

# The Imperative Dynamic of Christian Service

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon explores the concept of service in the Christian life, emphasizing its importance and the principles that govern it, using Peter's experiences as a model.*

**Scripture:** John 21:15

**Topics:** "Christian Service", "Grace and Brokenness"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the imperative dynamic of Christian service, illustrating how true service stems from a deep love for Christ, as exemplified by Peter's journey from self-confidence to brokenness. He highlights that service is not merely a specific role but an integral part of being in the Body of Christ, where every believer has a function. The sermon reflects on Peter's transformation, showing that real service requires losing self-trust and recognizing one's need for Christ's mastery. Sparks encourages believers to appreciate grace, as it empowers them to serve effectively, and underscores that the dynamic of service is a heartfelt response to Christ's love. Ultimately, he reassures that through grace, every believer can be a servant of God.

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## Transcript

Reading: John 21:15-17.

"Lovest thou me?"

In reading these verses, it is difficult not to believe that the Lord Jesus had in mind something that happened earlier, and was probably referring to it. I mean the incident recorded in Matthew 26:33: "Peter answered and said unto him, If all shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended." "Lovest thou me more than these?"

There are four main aspects of the Christian life - of course, with many subsidiary aspects. We have been considering three of them, and shall make reference to them again shortly. These three lead up to the fourth, and find their expression in it. This fourth aspect is service. Service is the great inclusive issue of everything. You notice that all four of the Gospels head up to commission and service. Service is the issue, therefore, of the three-and-a-half years of our Lord's ministry, and especially of the relationship subsisting between Himself and the disciples during that period. All that which He had said to them, all that which He had allowed and caused them to see, had this matter of service in view. He was working toward the day when He would have gone to Heaven and would continue His work through them. He was laying

the foundation for that service. Everything had testimony in the world in view.

Now that word 'service' is greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is usually confined to certain specific forms. People speak of 'going into Christian service', or 'the Lord's work', or some such expression, by which they mean some specific activity - either to be a 'missionary' abroad, or a 'minister' at home, or some other particular form of Christian work. But that is a misinterpretation of the word 'service'.

In the New Testament, service is contemplated in relation to the Church: individual service is always a related matter. It is the Church that is here to fulfil the ministry, and individuals are never looked upon in the New Testament as having detached, unrelated service. The great comprehensive conception is that of the Church as the Body of Christ. Immediately you contemplate that, your ideas of service must be completely revolutionised. For in a physical body the majority of the functions are not specific at all, but are vital, essential, indispensable. The whole service of the body depends upon them: the comparatively few specific functions can only possibly operate and fulfil their office by way of the countless unspecified functions of the body. And that is the New Testament conception of the Church and the Church's vocation.

We need, therefore, to reconsider this matter of service, because when we relegate the work to certain people only, we forget, or overlook, the fact that it is impossible to be in the Body of Christ and not have a function. Everyone is supposed to be a functional part of the Church. Nothing is independent, unrelated, or separate.

#### Peter: A Representative Servant

Let us now look at the basis, constitution, and dynamic of service. In this we are going to be much helped by Peter. You notice that the fourth Gospel, the last of all to be written, closes with an incident involving Peter in relation to the matter of service. Peter is a representative servant: he embodies all the essentials of a true servant of Jesus Christ. And in a very real sense Peter represented the Church. We shall therefore allow Peter to interpret this matter for us, as we consider him - the man himself, his training, and his dynamic of service.

It is possible, of course, to allow Peter to be completely overshadowed by the Apostle Paul. If that has happened, I would suggest a very profitable piece of work: that is, to collect together every passage in the New Testament where Simon Peter occurs, noting both what was said to him, and what he said. If you put all those fragments together, you will find that you have quite a rich biography, and you will have a very good manual of instruction in the matter of service. Peter was the first of the disciples to be called by the Lord; he always thereafter held the foremost place among the disciples; and here he is the last individual to be mentioned in the Gospels. Peter has a very large place in the New Testament, a very important place. Upon him hung some of the greatest crises in the history of the early Church.

#### The Man Himself

We look at the man himself, because we can only recognise the spiritual principles of service as we are able to recognise the man. You will understand what I mean by that as we go on. If you get a full-length portrait of Simon Peter, and watch him with the Gospels in your hand, you will begin to learn a very great deal about the principles of Christian service.

