

# The Disciple is a Servant

Want to be great? Then you must first be a slave.

BY FRANCIS COSGROVE

Dr. V. Raymond Edman, late president of Wheaton College, once said, "Our job is not to train leaders, but to train servants." That's a tremendous objective for a school, for the world has all too few servants. Many people aspire to leadership, fame, and success. Very few aspire to servanthood.

The Bible emphasizes serving others. A great example is that of Jesus as He washed the feet of His disciples. His was a matchless demonstration of love and servanthood in that He came to die for the sins of men.

This emphasis on servanthood is contrary to the practice of most secular leaders. In most cases those in high management demand service from others. But when Jesus came, He enhanced His leadership because of His service.

Jesus taught the disciples to be servants. During a discussion on who should be the greatest, He told them:

"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mt. 20:25-28)

This teaching of leading by serving continues to have an unfamiliar ring in an age that calls for us to do everything we can to climb to the top. The Bible teaches that to lead is to serve. We may recognize the truth of this concept and respond positively. The problem, however, is in doing it day to day.

Since servanthood is taught in the Bible as part of being a disciple of Jesus Christ, we want to examine what a servant is, look at some characteristics of a servant, and discover how we can be servants practically.

## WHAT IS A SERVANT?

Paul introduced himself to the church in Rome as a servant first, then as an apostle: "Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God" (Ro. 1:1). One of the greatest honors that anyone could grant us would be to call us servants of Christ. Throughout the history of the Church, godly men and women have often been designated by expressions such as "a true servant of the Lord."

LeRoy Eims, of The Navigators, has written:

"Jesus gave us the basic summary of his life: "For even the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45). He was among us as one who served (see Luke 22:27). Today it is not possible for us to serve the Lord by taking a sacrificial animal to the side of a hill, kindling a fire, and presenting it to him. To serve God we must serve others, as Jesus did. The leader must offer his own life on the altar of God to be consumed in the flame of God's love, in service to others."

Servanthood deals with people, and at heart is our willingness to go out of our way to meet a need in some one's life.

I believe that's why God is using Dr. James Kennedy so much. He has been a great servant of others in the Church and in the Christian world.

Dr. Kennedy has many responsibilities. He is the founder and president of Evangelism Explosion, head of Coral Ridge Ministries, and sits on the Board of Directors of Westminster Academy. He is involved in radio and television ministries. But he places a high priority on involvement in the evangelism training programs for the laymen of the church. Every week he leads a team of three people in calling in homes. Dr. Kennedy serves his people by teaching them and helping them become disciples.

The term servant, according to the Scriptures, cannot easily be tied down to one specific definition. Many times a servant is also called a slave. The Hebrews in the Old Testament had two types of servants or slaves, those bought and those taken in wars. In that society people were also able to sell themselves to pay their debts.

In the Bible entire nations were required to serve their king or those who conquered them. So Israel is spoken of as a servant to her king and the Syrians are referred to as the servants of King David. Depending on the course of history, the Israelites served the Philistines, and the Philistines served Israel.

The person who dedicates himself to the service of another by his own choice of will is also considered a servant. So we find that Joshua became the servant of Moses, Elisha the servant of Elijah, and the disciples the servants of Christ. "For we do not preach ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Cor. 4:5). The Apostle Paul chose to be a servant. "Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to

everyone, to win as many as possible" (1 Cor. 9:19). In all of these cases these men were eventually exalted to higher positions.

A common reference in the Scriptures is to servants of the Lord. There are the faithful and godly persons who have been redeemed from sin and are now serving God in righteousness and holiness (see Ro. 6:17,18). A person who serves God in a particular function or calling is designated a servant of God. The expression "servant of God" may be applied to a person whom God uses to perform His will in a particular mercy or judgment. Moses, for example, is called the servant of God seventeen times in the Scriptures, and David some twenty-four times.

Putting these biblical teachings together, we discover that a servant is a person who doesn't exercise his own will but rather submits it in order to please his master. He also demonstrates the importance of serving another without any assurance of reward.

## THE CHARACTER OF A SERVANT

Of all the biblical qualities ascribed to a servant, several stand out clearly.

