

## The Way Up is Down: Serve One Another

Galatians 5:13

What do you think of when you hear the word *serve*? No, I don't mean the opening hit of the racket in a tennis match. I'm not even talking about your waiter or waitress at Shiela's. I mean what does a servant look like? What picture comes to mind?

It's possible that you have a positive image. Perhaps you think of a soldier on the ground in Iraq or Afghanistan serving his country. Maybe you think of a police officer serving her community, and on the side of her car it says, "To protect and to serve."

However, for many people, serving doesn't conjure up a positive image. Instead, they think of endless menial chores, cleaning up other people's messes, and catering to their vain whims. When they think of a servant, they think of someone bent over, crushed in spirit, and someone who has been stripped of their dignity. They think of being mistreated and taken for granted. A servant is someone with no ambition, low skill, little value and no will of their own.

And yet the New Testament draws the picture of servant time after time. The apostles picture themselves as servants. They commend their fellow ministers for being servants. You and I are called to be servants. In Galatians 5:13 we read our next one another statement. It goes beyond the call to love one another, to accept one another, and to live in harmony with one another. Here we are called to become servants of one another. *"You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love."*

So, just what sort of image does the Bible want us to have of a servant? Interestingly, our English translations tone down Paul's words to make them easier for us to swallow. A literal translation of the end of Galatians 5:13 would read, "so use your freedom by making yourselves slaves to one another in love. Now there's a word that rubs us the wrong way. What do you picture in your mind when you hear the word *slave*?"

But Paul isn't calling for oppression. This isn't permission for us subjugate one another to our will. ***Paul is calling for servanthood, not servitude.*** It is the difference between have to and want to. Servitude is imposed from the outside. Someone forces you. Servanthood grows from our heart. It blossoms from our own desire, rooted in our love for God and for others. Paul isn't talking about an

obligation or duty that we have to others. Rather, he is talking about what we should freely want to do. We make our self the servant of another, because we love them. We desire to serve to serve them.

This does not come to us naturally or easily. Our sinful, human nature fights against this every step of the way. We want the spotlight. We want center stage. We want the attention, the credit, the glory. Our fleshly nature doesn't want to serve others, it wants to be served. This is why Paul warns that we should not use our freedom to serve our sinful nature, literally our flesh. Our flesh, our physical self, has been corrupted by sin. It is selfish by nature. It is focused entirely on what it wants and its appetites. Ours is a culture of me, mine, myself, and I.

Bill Hybels has written an excellent book on humility called *Descending into Greatness*. He points out that in our culture answers are wrapped around our appetites. "Does this fulfill my needs? Does it satisfy my sexual hunger? Quench my thirst for more? Feed my lust for power?" In the midst of all these appetites clamoring to be fed, comes this gentle but firm call to serve one another. Topple the idol of self. Think of the other person first. Set your own desires aside, and strangle the ravenous addictions of the flesh. Don't worry about the attention, the credit, or the glory, just do what needs to be done. Serve one another in love.

In this call to servanthood is one of the great mysteries of Scripture: The way up is down. Do you want to get higher? You need to go lower. The path to true greatness is paved with humble service. In Scripture, great leaders are great servants. Influential power is achieved through putting others first. The last shall be first. The way up is down. It turns the conventional wisdom of our culture upside down. Actually, it sets it right side up. It is our "Me" oriented culture that has turned everything topsy turvy.

This is one thing that Jesus tried real hard to impress upon his disciples. One time in Matthew 20 they got into a big fight over who would get to sit in the seats of honor next to Jesus in his kingdom. They were still thinking of the wrong kind of kingdom here. But here they are arguing over position and power, and listen to what Jesus tells them:

<sup>25</sup> *You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.* <sup>26</sup> *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* <sup>27</sup> *and whoever wants to be first must be your slave (Matt. 20:25-28)."*

The way up is down. Booker T. Washington, the great black leader and pioneer of civil rights and education for African Americans is a beautiful example of servanthood, and he showed how the

way up is down. He was born into slavery and grew up in a world of racial hatred and oppression. After the slaves were freed, Washington, through hard work and determination, paid his own way through school and received an education. At the age of 25, he helped found a school for blacks in Tuskegee, Alabama. He became a nationally recognized black leader.

One day he was walking through an exclusive section of Tuskegee, when a wealthy white woman stopped him. Not knowing that he was the famous Dr. Washington, president of the Tuskegee Institute, she asked if he would like to earn a few dollars by chopping wood.