Simon Peter could never be present anywhere without it being known. If ever there was an opportunity to speak or to act, he took it. His tongue, his hands and his feet often ran away with his judgment. His soul on

the emotional and volitional side predominated, and very often left his judgment waiting for an opportunity to assert itself, later on, to his discomfiture! Peter was capable of tremendous variations - from height to depth - from the highest exaltation to the lowest depression and despair. This man was never neutral. He never dealt in neutral colours; you could always distinguish him quite clearly. No man of all those associated with our Lord was so often corrected, and yet so irrepressible. His motives were right, his intentions were good; but he was always just saying the wrong thing and doing the wrong thing.

You notice that with Simon Peter the personal pronouns were much in evidence: and yet with all this there is no trace of vice. When you sum it all up, you have to say some things that may sound unkind; but it is just here that we are on the way to understanding what true service for Christ will mean. The things which stand out in the case of Simon Peter - self-confidence, self-sufficiency, self-assertiveness - are all because of self-ignorance. The Lord Jesus Himself, at the end of this chapter in which our question is found, puts it in three words: "When thou wast young, thou girdest thyself, and walkedst whither thou wouldest". Those last three words sum up Peter: "whither thou wouldest". That is the man in brief. Such a man, if he were going to be of any use to the Lord, would have to go through a very hard school. If he was to be constituted according to the greatest Servant that God ever had - the Lord Jesus - something very drastic must happen.

#### Need for Self-Discovery

What was his greatest need? To begin with, it was self-discovery, followed by loss of self-trust. And those were the very things that happened in the hard school of experience into which Simon Peter was put by his Lord. For the truth is this: that all who are going to be of real service to the Lord must be brought, sooner or later, to the place where they lose all trust in themselves. Before they can do the work for which they have been brought into this world, the work for God and the work of God, they will have to come to the place where they have lost all self-trust. Peter teaches us that lesson, perhaps, above all others, in relation to service.

See this man on the day of Pentecost. Is that service? Is he now a servant of Jesus Christ? See him in the house of Cornelius - another great turning-point in the history of Christianity. See him in the Council of Jerusalem: hear what he says and how he is deferred to. "Simon hath said..." This man emerged as a great servant of Jesus Christ - but only in virtue of having emerged from this deep and terrible experience in which he lost his self-trust.

If you have read this twenty-first chapter of John in a version that brings out the different words that were used by the Lord and by Peter for 'love', you may have wondered why it was that Peter balked at the word that the Lord was using, and refused to use it. When the Lord Jesus said, "Lovest thou me?", He used the highest word that could be used for 'love', but Peter answered with another word of a lower order altogether. Why would he not rise to the word that the Lord was using? I think that he had lost his self-trust; that he was remembering: "If all shall be offended in thee, I will never be offended" (Matt. 26:33) - and then the denial. Had something in him been touched and weakened and broken, that made him feel, 'I dare not declare myself to be on that highest level of love'? I may be wrong, but I seem to discern that. But at length the Lord Himself came down to Peter's level, and took him up on his own ground with the lower word, as if to say: 'All right: if you can only go so far, well, go as far as you can. Commit yourself to that! I will take you up on that; I will go on with you on that.' Whether that interpretation is true or not, there is little doubt that Peter had been touched on his strong point of self-assurance and self-confidence, and was a broken man in that realm. And therefore, becoming the servant that he did become, he says to us:

'That is the way of service. That is the first law.'

That may sound hard, but it ought to sound comforting. Are you having a bad time? If as you aspire to be of some use to the Lord, if you find yourself being emptied and broken, and taken through a hard school where you feel that you cannot stand up to it all, remember, that is the way of service. If you have any degree of self-confidence, if you think that you can 'do it', if you can 'do all the talking', if you are the first to take things into your hands, let me say: You will not be of service to the Lord until that is dealt with! No; we have to come to the place where we cannot and we will not, unless compelled by Another and not driven by our own impulses.

Peter's need was of a Master. But, in order to have a Master, a man like that has to be utterly broken. And that happened to Peter. Not only is it recorded that he went out and wept bitterly, after his terrible failure and breakdown and in his self-discovery, but it is recorded that the risen Lord, after sending a message to His disciples, then specified that it should be conveyed to Peter. The heavenly messenger said: "Go, tell his disciples and Peter..." (Mark 16:7). One thing that impresses you in those resurrection appearances of the Lord Jesus is how He knew all that was going on. He knew, for instance, exactly how Thomas had been behaving and talking, even though He Himself had not been visibly present. He could tell them just what had been going on inside of them, and all they had been doing. And so He knew about Peter, too, and what had been happening with him. Somewhere, in his brokenness, his humiliation, his despair, was Peter, necessitating that the Lord should say: 'Go, tell My disciples, and Peter...' Was he not a disciple? Why specify? Surely the reason is obvious. The man needs some special help: he is broken, he is shattered; a special message must go to him - he must be mentioned by name. 'Say to Peter... The Lord has not only sent a general message, but He has sent it to you - He has mentioned you by name.'

