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The Servant of the Lord

by T. Austin-Sparks

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In choosing a model of a servant of Christ, we instinctively turn to St. Paul. He seems to us to be the most outstanding in every way, and from the greatness of his achievements, the success of his methods, the amazement of his endurance, and his dominating objective, we must get back to his own conception of himself as a worker.

He has given us that conception in many significant and suggestive phrases, some of which we select at once. Not once only, but frequently, he refers to himself as "the servant of Jesus Christ."

Now I venture to say that a right understanding and apprehension of that word "servant" - as Paul used it - is calculated, without other designations, to revolutionize all of our work for the Master.

The actual word used by Paul was "bondslave," and by it we are thrown back into the social conditions of the world in those days. Slavery was a part of the social life of that time, and the readers of Paul's letters were all quite well acquainted with the ideas and customs connected with that system; indeed, some of those readers were slaves themselves. Paul looked upon himself as having been bought by Christ. He gloried in that ownership, and whenever opportunity presented itself he boasted that he was Christ's. To him that ownership was permanent. The slave was bound for life, and there could be no termination of the relationship or obligations.

The transaction was permanently marked by branding ("I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus"). Professor Mahaffy says:

"In the numerous records of manumissions found at Delphi and at other shrines in Greece, we have learned the legal process by which a slave gained his liberty. He did not bring his master his earnings and obtain his freedom with his receipt for the money, but went to the temple of the god and there paid in his money to the priests; who then with the money bought the slave from his master on the part of the god, and he became for the rest of his life a slave of the god. If at any future time his master or his master's heirs reclaimed him, he had the record of the transaction in the temple.... If he travelled from home and were seized as a runaway slave, what security could he have? Paul gives us the answer. When liberated at the temple, the priest branded him with the 'stigmata' of his new master, Apollo. Now Paul's words acquire a new and striking application. He had been the slave of sin; but he had been purchased by Christ, and his new liberty consisted in his being the slave of Christ. Henceforth, he says, let no man attempt to reclaim me; I have been marked with the brand of my new master, Jesus Christ."

On the one hand, this Pauline conception of the absolute and indelible proprietorship of Christ throws much of our modern "service" into striking contrast. Rather than being in willing, full, and free servitude, vassalage, and slavery to Christ, we often regard our service as a kind of religious holiday affair. We may be interested, we may be philanthropic, we may be condescending, or we may be dutiful, but we are certainly not under any compulsion. We can do pretty much as we like about it, and if things do not suit us, we can either "throw up" our work altogether or go where we shall be more appreciated or where things are smoother sailing.

So today, the "worker" too often makes the cause serve him or her instead of being the servant of the cause. Paul took his directions as to sphere, time, and kind of work from his Master, Christ, and relegated every concern to Him. He was not his own, and he could not use either his powers or his time as directed by the flesh.

But on the other hand, he was fully aware and convinced that this "slavery" to Christ was for him the greatest thing in the world. He had caught the true significance of the Master's invitation to "Take my yoke... and you shall find rest unto your souls." That, to Paul, meant control and direction for the most serviceable life.

The stream rushes aimlessly, frivolously, and noisily on until it is yoked by a water-wheel, and then - by its arrest - it grinds the grain to feed mankind. The wind blows wildly to no purpose on the sea until the mariner yokes it with his sail, and thus it is harnessed to bear the enriching cargoes from shore to shore. To capture the electricity which would otherwise be lost, we suspend our telegraph wires and direct it intelligently along them, bringing the whole world into an intimate association. And so, as in these and many other ways, the yoke is the symbol of useful control and serviceable direction. Paul knew that the yoke of Christ's service and association would make his life more fruitful than his own independence. There is a liberty which leads to havoc, ruin, uselessness, and remorse.

But the supreme element in Paul's abandonment to Christ was a strong, clear sense of what Christ had done for him... and a perpetual consciousness of what Christ was to him. There is nothing which makes slaves of us more than love, and it is an ecstatic and sublime slavery which never wants release, and only dreads that a breach might at some time come. In the captivity of Christ's love, Paul would ever be found doing everything which would preserve it from suffering hunger in his life,

and he would ever be found praying that the "marks" might be burnt more and more deeply into his soul.

