

(Needed-Men of God) 3. a Servant

by Zac Poonen

Zac Poonen emphasizes the importance of being a servant in God's kingdom, highlighting humility and the dangers of seeking recognition and popularity in ministry.

Scripture: 2 Kings 3:11, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Matthew 20:28, Luke 22:25, John 13:14, 2 Corinthians 4:5, Philippians 2:3, Philippians 2:7

Topics: "Servant Leadership", "Christian Humility"

Description

Zac Poonen preaches on the importance of being servants of others, drawing from the example of Elisha who was introduced as a servant despite performing remarkable miracles. He emphasizes the need to avoid desires for fame, recognition, and a bossy attitude, highlighting Jesus' humility as the ultimate example of servanthood. Poonen warns against seeking popularity, statistics, and positions of leadership, urging believers to embrace humility, brokenness, and the spirit of the Cross as distinguishing marks of true servants of God.

Transcript

Jehoshaphat said, Is there not here a prophet of the Lord that we may inquire of the Lord by him? And one of the king of Israel's servants answered and said, Here is Elisha the son of Shaphat, which poured water on the hands of Elijah"

(2 Kings 3:11).

Elisha is referred to here as the one who used to pour water for Elijah to wash his hands-or in other words, one who carried out the duties of a servant.

This would certainly not be a complimentary way of introducing a prophet of God according to 20th-century standards. Many preachers today would feel offended if they were introduced thus to an audience.

Elisha had done many other things besides pouring water for people to wash their hands. He had divided the waters of Jordan into two and he had also healed the plague caused by the water in Jericho. These were remarkable miracles indeed. Yet he is introduced here as a servant. And I don't think he minded being given such a title either. His ministry as a servant to Elijah must have been so conspicuous that this was the impression that others retained in their minds about him. Hence the king's servant here refers to

Elisha as a pourer of water.

Brothers and sisters, this is what we are called to be too-servants of others. Jesus Himself was One Who poured water and washed His disciples' feet. He said,

I did not come to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28).

He told those who coveted places of leadership on earth and in Heaven that His kingdom would be different from earthly kingdoms, and that those who sought to be chief in His kingdom would have to be servants of others.

Every servant of the Lord must be a servant of men, or else he forfeits the honour of being a servant of God.

There are two things that I can think of that are contrary to the nature of a servant. One is a desire to be well-known and famous. The other is a bossy attitude towards others. We see the opposite of these two in our Lord Jesus:

He made Himself of no reputation....and He took upon Him the form of a servant (Philippians 2:7).

Let us consider these two things.

Desire for Recognition

We may have got rid of the desire to be big and famous in the world, but may secretly long to be well-known and accepted in evangelical circles. Perhaps it is a desire to be known as a revivalist or as an outstanding Bible-teacher. Or it may be that we want others to know that people are always blessed through our preaching. Or perhaps it is the desire to be known as the Superintendent of a progressive denomination or mission. Whatever it be, all such longings are contrary to the spirit of Jesus. And it is often because such carnal longings still lurk in our hearts that God is hindered from letting all His fullness flow into us and through us to others.

It is a sad fact indeed that in Christian circles today, there is an unhealthy craze for popularity. And this has given the death-blow to what little spirituality we possessed. This disease is so widespread that if we are not constantly alert and battling it, we can be infected by it all unawares.

Christian leaders and preachers in our day are no longer like Paul, the filth and garbage of the world (1 Corinthians 4:13). They are more like filmstars and VIPs. They are written-up, photographed, boosted to the skies and glorified. And what is worse, many of these men (who owe everything to grace alone) love to have it so! They love to be recognised as leaders in Christendom. It is true that we can't prevent others from publicising us and our work. But may God deliver us from having any secret longing for such publicity. May we be delivered from any desire to be known as anything other than servants, those who pour water for others.

Jesus Himself shunned popularity. When the people of His day wanted to make Him a king, He avoided them and got alone with His Father. He didn't want the acclaim of men. He didn't want to be a VIP on this earth (John 6:15). He, Who was the perfect expression of the Father's glory here, hid Himself and avoided earthly fame and honour. How much more should we mortal men do the same. The true servant of the Lord will follow in his Master's footsteps here.

Apart from the craze for popularity, I find that there is also a lust for statistics in Christendom today. Like the headhunters of old who counted scalps, many present-day evangelists have become slaves to the carnal desire to count heads and hands and decision-cards, and then to boast (albeit subtly) about these numbers. The Devil sees this desire in us and plays upon it to lead us astray.

