
SERVICE

“Like Servants . . . We’re Watching & Waiting”

*I look to you, heaven-dwelling God,
look up to you for help.*

*Like servants, alert to their master’s commands,
like a maiden attending her lady,
We’re watching and waiting, holding our breath,
awaiting your word of mercy.*

Mercy, GOD, mercy!

*We’ve been kicked around long enough,
Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men,
kicked when we’re down by arrogant brutes.*

PSALM 123

In general terms, service is a willing, working, and doing in which a person acts not according to his own purposes or plans but with a view to the purpose of another person and according to the need, disposition, and direction of others.

It is an act whose freedom is limited and determined by the other's freedom, an act whose glory becomes increasingly greater to the extent that the doer is not concerned about his own glory but about the glory of the other. . . . It is ministerium Verbi divini, which means, literally, "a servant's attendance on the divine Word."

The expression "attendance" may call to mind the fact that the New Testament concept of Diakonos originally meant "a waiter." [We] must wait upon the high majesty of the divine Word, which is God himself as he speaks in his action.

KARL BARTH

As a person grows and matures in the Christian way, it is necessary to acquire certain skills. One is service. The skill is so difficult to acquire and liable to so many misunderstandings that it is necessary to single it out for special attention from time to time.

Psalm 123 is an instance of service. In this, as so often in the psalms, we are not instructed in what to do, we are provided an instance of what is done. A psalm is not a lecture; it is a song. In a psalm we have the observable evidence of what happens when a person of faith goes about the business of believing and loving and following God. We don't have a rule book defining the action, we have a snapshot of players playing the game. In Psalm 123 we observe that aspect of the life of discipleship that takes place under the form of servanthood.

If God Is God at All

"I look to you, heaven-dwelling God, look up to you for help." Service begins with an upward look to God. God is over us. He is above us. The person of faith looks up to God, not at him or down on him. The servant assumes a certain posture, a stance. If he or she fails to take that posture, attentive responsiveness to the master's commands will be hard.

It is easy to get the wrong idea, for when a person becomes a Christian there is a new sense of confident ability and assured power. Furthermore we are provided promises that tell us to go ahead:

Ask and you'll get;
Seek and you'll find;
Knock and the door will open. (Lk 11:9)

God presents himself to us in the history of Jesus Christ as a servant: with that before us it is easy to assume the role of master and begin ordering him around. But God is not a servant to be called into action when we are too tired to do something ourselves, not an expert to be called on when we find we are ill equipped to handle a specialized problem in living. Paul Scherer writes scathingly of people who lobby around in the courts of the Almighty for special favors, plucking at his sleeve, pestering him with requests. God is not a buddy we occasionally ask to join us at our convenience or for our diversion. God did not become a servant so that we could order him around but so that we could join him in a redemptive life.

Too often we think of religion as a far-off, mysteriously run bureaucracy to which we apply for assistance when we feel the need. We go to a local branch office and direct the clerk (sometimes called a pastor) to fill out our order for God. Then we go home and wait for God to be delivered to us according to the specifications that we have set down. But that is not the way it works. And if we thought about it for two consecutive minutes, we would not want it to work that way. If God is God at all, he must know more about our needs than we do; if God is God at all, he must be more in touch with the reality of our thoughts, our emotions, our bodies than we are; if God is God at all, he must have a more comprehensive grasp of the interrelations in our families and communities and nations than we do.

“Heaven-dwelling God.” When the Bible uses that phrase, and it does use it frequently, it is not saying anything about geography or space. Biblical writers are neither geographers nor astronomers—they are theologians. They describe with pro-

found accuracy the relation between God and persons like you and me, a relationship between the Creator and the creature; they coordinate our knowledge of the God who loves us with our experience of being loved; they tell the story of the God who leads us through difficulties and document it with our experience of being guided. We are not presented with a functional god who will help us out of jams or an entertainment god who will lighten tedious hours. We are presented with the God of exodus and Easter, the God of Sinai and Calvary. If we want to understand God, we must do it on his terms. If we want to see God the way he really is, we must look to the place of authority—to Scripture and to Jesus Christ.

And do we really want it any other way? I don't think so. We would very soon become contemptuous of a god whom we could figure out like a puzzle or learn to use like a tool. No, if God is worth our attention at all, he must be a God we can look up to—a God we *must* look up to: "I look to you, heaven-dwelling God."

The moment we look up to God (and not over at him, or down on him) we are in the posture of servitude.

Mercy, GOD, Mercy!

A second element in service has to do with our expectation. What happens when we look up to God in faith? There is an awesome mystery in God that we can never completely penetrate. We cannot define God; we cannot package God. But that doesn't mean that we don't know anything about God. It doesn't mean that we are completely at sea with God, never knowing what to expect, nervously on edge all the time, wondering what he might do.

We know very well what to expect, and what we expect is mercy. Three times the expectation is articulated in Psalm 123:

“We’re watching and waiting, holding our breath, awaiting your word of mercy. Mercy, GOD, mercy!”

The basic conviction of a Christian is that God intends good for us and that he will get his way in us. He does not treat us according to our deserts, but according to his plan. He is not a police officer on patrol, watching over the universe, ready to club us if we get out of hand or put us in jail if we get obstreperous. He is a potter working with the clay of our lives, forming and reforming until, finally, he has shaped a redeemed life, a vessel fit for the kingdom.

“Mercy, GOD, mercy!”: the prayer is not an attempt to get God to do what he is unwilling otherwise to do, but a reaching out to what we know that he does do, an expressed longing to receive what God is doing in and for us in Jesus Christ. In obedience we pray “*Mercy!*” instead of “Give us what we want.” We pray “*Mercy!*” and not “Reward us for our goodness so our neighbors will acknowledge our superiority.” We pray “*Mercy!*” and not “Punish us for our badness so we will feel better.” We pray “*Mercy!*” and not “Be nice to us because we have been such good people.”