"Who that one moment has the least descried Him,
Dimly and faintly, hidden and afar,
Doth not despise all excellence beside Him,
Pleasures and powers that are not and that are.

"I am persuaded that nothing shall sunder
Us from the love that saveth us from sin,
Lift it or lose hereover or hereunder,
Pluck it hereout or strangle it herein."

For effectual Christian service and the more powerful corporate testimony of the Church, it must be realized that the Divine calling and equipment for the prophetic, or pastoral, or teaching, or evangelistic, or apostolic work is not centered in one man in any given community, but that these personal gifts are distributed over the whole Church. Every true disciple of Christ is called to be a "servant of the Lord," and he should prayerfully seek to know in what specific capacity He calls him to serve - not taking up work at random, but having sought His guidance he should give himself earnestly, devotedly, and vigorously to his special ministry... and regard his calling as from God.

The "marks" of Christ must be seen upon His servants whether in the place where the Lord's people assemble, the business, the home, or the social circle; and he must ever be proud to say of *Him*: "Whose I am, and Whom I serve."

A vital relationship with Christ born of a deep personal appreciation of what He has done for... and daily is to... our souls, and a clear understanding with a profound conviction of what He wishes to do through our instrumentality - these, covered by a complete and utter abandonment to Him, are the only legitimate grounds for His service. Of such servants the world and the Church stand in tragic and pathetic need, and by such all problems of ineffectiveness and failure are solved. Such never take up the work lightly, and therefore never give it up easily - if at all.

Every Christian must conceive of himself or herself as being definitely called by God into the "fellowship of His Son," and as "workers together with Him." He must know that this calling is a solemn and irrevocable ordination to "the work of the ministry."

To be Christ's own purchased possession... and to be Christ's own controlled, directed, and equipped servant... is to have the strength of a great assurance that nothing can separate you from Him; that you work under supreme authority; that all the resources of Christ are at your disposal; and that while doing His work there can be no ultimate failure - unless *He* is ultimately to fail, an eventuality which is impossible.

This is a service which is eternal and supreme; yet it is only the probation for "higher service" where and when "His servants shall serve Him... and they shall see His face."

"Christ! I am Christ's! And let the name suffice you;
Ay, for me, too, He greatly hath sufficed.

Lo, with no winning words I would entice you,
Paul has no honor and no friend but Christ.

"Yea, through life, death, through sorrow and through sinning,
He shall suffice me, for He hath sufficed:
Christ is the end, for Christ is the beginning,
Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ."

It is so important, beloved, that we should be clear on this matter of service, and it will save us so much sorrow and heartbreak if we have this right as early as possible. We do not want to spend time in pointing out the tremendous mistakenness which prevails far and wide in this respect. "Christian service" has come to be a realm in which all the acquisitive, ambitious, obtrusive, assertive, self-seeking, and numerous other elements of the natural man have been vented and taken hold. It has created a system in which *human* distinctions are the order of the day. Yes, and much more which it is too painful to mention.

We need an adjustment of our minds by a true spiritual perception of the real nature of service, and it will be well for us ever to remember that all work for Christ is not service *to* Christ. A child may be very well-meaning and industrious in its "helping mother" (?), but poor mother may find rather more work created than done.

Now let us say right away... with emphasis... that the indispensable and basic thing to real service is THE SERVANT-SPIRIT AND THE SERVANT-MIND. The matter of service is infinitely more than busy-ness in religious causes, earthly activities in Christian interests; it is the accomplishment of a heavenly will and Divine purpose which registers its impact in the breaking of another, foreign will and destroying the works of the devil. This is the force of "obedience" and the "not my will" ...and this is the servant-mind and servant-spirit.

When a slave in Israel had fulfilled his time and could claim his liberty but preferred to remain with his master, he was taken on to the threshold and his ear was bored with an awl. The blood fell on the threshold, and he and his master stepped across that blood; by so doing, a covenant of service - now the service of love - was entered upon. To have stepped UPON the blood and "trodden it under foot" would have been to have "counted it an unholy thing," but passing over ("passover") it hand in hand was a covenant too sacred ever to be broken. So we are reminded that "we are not our own; we are bought with a price, even the precious blood."