One example will illustrate what I mean. In a certain part of India, gospel meetings were once held and a well-known evangelist invited to preach. Many raised, their hands and signed decision-cards. These statistics were given wide publicity in many parts of the country and people praised God for the "revival" that had broken out. A year later, I happened to meet the person who was responsible for the follow-up of these "converts," and I asked him how things were. He said that there was hardly any change in the general condition of the churches and that all the people he had visited seemed to be very much in the same state as before. There had been an emotional stirring no doubt, during the meetings, but no permanent change. Some people had apparently raised their hands so as not to disappoint the preacher who had come from so far away to preach to them! Others had raised their hands hoping thereby to establish a more intimate contact with this "famous" preacher later on, by telling him that they had been saved in his meetings! Others had come forward merely to have a closer look at the evangelist! That was the inside story of this marvellous "revival" and this is fact, not fiction.

Brothers and sisters, that is a perfect example of what I would call "apparent success." The Devil used it to fool many. Hardly anyone had been saved, hardly anyone made any holier and yet the evangelist and the organising committee all rejoiced in a "marvellous breakthrough for God" in that area! If in that series of meetings, no one had raised hands or signed decision-cards, the preacher and the organising committee would perhaps have felt so humbled that they might have sought God's face in prayer and fasting, and then something of real spiritual value would have been accomplished. But the Devil effectively prevented that from happening by keeping everybody happy with apparent success. He got everybody thinking that hundreds of souls had been delivered from his grip when they had not.

The Devil is fooling many with apparent revivals among believers too. People come to the altar and weep and cry, but without yielding their wills and lives to God. Some others come to the preacher and tell him what a blessing his messages were to them. The preacher goes away secretly delighted that he too is a revivalist like Wesley and Finney! He shares the news of the "revival" with others under the pretext of wanting them to praise God for it, when all he is interested in really is to let others know how God has used him. Does he go into the secret place alone with God and claim deliverance for the souls to whom he has preached? No, he thinks they are already delivered. Hence, he neglects to pray after the meetings are over. He is too busy advertising the "revival."

It is thus that many Christian workers are being fooled today by the Enemy-not because they are liberal in their doctrine but because they love advertisement and statistics. The Devil succeeds in such situations because he sees this desire for fame and publicity in the hearts of preachers and committee-members alike. He knows that the evangelists are keen to maintain their reputation before others as great soul-winners and that the committee-members are eager for people to realise that their labours have produced much fruit. And thus he achieves his diabolical ends.

What has been said above applied equally to missions and denominations also that glory in statistics.

Would that we were more convicted of our carnality in such matters, as David was, when he counted numbers once and gloried in them (2 Samuel 24). May the Lord give us vision to see through all that is

merely superficial. May He deliver us from the spirit of the advertising world, for it always spells doom to a work of God. If we are not free from such carnal desires and lusts we shall find that the Devil succeeds in fooling us in one way or another.

One of the hardest things I have found in my life is to give a public testimony. I find it more difficult to give a testimony in public than to preach a sermon. For it is so difficult when giving a testimony either about one's life or about one's labours to avoid taking some of the glory to oneself.

I'm sure none of us would dare to take all or even the major share of the glory and credit to ourselves. Perhaps we take only 5% or 10%. Surely, we feel, that is not too much of a commission for all the labour we have put in!

Should it then surprise us when the glory of God departs and "Ichabod" has to be written over so many of our churches?

We must dread to touch God's glory. Our God is a jealous God and He will not share His glory-not even a small percentage of it-with another (Isaiah 42:8).

Paul was once caught up to the third heaven but kept quiet about it for 14 years and mentioned it only when called upon to defend his apostleship - and even then gave no details (2 Corinthians 12:2).

The one who has seen the glory of God will always hide his own face as Moses did at the burning bush and as the seraphim do around God's Throne (Exodus 3:6; Isaiah 6:2). He will not want to be seen or known of men. Having seen God in all His glory, he will fear to touch that glory. He hides his face perpetually. He will not speak of himself or his work except where absolutely necessary; and when he does, it will be in subdued tones lest any of the credit should accrue to him. He will shun the carnal desire to speak of his dedication to God and of the marvellous experiences he has had and of the costly sacrifices he has made (which often go under the guise of a testimony), either in a public meeting or in a Christian magazine.

