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The Form of a Servant

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Series: The Mind of Christ



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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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The Form of a Servant

A sense of stillness etched its way into your heart. The wind had ceased its campaign to draw the leaves from their comfortable homes in the trees and cast them aimlessly to the ground. But the stillness only amplified the starkness of this struggling third world country. You were appalled at the hunger, the unemployment, the awesome reality that people were dying for lack of food. Orphanages were turning children away because they had no more beds. Beggars lined the streets, searching even for a crumb of food to stay alive. Garbage littered the countryside as the homeless rummaged through everything they could find, searching for anything to eat, leaving the remains scattered across the narrow paths.

Occasionally, you would see something that gave you hope: like a team of missionaries cooking pots of beans all night to serve the starving the next day, or nurses and doctors from the States giving their time to immunize the masses and treat the most life-threatening diseases with donated supplies from home. But those signs of hope were too few and far between. As we walk down the narrow streets, dodging donkeys and bicycles, trying to breathe without inhaling the stench of garbage, we are well aware of how much we have to be thankful for. For these people, there seems to be no hope.

As we round the corner, a pleasant sight captures our imagination. A tall slender man, neatly dressed in blue jeans and a short sleeved shirt is standing by the roadside. Crowds of people are huddling around him. He is teaching them. He is giving them food. He is giving them medicine. He is offering them clothing and encouragement. One man reaches out to him, struggling just to walk. He appears to have leprosy or some other hideous disease. The crowds won't touch him. This man does. He puts his arm around the disfigured man and says, "Don't give up. There's hope." Then he writes down

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an address on a piece of paper and tells him to go there. We later find out it is his own home, and his wife and children are waiting there to house and feed this social outcast, whose certain fate is death.

Something about the man seems familiar. It's almost as though you have seen him before. You call to your guide, and ask, "That man looks so familiar. Where is he from? Who is he? He seems to be the only real hope these people have. I know I've seen his picture somewhere."

The guide turns and with a smile says, "You don't recognize him, do you? He is the Supreme Ruler of our country. The government belongs to him. He was once the richest man in this part of the world. He had servants to do his bidding at a moment's notice. He owned most of the cattle in this part of the world. He is a man of such power that all he has to do is make a speech, and the news media around the world quotes his every word."

"I don't understand," you respond. "Why isn't he in the seat of government running the country?" The guide quietly answers, "He gave up his position as our leader in order to become a servant. He determined that unless he humbled himself and did what needed to be done, all the decrees in history would not help his people. So he laid aside his robes of lordship, gave up the rights to his wealth, sold many of his possessions and gave the proceeds to his starving countrymen. Now he spends his time doing the menial things, the grimy things, the thankless tasks that no one else will do. One day he will probably return to the glory that was once his, but not until he has finished the job of meeting his people's needs. He said he read about a man named Jesus who did that. And he said this man Jesus told his followers to do that. So he took on the form of a servant, gave up his rights, and now he is giving his life away. Have you heard of this man Jesus?" the guide concluded. "What a man he must have been. I wish I could meet one of His followers. No one I have ever met thought servanthood was an honor."

By then, the tears were streaming down my face. I am one of His followers. But no one could tell it by watching my

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life. I cling to my possessions, demand my privacy, insist on respect, clutch at my rights. My idea of being a servant is to serve on a committee, provided it meets at an acceptable hour, and then I want everyone to know I've served. I'm proud of my position in the community and in the church, and I wonder just what it would cost me to give it all up to do the things no one wants to do for people who don't even know who I am. I wonder.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,
(Philippians 2:5 NKJV)

Those words keep racing through my mind.

who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery
to be equal with God,

but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a
bondservant... (Philippians 2:6,7)

I don't even understand those words, let alone know how to make it work. But I wonder...if that mind is to be in me, dare I not investigate what it means?

I think we must investigate, and if need be, lay aside our robes of religiosity the way Jesus did. But we must not lay them aside so we can say that we have. We must lay them aside to take on the form of a servant. For the next few studies, we are going to find out what a servant does, who a servant is, and why, when those who possess robes of royalty become servants, the world takes notice.

And so our pilgrimage through the pages of Philippians, chapter two, continues. We are winding our way down, now, from the theological mountaintops of doctrinal understanding, down into the dirty streets where people live and where a real God has commissioned us to go. Our Commander-in-Chief hasn't left us with just an instruction manual. He has left us with the supreme example. He did it. And the video of what He did ought never to stop replaying in the recorders of our minds. It is not only our example, it is our motivation and our source of power.

HE TOOK ON THE FORM OF A SERVANT.