The basic vision of all true service is that of "the Lord high and lifted up," His train filling "the Temple," resulting in ourselves being smitten to the ground with a realization of our own worthlessness. Such a vision makes us forever not masters but slaves... and necessitates an abiding application of blood-soaked, fire-impregnated coal from the altar if we are to be sent-ones - His servants.

Might it not be laid to our charge that our vision of service held *ourselves* high and lifted up and filling the frame as the goal... until we saw the Lord, and then - in that light - saw ourselves as worthless?

The Lord's need is to have *bond*-servants - such as... even though the extreme pressure at some time might make them say that they would "no more speak in this Name" ...find that they cannot

forbear for long; but cost what it may, they must be in it and at it - the fire is in their bones and zeal of His House eats them up. May we be such, and may the true ground and motive of this fellowship in service be:

"I love, I love my Master,
I will not go out free!
For He is my Redeemer,
He paid the price for me.
I would not leave His service,
It is so sweet and blest;
And in the weariest moments
He gives the truest rest.

"My Master shed His life-blood
My vassal life to win,
And save me from the bondage
Of tyrant self and sin.
He chose me for His service,
And gave me power to choose
That blessed, perfect freedom
Which I shall never lose.

"I would not halve my service,
His only it must be!
His only, Who so loved me
And gave Himself for me.
Rejoicing and adoring,
Henceforth my song shall be
'I love, I love my Master,
I will not go out free!'"

For the work of God a wisdom and a skill different from... and far transcending... that of man at his best is essential. A wisdom which is the gift of God. A wisdom, however, which is very often foolishness to men, and yet which - when the work is done - makes the wisdom of men look like foolishness.

Many things are being constructed to which the Name of the Lord is being affixed - things which appear fine and great and *like* "the Church," but which are destined to collapse when God's hurricane and fire test every man's work. Good works - philanthropy, hospitality, reform, education, religion, relief, etc. - may be the products, or byproducts, of what is called "Christian civilization" ...and things for which to be profoundly grateful... but let us not confuse these with "a new creation," regeneration, a being "born from above."

The Church is nothing which man can build by any resource in himself personally or collectively. The Church is an organism, not an organization: "Behold, I show you a mystery - we are members of His flesh and of His bones." Build that, if you can! Launch that; organize that; "run" that! It cannot be done. It is the spontaneous outworking of spiritual forces released... in the acceptance by faith of tremendous facts concerning Christ - facts which are proclaimed out of experience in the power of

the Holy Ghost. Not the theological Christ; not the doctrinal Christ; not the Christ of the letter; much less the Jesus of history; but the Christ of Eternity in all the meaning of His death, burial, resurrection, and ascension into the Throne of God *revealed in the heart by the Holy Spirit* - this alone is authority to preach, to serve, to occupy position, to "build" in relation to the House of God. It is folly to spend time and strength otherwise. It is wisdom to labor on this foundation.

Many inquiries have been set up as to the unsatisfactory situation which exists for so great an area in relation to the gospel and Christian life - questions concerning widespread indifference, gospel-hardening, wholesale backsliding, disappointing "converts," ineffective Christians, low level of spiritual life, worldliness in the "Church," the misleading of believers by false doctrine and deceiving spirits, spiritual immaturity, etc., etc.

To some extent such conditions existed from the beginning, even in the great apostolic days, but it was then much more the exception than now. It was then something in the midst of the greater and better conditions which made the apostolic Church so mighty in the world. Now it would seem to be the other way round. The genuine thing is the smaller company in the midst of the more general failure.

Far be it from us to join in the tirade against that which bears "His" name, but we are so constantly confronted with the heartbreaking story of the difficulties of service, the disappointment of workers, the despair of Christians, that we must enter the inquiry and seek to help.

Now without pressing it as our conviction - which it certainly is - we would present it as a question:

May not this state be largely due to an inadequate gospel?

Is the means used such as is calculated to achieve the tremendous end in view?

Have we an adequate conception of what that end is?

May it not be that such an inadequate conception has resulted in the eliminating or neglecting of essentials on the one hand, and the laboring of certain unworthy factors on the other?