Another disease I have found in Christendom is an unhealthy coveting of positions of leadership. When I was in the Navy, I found some who thought nothing of climbing on the shoulders of others and of trampling people under them, if only they could get to the top. I thought I had seen the last of that when I left the Forces. But I was both surprised and grieved, as I moved in Christian circles in our land, to find exactly the same thing even among evangelical Christians-a coveting of position and a clamouring for it. I found Christians scheming and campaigning to be Superintendents and elders and treasurers and to get on to Executive Committees.

All this is contrary to the spirit of Jesus. The man who has seen the glory of God does not join the rat-race for fame-either in the world or in evangelical circles. He is too busy pressing towards the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. He desires only to pour water for others, to sweep the floor and to glorify his God here on earth.

Let us remember that greatness in man's eyes does not always mean greatness in God's eyes. Dr. A.W. Tozer once said that after thirty years of observing the religious scene, he had been forced to conclude that saintliness and church-leadership were not often synonymous. This is true in India too. Those who stand in the big pulpits of our land and who hold high positions in Christian circles are not often God's greatest saints. God's rarest jewels are usually found among the poor and the unknown in our churches.

God grant that the desire of our hearts will be to be great in His sight, even as John the Baptist was (Luke 1:15). There was a reason why John was great in God's eyes. John's passion in life as he expressed it himself, was that Christ might increase and that he himself might decrease (John 3:30). He constantly sought to fade into the background so that Jesus might have the prominence.

God's heart is set on this, that in all things Christ might have the pre-eminence (Colossians 1:18). If our hearts are also set on this one thing, that we ourselves should recede into the background and that Christ alone should be exalted, then assuredly we shall have God's power and authority behind us continually.

It is when we have other selfish aims and motives, perhaps not known to others but known to God, that God cannot in all faithfulness to His Holy Name commit His power to us.

Brothers and sisters, it is only through men and women who have the spirit of John the Baptist, that God is able to build His real Church. There is a real Church and there is a false one-a Jerusalem and a Babylon-as the Book of Revelation makes abundantly clear. Jerusalem can be built only by those who efface themselves and who have the spirit of a servant, but Babylon can be built by anyone. Jerusalem will remain for all eternity, but Babylon will very soon be destroyed by God (Revelation 18:21).

You remember how the Tower of Babel (the beginning of Babylon) came into being. Men got together and said, "Let us make us a name" (Genesis 11:4). The king of Babylon, years later, spoke in the same vein, "Isn't this great Babylon that I have built by my power and for my honour" (Daniel 4:30).

Any believer who has this same desire to make a name for himself and to exalt himself in the eyes of men, possesses the spirit of Babylon and what he builds through his labours can never last for eternity. And brethren, this spirit, alas, is found in the highest echelons of evangelicalism.

This was the spirit that Lucifer had. He wasn't satisfied with the position God had given him. He wanted to go higher, and he lost his anointing thereby. He was once the anointed cherub but he ended up as the Devil. And he is not the only one who has lost the anointing in this manner.

The Spirit of Christ is contrary to all this. Though He was God, yet He humbled Himself and made Himself of no reputation for our sakes. And the Bible says, "Let this mind be in you also.... (Philippians 2:5-8).

May God root out from our hearts all desire to be known and accepted by men. Let us not go around trying to make contacts in order to widen our influence and to make ourselves more well-known in evangelical circles. Let us not strive to get ourselves invited to foreign countries as "spiritual prodigies from heathen India."

If we are going to be like Jesus, we shall spend our time with the common folk, with ordinary men and women, as Jesus did, and not go around seeking to cultivate the friendship of evangelical leaders alone all the time. The Bible says,

Don't try to act big. Don't try to get into the good graces of important people, but enjoy the company of ordinary folks (Romans 12:16 - TLB).

May God keep us low. The safest place to be in is the foot of the Cross.

A Bossy Attitude

Our Lord was a servant, but alas, Christian leaders and missionaries today are often masters-bosses and Sahibs. We may not be able to prevent others from calling us "Sahibs" perhaps, but the question is whether we desire to be Sahibs in our hearts.

We need to re-learn the lesson that Jesus sought so patiently to teach His disciples. To them He said, after washing their feet, "In this world the kings and great men order their slaves around....ut among you the one who serves you best will be your leader. Out in the world the master sits at the table and is served by his servants. But not here! For I am your servant" (Luke 22:25-27 - TLB). Oh, how these words should convict us of our bossy attitude to those under us. How we should be humbled by the example of our Lord. May the Lord remove from us all false, worldly ideas of self-respect and dignity and race-superiority that we may yet be having. May He teach us afresh that the real mark of greatness in the kingdom of God is to be a servant, a pourer of water, as Jesus was.