*A servant is humble.* He does not attract attention to himself. Jesus taught, "A student is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master" (Mt. 10:24). Paul said that the servant is to "gently instruct" those who oppose him (2 Tim. 2:25). Only someone truly humble before God can be gentle to those who oppose him.

*A servant is diligent.* He is active in doing his work, not slothful. Some of Jesus' strongest words were about diligence:

"Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions." (Mt. 24:45-47)

*A servant is busy serving.* True servants of God are busy about their business. Servants should serve, not do other things. This was the essence of Jesus' teaching on one occasion.

"Suppose one of you had a servant plowing or looking after the sheep. Would he say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat'? Would he not rather say, 'Prepare my supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink?'" (Lk. 17:7,8)

*A servant should be able to teach.* Primarily this means able to teach others to be servants. "And the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful" (2 Tim. 2:24). In countries where people work as servants, boys often come into a household as apprentices to learn how to be good servants. The older servants teach them everything they know about service to their masters.

*A servant is patient.* What a necessary virtue for all disciples! Paul urged Timothy, as a servant, to be patient (2 Tim. 4:2). The opposite of patience is resenting the circumstances that keep us from doing what we think ought to be done. One result of impatience is discouragement. A servant should do his work and not become discouraged when things don't go his way. The same is true when we as disciples spend time and work with others. As we serve them, we need patience so that we don't become discouraged.

*A servant is obedient.* Here's the heart of servanthood and the reason so many have problems with it. Paul wrote, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart" (Eph. 6:5,6). One of the responsibilities of Christian leadership is to "teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them" (Titus 2:9).

*A servant is dedicated.* When a servant commits himself to the one he serves, he does it with the totality of his heart. We have a beautiful example of that in Ittai the Gittite. David had been ousted in a palace coup by his son Absalom, and was now fleeing for his life. Ittai had gone with him, but David tried to convince him to return to King Absalom. "But Ittai replied to the king, 'As surely as the LORD lives, and as my lord the king lives, wherever my lord the king may be, whether it means life or death, there will your servant be'" (2 Sam. 15:21).

*A servant is watchful.* A servant needs to be alert to the needs his master might have and to the work that needs doing. Jesus spoke often about watchfulness. "Be dressed ready for service and keep your lamps burning, like men waiting for their master to return from a wedding banquet, so that when he comes and knocks they can immediately open the door for him" (Lk. 12:35,36).

*A servant is faithful.* No matter what happens, a servant remains faithful to his master. That is the reputation David had in the days when King Saul was trying to kill him. Ahimelech the priest said to Saul, "Who of all your servants is as loyal as David, the king's son-in-law, captain of your bodyguard and highly respected in your household?" (1 Sam. 22:14).

*A servant does not talk back to his master.* A servant respects his master (see Titus 2:9). Harmony in the household enables the servant to do what he is supposed to do: serve.

*A Christian disciple-servant is Spirit filled.* The enabling power for Christian servanthood comes from the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, Peter declared, "This is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: ... 'Even on my servants,

both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days" (Acts 2:16,18). The power and filling of the Holy Spirit of God are necessary for real servanthood.

## **SERVANTHOOD AND DISCIPLESHIP**

By both precept and example the Scriptures call on all of us who would be disciples to be Christ's servants. When we act like servants, it is obvious to all.

When we were ministering in Charleston, S.C., six of the men we were discipling climbed onto my roof and cleaned off the pine needles that were clogging the gutters and causing leaks. My neighbor across the street asked, "Where do you get all these people to do your work?" When I told him they were in a Christian training program that emphasized service, he went away shaking his head. The men who had cleaned my roof got the ladder out again, climbed up on the neighbor's roof, and cleaned up all his needles. Now that's servanthood! That incident opened my neighbor's heart to the gospel as nothing else had before.

Servanthood is intensely practical. It works in everyday life. Some thirty people would come to our house on Monday nights for Bible study. After the study was over, some of these men and women would straighten up the furniture and put the house back in order. They would also wash the cups and plates, and then put them away. These people were servants.

## **HOW CAN WE BE SERVANTS?**

Servanthood is intensely practical and should be the warp and woof of each disciple's life. Here are some suggestions on how we can be servants of Jesus Christ and others.