We live under the mercy. God does not treat us as alien others, lining us up so that he can evaluate our competence or our usefulness or our worth. He rules, guides, commands, loves us as children whose destinies he carries in his heart.

The word *mercy* means that the upward look to God in the heavens does not expect God to stay in the heavens but to come down, to enter our condition, to accomplish the vast enterprise of redemption, to fashion in us his eternal salvation. “The root meaning ‘to stoop,’ ‘to be inclined,’ has been conjectured.”¹ Servitude is not a vague woolgathering in the general direction of God and certainly not a cringing, cowering terror under the lash of God. Servitude is specific in its expectation, and what it expects is mercy.

Urgent Service

A third element in the servant life is urgency: "Mercy. . . . We've been kicked around long enough, / Kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men, / kicked when we're down by arrogant brutes."

The experience of servitude is recurrent through history. And the experience has never been happy. The psalmist lived in a culture in which the slave and the servant were institutionalized, as they have been at different times in world history. As far as we can tell, it has never worked very well. Power breeds oppression. Masters get lazy and become scornful of those under them. The cry "We've been kicked around long enough, kicked in the teeth . . . kicked when we're down" is believable. The psalm is part of a vast literature of outcry, a longing for deliverance from oppression.

We live in a similar slavery. True, we have, in Western countries, abolished the institutionalized forms of slavery and all but eliminated a servant class, but the experience of servitude is still among us and is as oppressive as ever. Freedom is on everyone's lips. Freedom is announced and celebrated. But not many feel or act free. Evidence? We live in a nation of complainers and a society of addicts. Everywhere we turn we hear complaints: I can't spend my money the way I want; I can't spend my time the way I want; I can't be myself; I'm under the control of others all the time. And everywhere we meet the addicts—addiction to alcohol and drugs, to compulsive work habits and to obsessive consumption. We trade masters; we stay enslaved.

The Christian is a person who recognizes that our real problem is not in achieving freedom but in learning service under a better master. The Christian realizes that every relationship that excludes God becomes oppressive. Recognizing and realizing that, we urgently want to live under the mastery of God.

For such reasons all Christian service involves urgency. Servitude is not a casual standing around waiting for orders. It is

never desultory; it is urgent need: "Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth." And the gospel is the good news that the words of God, commanding new life in us, are already in our ears; "those who have ears to hear, let them hear."

Reasonable Service

The best New Testament commentary on this psalm is in the final section of Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 12—16. The section begins with this sentence: "So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering" (12:1). The psalm's emphasis on actual, physical service (not a spiritual intention, not a desire to be of service) is picked up in the invitation to present our *everyday, ordinary life*. The motivation for service (not coerced, not demanded) is picked up in the phrase "God helping you." But most significant is the remarkable last phrase *logikēn latreian*, "place it before God as an offering," which another translation renders "reasonable service." Service, that is, that makes sense. The word *latreia* means "service," the work one does on behalf of the community. But it also is the base of our word *liturgy*, the service of worship that we render to God. And it is precisely that service that is logical, reasonable. The service we offer to God (in worship) is extended into specific acts that serve others. We learn a relationship—an attitude toward life, a stance—of servitude before God, and then we are available to be of use to others in acts of service.

The psalm has nothing in it about serving others. It concentrates on being a servant to God. Its position is that if the attitude of servanthood is learned, by attending to God as Lord, then serving others will develop as a very natural way of life. Commands will be

heard to be hospitable, to be compassionate, to visit the sick, to help and to heal (commands that Paul assembles in Romans 12—16 and many other places) and carried out with ease and poise.

As we live out the implications of a life of service, we are provided with continuous encouragement and example by Jesus Christ, who said:

Do you understand what I have done to you? You address me as “Teacher” and “Master,” and rightly so. That is what I am. So if I, the Master and Teacher, washed your feet, you must now wash each other’s feet. I’ve laid down a pattern for you. What I’ve done, you do. I’m only pointing out the obvious. A servant is not ranked above his master; an employee doesn’t give orders to the employer. If you understand what I’m telling you, act like it—and live a blessed life. (Jn 13:12-17)

The Freest Person on Earth

God’s people are everywhere and always encouraged to work for the liberation of others, helping to free them from every form of bondage—religious, economic, cultural, political—that sin uses to stunt or thwart or cramp their lives. The promises and fulfillments of freedom are antiphonal throughout Scripture. The glorious theme has extensive documentation in the lives of the people of God. But there are also, sadly, numerous instances in our society of persons who, having been given their freedom, have at once squandered it, using it as “an excuse to do whatever you want” (Gal 5:13), ending in a worse slavery. For freedom is the freedom to live as persons in love for the sake of God and neighbor, not a license to grab and push. It is the opportunity to live at our best, “little less than God” (Ps 8:5 RSV), not as unruly beasts. The work of liberation must therefore be accompanied by instruction in the use of liberty as children of God who “walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:25 RSV).

Those who parade the rhetoric of liberation but scorn the wisdom of service do not lead people into the glorious liberty of the children of God but into a cramped and covetous squalor.

As Psalm 123 prays the transition from oppression (“kicked in the teeth by complacent rich men”) to freedom (“awaiting your word of mercy”) to a new servitude (“like servants, alert to their master’s commands”), it puts us in the way of learning how to use our freedom most appropriately, under the lordship of a merciful God. The consequences are all positive. I have never yet heard a servant Christian complain of the oppressiveness of his servitude. I have never yet heard a servant Christian rail against the restrictions of her service. A servant Christian is the freest person on earth.