With regard to the latter: Is fear of hell and gain of heaven really worthy of the "so great salvation"? Is the horror of being doomed to eternal punishment - giving rise to all the sensational means and methods by which fear is meant to be produced - really a sufficient motive? Is the personal going to heaven, with all the personal gains and pleasures associated therewith - producing all the sentimental appeals intended to capture by pathos, emotion, excitement, pleasure, etc. - really mighty enough to bring through the eternal purpose? The gospel of "escape from hell and going to heaven," with all the cheap elements of its proclamation which has nauseated so many and turned them away in disgust - may it not be this gospel which prejudices the true and has become played out in the emotions of many who can no longer be appealed to along these lines, setting up a gospel deadlock?

It is absolutely essential that if all the great purpose of God with its vast inclusions is to be entered into, and if there is to be an adequate impact upon men, there must be the sufficient background of the New Testament evangel. It would be very salutary if every "Christian worker" were to sit down...

or kneel down... and prayerfully consider the background of New Testament preaching, exhortation, admonition, entreaty, appeal, instruction.

It will be discovered that that background begins in eternity past, before times eternal, in the eternal counsels of God. It will reveal a conception and design with which every movement and gesture of God throughout the ages is related. It will explain the existence of the universe and the purpose of the whole creation. It will set the sovereignty of the Son at the center and make it also the circumference. It will reveal that each soul saved is a vindication of the wisdom of God in plan and creation... and the justification of the existence of the world.

Salvation - conversion - is never something in itself. An ultra-individualism in being saved or in seeking the salvation of others is contrary to the Scriptures... and is baneful. The "therefores" and the "wherefores" of the New Testament are pegs upon which hang vast ranges and mighty weights of spiritual significance and reason.

Why should men be saved? Why should I be utterly abandoned to Christ? Why should I accept the Cross of Christ in its total application to all the elements of my natural life? Why should I leave all for the Gospel's sake? These and many other such questions must be answered in the light of that infinite background of "the eternal purpose" in the first place.

True it is that conversions take place from the preaching of the immediate issues of sin and hell... and salvation from these. But so often such remains for a long time with but the personal salvation and the immediate issue and a single note. Why should maturity be so long delayed - the nursery so long occupied? Why not the full compass of Divine Meaning from the beginning? Again we ask, may not the widespread failure of a certain evangelism be due to an inadequate motive?

Then in the next place there must be an ADEQUATE DYNAMIC. There is no subject which concerns the servants of the Lord more than that of spiritual power and effectiveness. We have prayed about this until we despaired. We have read books upon it until we were sick. Yes, we have spoken about it ourselves until shame has silenced us.

We see the apostolic example and demonstration.
We know the Master's promise.
We know the doctrine and teaching basic to power.
But what of the power itself?

Far be it from us to think that we can improve upon, or profitably add to, all that has been written. But if the Lord has taken us through an experience which has made possible an unfolding of His secrets, it will not be conceit on our part if we humbly place such at the service of His children.

It is not sufficient that we recognize the need for power and pray for it. Indeed, it might be very unsafe for the gospel and for the Name of the Lord if it were given. It is of primary importance that we should know the nature and the basis of power. It is equally important that we should recognize that it is that power which has as its object the building of the "House" - the "Temple" of God.

From Genesis to Revelation, *resurrection* is invariably the basis upon which the direct purpose of God is carried forward. Every instrument which is used in that *direct* purpose has to be wrought on to a basis of *resurrection*. The experimental spiritual ground upon which the Church stood at Pentecost

was the Resurrection. Paul's whole life and work rested upon his own experience of the Resurrection. The basis of power is Resurrection union with Christ. The principle of "the eternal purpose" is Resurrection Life in Christ. The Holy Spirit comes only upon Resurrection ground. Power is to "know Him and the *power* of His Resurrection..." By that Life the Holy Spirit constitutes the believer a personal demonstration of the Resurrection, and the word of testimony thereto is only a consequence... but it is a consequence.

In the meantime, "the eternal purpose" proceeds, but it proceeds only in those and through those who have firstly recognized the death of Jesus as their death... and then accepted it in one all-inclusive reckoning of faith, trusting God to make it actual. They have claimed and apprehended by faith their inheritance in the Risen Lord, even Resurrection Life. It becomes the exclusive basis of all the activities of God within and through His children relative to the eternal purpose. But it is *Resurrection Life* - mighty, unconquerable, indestructible, deathless. *The Holy Spirit is the seal of the Resurrection, and the Holy Spirit's law of operation is Divine Life.*