## **DO MENIAL TASKS**

This is one of the hardest things to teach in Western society. Many think that menial tasks are below them. But note this incident in the life of the Apostle Paul:

"Once safely on shore, we found out that the island was called Malta. The islanders showed us unusual kindness. They built a fire and welcomed us all because it was raining and cold. Paul gathered a pile of brushwood and, as he put it on the fire, a viper, driven out by the heat, fastened itself on his hand." (Acts 28:1-3)

The great Apostle gathered firewood on a cold, rainy day right after a traumatic shipwreck. He could just as easily have rested and let the kind islanders do all the work. But Paul was a servant.

In our discipleship training at the Glen Eyrie, headquarters of The Navigators in Colorado Springs, we often assign newcomers to menial tasks. It is not uncommon to find a Ph.D. working on the lawn crew or a graduate engineer washing dishes. Women in business make beds and nurses wait on tables. It is an excellent opportunity for these well-educated and successful people to learn servanthood at the practical level.

## **BE AVAILABLE**

One of the characteristics of servants in a household is that they must be available when the master calls them. The Christian servant must also be available-to God and to those it is his ministry to serve. We must not be like those who made all kinds of excuses when Jesus called them to follow Him:

"He said to another man, "Follow me."

But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father."

Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family."

Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9 59-62).

## **BE OBSERVANT**

A servant must be alert to the needs of others. The psalmist wrote, "As the eyes of slaves look to the hand of their master, as the eyes of a maid look to the hand of her mistress, so our eyes look to the LORD our God, till he shows

us his mercy" (Ps. 123:2). The needs of guests in a Hebrew household were communicated to the servants by hand signals, so it was the responsibility of those serving to watch the hands of the master and mistress.

When Dawson Trotman was president of The Navigators, he lived in a lovely, large home on the grounds of Glen Eyrie. The home had a large dining room and a table that seated about eighteen people. The Trotmans entertained often, and I was always amazed at how efficiently the girls who were serving met our needs without anyone saying a word. I was puzzled by this and finally asked Lila Trotman about it. She said it was all based on Ps. 123:2. The girls had been taught to observe the hand signals that Daws or Lila made signifying a need a guest might have.

When I was in training to be a Navigator representative, I learned it shouldn't always be necessary to be told to do jobs that needed to be done. If you saw that one of the knobs on a cabinet was loose, you got a screwdriver and tightened it. If you noticed that the kids had been pushing out the back porch screen, you repaired it. A servant should take the initiative and do whatever has to be done. That's practical servanthood.

## **DO MORE THAN YOU'RE ASKED**

Western society is governed by clock-watching. People do just what they are asked to do, nothing more. If they are asked to do a little more than their job description calls for, they want overtime or other compensation. A true servant does what he is supposed to do, and more.

## **THE RESULT OF SERVANTHOOD**

What happens to a servant? His master may serve him:

"It will be good for those servants whose master finds them watching when he comes. I tell you the truth, he will dress himself to serve, will have them recline at the table and will come and wait on them. It will be good for those servants whose master finds them ready, even if he comes in the second or third watch of the night." (Lk. 12:37,38)

Masters honor faithful servants. They may say, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!" (Mt. 25:21).

God gives His servants wisdom for their responsibilities. When Solomon became king, he prayed:

"Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?" (1 K. 3:8,9)

God granted his request for wisdom, and Solomon became one of the wisest men who ever lived.

Honor from God comes to the faithful servant of the Lord. Jesus said, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me" (Jn. 12:26).

You cannot be a true disciple of Jesus Christ unless you have a servant's heart.

FRANCIS COSGROVE is director of church relations for The Navigators. This article is adapted from a chapter in his book *Essentials or Discipleship* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1980).

## **WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A SERVANT WORKSHEET:**

Preparation: Read Luke 12:35-48 several times.

1) Describe each of the following elements of servanthood and tell what verses in the passage teach them:

Readiness:

Perseverance:

Faithfulness:

Wisdom:

Feeding others:

2) What do you think is a sign of a faithful servant? Which verses tell you this?

3) How does this passage contrast the unfaithful servant with the faithful?

4) Study Phil. 2:5-11. What greatest aspect do you find displayed in Jesus?