Just think how you would feel if you were in his position and condition. 'The Lord - the Lord! The last time I saw the Lord was when He looked at me. It was that look that broke me, that shattered me, as I was denying Him. That look I shall never forget. He looked at me.' The word that is used there about the Lord 'looking upon' Peter (Luke 22:61) is a rather strong word. There are different words for 'look', but this word means 'to look upon attentively or fixedly'. His eyes rested upon him, held him, went right through him. That was the last time Peter had seen the Lord, and that look had done its work. Those eyes knew him, and now Peter had come to know himself as the Lord knew him. It is a terrible thing when that happens. And to think that the Lord should say, "...and Peter"! 'Could He ever think of me again? Could He ever have anything to do with me again? Do I still stand with Him in the company of His disciples?'

### The Mastery of Christ

Now the point is this: that this is the making of a servant - this is the training of a servant of Jesus Christ. This came; and, having come, it led to two things. Firstly, it led to the mastery of Christ. The real mastery of Christ, though we may call Him Master and Lord, is not established until our own mastery of ourselves has been shattered and broken. How often did Peter, who called Jesus 'Master' and 'Lord', seek to dictate to Him, to tell Him - the Lord - what He ought to do and what He ought not to do - what He might do and what He was not allowed to do! Yes, we can call Him 'Lord', and we can call Him 'Master'. But the way of real service is that He become Master in reality, and that necessitates our brokenness.

Look at Peter on the day of Pentecost, and afterward, and look right on to his letters. Listen to him speaking; read what he writes. Jesus is Master of this man, now. That is the first thing that came out of this shattering. It is a law of usefulness and service to the Lord - make no mistake about it. If you aspire to

service, if you are thinking in terms of Christian work, if you are desirous of being of real value to the Lord - put it how you will - you can take it that the way is here 'writ large for all to see'. This man Peter stands out as a servant of Jesus Christ of no mean order, and the way by which he became that was the way of Jesus Christ becoming his absolute Master. He stands for the great principle of submission to Christ, without which there can be no usefulness to Him. Our value to the Lord really begins - not when He becomes our Saviour, but when He becomes our Lord. Those two things can happen at the same time, but with many they stand far apart.

### An Overwhelming Appreciation of Grace

The second thing that came out of this shattering was an overwhelming appreciation of grace. The Lord Jesus, on one occasion which you will recall, enunciated a great spiritual truth and law, when referring to one who was pouring out devotion at His feet. He said: 'Where much has been forgiven, there is much love. She loved much because she was forgiven much' (Luke 7:47).

Now Peter came into the meaning of that spiritual principle - or it came into Peter. What an appreciation of grace! Look at the first letter that goes by his name. In that quite brief document, which you can read through from beginning to end in ten or fifteen minutes, Peter speaks of grace no fewer than ten times, and in every case the context of that word is tremendous.

Here, for instance, he speaks of "the manifold grace of God" (1 Pet. 4:10). Grace is really the theme of his letter. It governs everything - every department of the Christian life. Yes, Peter knew what he was talking about: he was speaking out of experience. It was this tremendous appreciation of grace that made him the servant that he became. But he had to be baptized into that: that is, he had to be baptized into the agony of suffering, of self-discovery - of the discovery of his own unworthiness, weakness, failure. The waves of despair had to go over his head, in order to bring him to this place where grace was his theme, grace accounted for everything, grace became the great motive of his ministry.

A man cannot go through an experience of that kind, he cannot go through a spiritual history like that, he cannot go through such depths, without being caused to reflect deeply. It is not just our imagination, or reading something into the story, to say that, when Peter was recovered, restored, brought back into all the blessings of fellowship with his Lord, and given his commission, he must have thought something like this: 'Just imagine it - that such a one as I am, and have proved to be; such a one as I, who have done what I have done - could any man sink to deeper depths of shame, disgrace, dishonour? - that such a one as I should be called by the Lord at all, when He knew all about me beforehand! That day when He came along by the seashore, when I was engaged in my business, and He called me - that day He knew everything that there was to know about me! He did not have to spend three-and-a-half years discovering it. He did not have to wait until that judgment hall; He knew it all at the beginning, and yet He called me!' Peter could indeed say with Paul: 'He called me by His grace' (Gal. 1:15). That is consolation, that is comfort, that is help; that makes service possible for anybody.