What a statement. It was one thing for Him to become a man. That was the supreme act of humility. But, being found in fashion as a man, to humble Himself further and take on the form of a servant, takes the word “humility” to far deeper depths. What is a servant? Why did Jesus do that? How can this mind be in us? Perhaps you don’t want to know. I understand. It’s safer not to know. You can remain safely sanctified in the darker side of life. You can rise to the heights of spiritual recognition, be looked upon as a disciple of disciples, and never have to get your hands dirty, your heart broken, or your time taken over by people who have nothing to give you in return. It’s safer not to know, but it will never lead you to the heart of God. The heart of God is looking for men and women who will take on the form of a servant. In fact, that’s exactly what God is after.

but [He] made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... (Philippians 2:7 NIV)

but [He] emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant... (Philippians 2:7 NAS)

He took on the nature of a slave. (Philippians 2:7 Williams’ translation)

He made Himself a slave. (Philippians 2:7 Beck’s translation)

1) His servanthood was a part of the process of emptying Himself or making Himself nothing. Giving up His name and giving up His rights were synonymous.

2) Taking on the “form” of a servant means taking on the “nature” of a servant as well. Form indicates the role He would play. Nature indicates the attitude He had. Both were part of the Mind He wants us to have.

3) What the word “servant” or “slave” means must be the key to this passage, not necessarily what it means today, but what it meant when Jesus said it.

The Greek word “doulos” in this passage has both the meaning of a “servant” and that of a “slave.” The literal

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definition might be that of a “bond-slave.” It has both the connotation of one who is committed to do the menial tasks (servant) and one who has given up or lost all his rights (slave). In our relationship with God, we are to become “bondslaves”. In our relationship with others, we are to become “servants.”

In Jesus’ day, there were more slaves than there were free men. So predominant were they in numbers, that it was against Roman law for slaves to wear any mark of identification because were the slaves to realize how many of them there were, an insurrection would be certain. The people understood Paul’s analogy.

There was more than one way to become a slave. One way was to get over your head in debt, and be unable to pay. After a reasonable period of time, you became the property of the one to whom you owed the debt. That was before the day when you could just get the limit on your MasterCard raised. For six years, you were an owned man. You did what you were told. You lived where they placed you, ate what they fed you, went where they sent you. You were “not your own,” you had been bought with a price. The price was the debt you owed that you could not atone for.

But in the seventh year, you could go free. And you would be sent out with a house full of food and drink and a way to make your entrance back into the free world. The day of your redemption was at hand. You were free again. There was, however, one exception. You could choose to remain a slave.

And if it happens that he says to you, “I will not go away from you,” because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you,

then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise.

(Deuteronomy 15:16,17 NKJV)

If you determined that your particular master was so good that you were better off being his slave than you were being free, you could become his “bondslave.” You could become a “slave by choice”. You could give up that right to be your own boss for the rest of your life and choose to submit instead

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to one who so had your best interest at heart, that he could better run your life than you could. That was your choice. If you made that choice, you made a definite, irrevocable commitment. You went to the magistrates, and in a public display of surrender, you asked to become formally marked as the property of another. Your ear would be pierced and an ornament place there that identified you with your master. It meant he had your ear. He would call, and you would answer. You would obey, and you would do it joyfully, because now you were not a slave by circumstance because you had to be. Now your obedience was based on love.

The picture being painted here on the scrolls of eternity is not difficult to recognize. It portrays the believer, purchased by the blood of God's Son, willingly choosing to become a bondsman of Jesus Christ. It is an eternal commitment. It is a public commitment. It is a serious commitment. It means that from this point on in your life, your one and only goal in life is to please your Master. He can run your life better than you can. He can make decisions for you that you cannot make for yourself. In exchange, He will provide for you, and whatever He provides is good. His will is good, acceptable, and perfect. He is your Master. You are His slave.

Now the word "slave" does not have a good connotation in our society or in our generation. But we must look at it from the perspective of what it meant to the people Paul was addressing in the first century. The issue isn't forced slavery. The issue is chosen servanthood. And our journey through the Scriptures for the next few lessons is designed to determine just what it ought to be like to be a slave of God's and a servant of man's.

The most important thing we can learn at the outset is the difference between a slave and a servant from God's perspective. A slave is one who has been purchased or who has chosen servitude: one whose rights have been subjugated totally to another. To his master, he is a slave. But if his master wills for him to wait tables for his guests, to those guests, he is a servant. He serves others in his master's name. If the master asks him to sweep floors, he becomes a floor sweeper. If the master asks him to paint the wall, he

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becomes a painter. But if the master asks him to carry his guests bodily to their awaiting chariot, that, too, is his task. He is a servant to his master's guest, because he is a slave to his master.