May God help us to take the low place not only now but right through till the end of our lives. Let us never seek for honour and respect and obedience from our fellow-brethren at any time, not even when we feel we are senior workers in the Lord's vineyard. In our attitude to others, may we always recognise that they are the masters and we are the servants-even if our official position in the administrative set-up of our church is higher than theirs and even if we are senior in age and in experience. The higher we go, the more it becomes our responsibility to serve others.

2 Corinthians 4:5 is a very challenging verse in this connection. Paul says there (paraphrasing his words).

"We preach two things: By our lips we proclaim Christ Jesus as Lord. By our life we proclaim ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake."

Brothers and sisters, this is our twofold message; and what God has joined together, let no man put asunder. This is the full gospel. May we never be guilty of proclaiming only half of it, for only when this message is proclaimed in its entirety will the heathen begin to see Christ sanctified in us. It is the lack of this that hinders so much of the Lord's work in our land today.

If we are to be servants, we have to be genuinely humble. We shouldn't mistake condescension for humility. It is easy to have condescension. Even selfish politicians have that. We can have a conceited opinion of ourselves in our hearts that we are big people and then condescend to fellowship with lesser folk and mistake that for humility. No, that's not humility at all.

"Genuine humility involves my recognising that in God's eyes there is no difference whatever between me and anyone else. All the natural distinctions that exist between me and others are caused by circumstances and environmental factors etc., and have all been eradicated at the cross. The cross of Jesus reduces us all to zero. If that has not happened in my life, it only indicates that I have not yet begun to esteem others as more important than myself, as Philippians 2:3 commands us to. Once we have been reduced to zero, it becomes easy to take the low place, willingly and joyfully. And it becomes easy then for God to accomplish His full purpose through us as well."

As long as Moses (at the age of 40) felt that he was to be the leader of God's people, God couldn't use him (Acts 7:25). God had to take him out into the wilderness for another 40 years and break him. Finally, Moses came to the place where he said, "Lord, I'm not the man for this job. I'm unfit. I can't even speak" (and he really meant it; it wasn't just false humility as it often is with some folk who say similar things!). It was only then that God could use him, for Moses had now come to an end of himself. At the age of 40, in

his own strength, all Moses could do was bury one Egyptian under the sand. After God had broken him, he buried the whole Egyptian army under the Red Sea. Such is the result of brokenness.

It is not enough that the Lord take the five loaves and bless them. They must be broken before the multitude can be fed. This is a process that has to be repeated in our lives constantly. God takes us, blesses us, breaks us and uses us. Then we tend to get exalted because we have been used to feed so many. So He has to take us and break us again. And this process goes on all through life.

How we need to covet this brokenness. When a small atom is broken, what power is released! Then what power could be released in our land if only the leaders in our churches and then the congregations were broken by God.

The Distinguishing Mark

In these days of counterfeit, when the false looks so much like the true, I have often asked myself what the one unmistakable distinguishing mark of the true servant of God is.

Is it the power to do miracles? No. Demons can do miracles. Is it the ability to speak in tongues? No. Demons can copy that too. It is none of these primarily.

I have come to the conclusion that it is the spirit of the Cross that marks out the true follower of Jesus. The true servant of the Lord is one who has accepted the Cross in his life—a Cross that has slain his self-esteem, self-confidence, self-centredness and everything else of himself, and that has reduced him to a nonentity. This is the only clear mark by which we can distinguish the one who is really serving the Lord from the one who is serving himself. Other evidences can be deceptive.

We Reproduce After Our Kind

Are we being bothered by troublesome people in our churches today, by snobbish elders and bossy deacons? May it not be that we are reaping the fruit of what we have sown through the years, and that we are reproducing exactly after our kind? The snobbishness and the pride that we had (and still have) in our hearts are now becoming evident in the lives of our spiritual progeny. That shouldn't surprise us, should it?

And so, when we cry out, "Lord, send us a revival," the Word of the Lord to us is,

If my people who are called by My Name shall humble themselves and pray....then I will hear from Heaven....and heal their land (2 Chronicles 7:14).

Oh, how our land needs healing. Let us not say that God is delaying the revival. The hindrance is found in us, brethren.

May God find among us those who are willing to be servants and pourers of water.

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