### The Training of Grace

Anyone other than Jesus would probably have washed their hands of Peter and said, 'I shall never make anything of this man - I can do nothing with him: He is incorrigible.' The Holy Spirit has caused to be written in fiery letters, for all to see, all this blundering and blurring of Simon, all his rebuking of the Lord, correcting the Lord, telling the Lord, 'Thou shalt never...' All this - and then the Lord's infinite patience with that man. When John writes: "Having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end"

(John 13:1), there is an immense amount behind that statement in relation to this man alone, to say nothing of the rest of them. That is no small thing; it is wonderful. Think of all the training, all the infinite patience and care and kindness, and the going on - just going on. This was the training of grace: do you not think Peter remembered that? I am sure he thought back over those three-and-a-half years, and how they culminated in his denial. 'Oh, what patience He showed with me! To think that I am here today at all, and having a place of honour in His service! What does it not say for His patience, His forbearance, His longsuffering, His love!'

### The Endowments of Grace

But then, as though that were not enough, grace brought endowments. First of all, the mighty, inclusive gift of the anointing Holy Spirit, and all that that implies! We have so often said that the anointing of the Holy Spirit implies that God commits Himself. It is as though He would say: 'I am going to join myself with that man or that woman, and I am going on with them, for my Son's sake.' That is the basic meaning of the gift of the Holy Spirit.

But grace brought all those other things, all those new capacities, which come by the Spirit in the new creation. Are they not marvellous in Peter? Remember, he was a fisherman. Although that does not necessarily mean that he was an uneducated man, they did say about Peter and John that they were "unlearned and ignorant men" (Acts 4:13). At any rate, certain people, who considered themselves to be otherwise, said that of him in Jerusalem. Have you ever studied that discourse of Peter's on the day of Pentecost? Many years ago I made a list of all the subjects mentioned in it, and I was amazed what a catalogue I had. Almost every sentence or part sentence touches on something which, being gathered into the whole, adds up to a most comprehensive statement. There is great understanding of the Old Testament Scriptures, wonderful insight into the Word of God and the things of God. We have already referred to that critical day in Jerusalem, when Peter's counsel, supported by James with citation of the Old Testament prophets, marked a turning-point in the history of the Church.

And if that is not enough, read Peter's letters. I do not know how, apart from Divine revelation, Peter knew about the atomic age! Long, long centuries before the splitting of the atom, he talked, in language which we all understand now, about 'the heavens being on fire', 'the elements melting with fervent heat', 'all these things being dissolved' (2 Pet. 3:10-12). That is very up to date, is it not? Where did he get it? There are endowments by the Holy Spirit of understanding, intelligence and knowledge. And there are endowments of endurance. Here is a man who breaks down at the taunt of a serving maid, and vehemently denies his Lord. But look at him here - "when they saw the boldness..."! And there are many other endowments which we cannot now stay to tabulate. All this is the work of grace. Yes, Peter came into a large appreciation of grace.

### The Dynamic of Service

This leads us to our sub-title: 'The Dynamic of Service'. What is that? Surely it is the response of the heart to a love like that! That is what made Peter the servant of Jesus Christ. It may be that he was fearful about trusting his love, and so dared not rise to the great word that the Master was using; but he meant it. He was trying to go as far as he could, and in the event he went further - he went beyond his own language. His response turned out better than he perhaps feared it would be. It was a mighty response to love - and that is the dynamic of service.

Now the grace that lies behind our being called by Jesus Christ into fellowship with Himself, the grace that lies behind His training of us, His dealing with us in longsuffering and forbearance, the grace that lies behind His gracious gift of the Holy Spirit, and all that goes with that gift, represents endowment for us all! This is not exclusive to Peter or his class; he is but representative. All these things are for the Church; and we, as organic parts of the Church, inherit the endowments, as we inherit the calling, of grace. These things are true for us all. Because of the grace of God, every one of us can be a servant of God.

To be called at all, did we but know it, is the most marvellous thing that could ever have happened to us. And He calls us, knowing us through and through. I do not know how much you know about yourself, but if you knew yourself as He knows you, you would go out and weep bitterly, you would fall into the depths of despair. And if He should then come to you, in that day of self-discovery, in your despair and brokenness, and should mention your name, showing that you were still in His thought and love, would that not be a great step of grace? - and would it not qualify you to be a witness? Should He, moreover, with all His knowledge of you, and all your despair of yourself, give to you the great gift of His Holy Spirit, with all the wonderful capacities that come with that, would it not be a glorious thing? That is how witnesses are made, how servants are made. How poor our service must be, if there is not an answering love begotten in us by this overwhelming consciousness of the grace of God!

That is the dynamic of service. The Lord may take us through a hard school; but "wisdom is justified of all her children" (Luke 7:35), and in the end you will say, 'He was right; He knew what He was doing - He did the right thing!'

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