According to Bible scholars, this word "doulos" stands for the lowest possible form of slavery. The slave who is so described is owned lock, stock, and barrel by his master. He has no rights, only the privileges his master deems to give him, and those may be altered or removed at a moment's notice. One author described it this way: "one whose will and capacities are wholly at the service of another." He is truly "not his own". In his state as a slave, it is likely that his task on earth will be simply to serve others. Those others may have less education than he, less intelligence, less physical strength. They may be of dubious character, of less than honorable intentions. He does not serve them because they are worthy or because they are more deserving than he. He serves them because his master says so. That's all there is to it. By serving them, he is serving his lord.

Jesus became a "doulos" for our sake. Though He was equal to His Father, He considered His equality with the Father nothing to be clutched at, and made Himself of no reputation and became His Father's slave. That is why, when Jesus said, "Of mine own self I can do nothing", we should not be surprised. He was not, while on this earth, free to make His own choices. He was free to honor the choices His Father made. For 33 years, Jesus was His Father's slave.

As such, the Father made the son a servant of undeserving men. The only way Jesus could remain the perfect slave was to be the perfect servant. As the Father's slave, He had to submit to washing dirty feet, loving lepers, fellowshiping with sinners, walking dirty roads, living from day to day without so much as a place to lay His head. He had to be born in a manger, not in a palace. He had to teach on a hillside, not in the temple. He had to be despised and rejected of men, a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief. He had to endure the taunts of jealous Pharisees, the rejection of Roman authorities, the ingratitude and unfaithfulness of uncommitted disciples. He lived with the horrible effects of sin in the world: death,

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disease, immorality, lying, and still He served. In that kind of world, the one who knew no sin spent His days bringing life to the dead, sight to the blind, healing to the crippled, and eternal life to any who would receive His name.

He poured His life day after day into fickle, feuding, self-centered men, who spent more time arguing over who would be greatest in the Kingdom, knowing that though they were filled with imperfections, those imperfections would one day be the reflectors that would more perfectly show forth the power that makes strength out of weakness. So He loved them. He taught them. He rebuked them. He waited for them. He explained again and again to them the same truths, patiently waiting for that day when the Holy Spirit would make that truth come alive. Never did He reject them for their slowness of mind, their indifference, or their lack of commitment. Taking the form of servant, He simply gave Himself away. The results were not His. They belonged to the Father, “I have manifested Your name...I have given them Your word...I have sent them into the world. I have glorified You on earth...I pray for them.”¹

He did the Father’s will. He served as the Father’s slave. Now the results were up to the Father, and the Father alone. And so Jesus etched indelibly on Scripture’s scrolls, the pattern of the Christian life. “Let this mind be in you” means that in order “to do the Father’s will, you must become the Father’s slave, which will ultimately make you the servant of men.” One day you will reign as kings. One day you will rule angels. One day “the trumpet of God will sound, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord.”²

But as the song says, “Until then” we are to serve. Not organizations, people. Not just worthy people, also outcasts, hypocrites, slanderers, fools. We are to wait tables, if you will, for the arrogant, the condemning, the self-satisfied. We are to wash the feet, if you will, of the beggar, the elderly, the crippled, the blind, the weary, the dying. And until we become

¹ John 17:6-9

² 1 Thessalonians 4:16,17

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so yielded to the humility of Christ that we literally consider all others as better than ourselves, we will miss the mind of Christ. We may have volumes of doctrinal truth stored in the computers of our minds, but if we cannot let the love of Christ pour through our lives, we will be stumblingblocks, not stepping stones to a world that has enough arrogance already. It is looking for something different. It is looking for the mind of Christ.

The mind of Christ doesn't mind being interrupted. The mind of Christ doesn't resent intrusions on its time. The mind of Christ doesn't resist that which is menial, doesn't think of class systems, or racial or economic differences. The mind of Christ sees need as opportunity, the hurts of others as an affront to God, and the rejections of others as a clarion call to get involved in demonstrating the love of God. The ultimate act of a slave would be to die for his master. A bondslave who had chosen slavery would consider that an honor. If he were asked to die for his master's least-deserving friends, that, too, would be an honor. That's why Jesus was able to say, "nevertheless, Thy will be done." That's why you can say it, as well.

In the next few lessons, we will ask God to let us walk in the steps of Jesus and find out what a servant does to honor his master. But for the moment, let's close by looking at an incident in our Savior's life that best illustrates the difference between His concept of service and ours. It is found in the latter portion of Matthew, chapter 20.

"So the last will be first, and the first will be last."

Now as Jesus was going to Jerusalem, He took the twelve disciples aside and said to them,

"We are going up to Jerusalem, and the son of Man will be betrayed, to the chief priests and the teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death

and will turn Him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified. On the third day He will be raised to life!"

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of Him.

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“What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by My Father.”

When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers.

Jesus called them together and said, “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.”

(Matthew 20:16-28 NIV)

Jesus had just finished sharing with His somewhat thin-skinned, but thick-skulled followers, the parable of the workers in the vineyard. The workers who had been called in early were demanding their rights. The workers who had come late were grateful for theirs. Jesus, trying to teach about the principle of presumption and pride, ends by saying, “The last will be first, and the first will be last.” Those who humbly thought they deserved nothing would be honored above all.

That statement is important, because it was on the heels of this explanation of the essence of humility that this next incident occurs in the life of Christ. Jesus called His co-workers aside, and with a heart filled with grief and a voice no doubt filled with agony, He tells them that He is to be arrested, falsely accused, condemned, betrayed, and crucified. This was the most important statement Jesus had ever made to the twelve. The atmosphere must have been filled with tension.

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Suddenly they were interrupted. The mother of Zebedee's sons comes into the Master's presence and falls down before Him in an act of reverence. She meant well, but she didn't have a clue as to what the Kingdom was all about. She said, to have an hierarchy of authority, how about making my two boys, James and John, your vice-president and secretary of state." The boys were in on the charade. We know that, because Jesus addressed them in their answer to her. He said, "Are you able to drink the cup I am about to drink?" The Scripture says they both answered, "Yes, Lord, we're ready!"

Jesus was kind to them. He told them they didn't understand what they were asking for. And He went on to say that the places of honor in the kingdom were reserved for those His Father had chosen. Jesus was a slave. His Father was the Master. And the places of honor were not reserved for those who lobbied for them, but for those who humbled themselves and would feel unworthy even thinking about it.

That should have humbled the twelve, even if they missed the import of the lesson and even if they hadn't caught the intensity of Jesus' revelation of His upcoming death. But it didn't. The next verse says that the other ten classmates of James and John turned on them and began to argue over the gall of their mother's demands that would cause them to be subordinated to these two. She wanted her boys to be the first elders. The other ten felt more qualified. At that point, this very discussion indicated none of them were qualified.

Jesus called them aside once more. Oh, how patient He was. They hadn't even begun to grasp that God had become a servant to man so man could become the servant of God. They hadn't made the "spiritual switch". So Jesus used the world system once again as a backdrop to explain what the Kingdom wasn't. He said, "In the world, the more important a man is, the more he lords it over those under him. The more power is his, the more power he uses. It must not be so with you". Those were the Master's words. It must not be so with us, either.

"Instead," Jesus added, "Whoever wants to become great among you must become your servant, and whoever wants

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to be first must be your slave.” There’s our word “doulos”. The truly great in the Kingdom will be the ones who humble themselves the most. The greatest in the Kingdom will be those who actually became slaves of God and servants of men. Then He tells them one more time...

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.

(Matthew 20:28 NIV)

Do you want to be great? Then learn how to die. Learn how to die to your own desires, your own reputation, your own recognition, your own affluence. Learn to give it up quietly, without fanfare, for the sake of those who deserve absolutely nothing. Learn to give it up for those who won’t appreciate it when they get it. Learn to give up your claims to greatness in exchange for the greatness that accompanies true humility. Until you do that, the “exchanged life” is a doctrinal mentality, not a spiritual reality. So long as you think you deserve anything, you do not understand the mind of Christ.

What we deserve is an eternity in hell. Anything other than that and better than that is grace. And as we argue over our position in the Kingdom or our place in the church or have hurt feelings because someone didn’t understand us or appreciate us or recognize us, we are saying to God, “I don’t want to die with you. I’m better than that. I deserve to be noticed. I deserve to be treated fairly.” Oh, Beloved, “The servant is not greater than His Master.” Was Jesus treated fairly? Did He retaliate? Did He pout? Did He quit? No, He humbled Himself. He was a slave. A slave has no rights. A slave is often misunderstood, seldom appreciated, often abused. That’s his owner’s problem. All the slave is called to do is to serve the very people who don’t appreciate him, knowing that by so doing, he is honoring his master.

Try for one week, every time someone takes advantage of you, every time you are misunderstood, not appreciated, not taken seriously, not given your rightful place or paid your rightful due, instead of demanding the rights of a master, take the form of a slave. Serve those who misunderstand you. Love those who don’t appreciate you. Humble yourself

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before those who do not give you what you think you deserve. Serve them in life. It will please your Master, for you will have become a slave, indeed. And others, seeing how a real slave behaves as a servant, will begin to wonder, “What makes him so different?” And you can “be ready always to give an answer to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you with meekness and fear.”³

It is not natural. Praise God for that. It has to be supernatural. Only God in you can be that humble. But God won't do it, unless you choose, moment by moment, to let Him. The power is His. The choice is yours. And the choice is whether or not to become...a slave. If “this mind is to be in you”, you have no other choice.

³ I Peter 3:15b

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