Professor Washington smiled, rolled up his sleeves, and proceeded to do the humble chore she had requested. When he was finished, he carried the logs into the house and stacked them by the fireplace.

At this point, a young girl recognized him and later revealed his identity to the wealthy woman. The next morning this embarrassed woman went to see Dr. Washington at his office and apologized profusely. He was very gracious, "It's perfectly all right, Madam. Occasionally, I enjoy a little manual labor. Besides, it's always a delight to do something for a friend.

She shook his hand warmly and assured him that his meek and gracious manner had endeared him and his work to her heart. A short time later, she persuaded several of her wealthy friends to join her in donating many thousands of dollars to the poorly funded school. The way up is down.

Let me give you three reasons why this spiritual principle is true, why the way up is down.

### **I. When You Serve You Find Your Purpose in Life**

First of all, the way up is down, because when you serve, you find your purpose in life. The way things are, is not the way God intended them to be. God did not create us to be appetite driven, selfish creatures. Being a Christian and having a relationship with our Creator is in part about renewing and rediscovering God's original purpose for your life. You were made for love. You were made for relationship. You were made to fulfill and complete one another, and serving is an integral part of that.

Niccolo Paganini is regarded by many as the greatest violinist who ever lived. He pioneered techniques and styles that forever changed the face of music and remain influential to this day. A key part of his signature sound was his violin, which he named *The Cannon*, for its booming resonance so distinct from other violins. This violin is believed to be one of the greatest instruments ever made.

When he died, he willed his beautiful instrument to the city of Genoa, his hometown. Paganini's violin became a prized treasure of the city. It was locked in a glass display case and went unplayed for nearly a century. By the early 1900s, the violin had become so decayed that was nearly a useless relic. You see, when used and handled, the wood of such a fine instrument wears only slightly, but unused, it begins to dry and decay. So, the painstakingly tedious process of restoration began in 1917. Today, the violin is still on display in the Genoa town hall. However, the curator takes it out and plays it every month, and the greatest violinists in the world are periodically invited to play it. A Christian who doesn't serve others is like Paganini's unplayed violin. You are a beautiful instrument, exquisitely crafted for a most noble purpose. When you don't serve, your life isn't doing that for which it was designed. You begin to dry up and decay.

However, when you serve others you are functioning according to your Creator's original design. You're doing something that matters. You are making a difference. When you serve, you find your purpose in life. It's why you were made. The way up is down.

## **II. When You Serve You Become More Like Jesus**

Perhaps when we think of a servant, the first image that should come to our minds is Jesus. Jesus is the greatest picture of a servant, and when you serve you become more like Jesus. After telling his disciples that the way to become great was by serving, he said that he did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Later, he would demonstrate this in a very vivid way. In John 13, we read that Jesus, *"got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him."*

To truly appreciate this we need to step back in time. This was a time when most roads were not paved. They were simply dusty paths. If you travelled, you went on foot. During this time of year, frequent rains made the roads very muddy. When you arrived somewhere, your feet, and ankles, and calves were caked in dirt and mud.

Because of this, it was common when hosting others, to have a servant at the door to wash the guest's feet as they arrived. If no servant was available, the earliest arriving guest would take it upon himself to wash the feet of others. Not only was this needed after a long walk, but it served a very practical purpose at meal time. 1<sup>st</sup> Century Jews did not sit in chairs at a table. Their tables were low to

the ground, and they would recline on pillows, they would lie down around the table. Now picture this in your mind. Imagine thirteen sweaty, filthy dudes reclining around this table. One guy's head is right next to the next guy's feet.

As they arrive for the Passover meal, not one disciple takes it upon himself to wash the feet. Instead, they recline to eat, feet unwashed. We know from Luke's Gospel that an argument broke out at the table about which of them were the greatest. They argue about honor with dirty feet.

Now what do you think went through their minds as Jesus arose from the table. He removes his robe and he takes up the servant's towel. He grabs the basin of water, and one by one their master begins to wash their feet. What do you think they felt? What would you have felt?

Afterwards, Jesus tells them,

John 13:12-17

*"Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. 13 "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. 14 Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. 15 I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. 16 I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. 17 Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

Do you want to be like Jesus? Then serve. You don't have to have great theological knowledge. You don't have to be able to teach Sunday School classes. It doesn't have to cost any money. Just time and love. If you want to get closer to God, remember the way up is down. You get closer to him by lowering yourself and serving others. Here's the thing, you cannot be looking down on others and up at God at the same time. You are never more like Jesus than when you are serving others.

### **III. When You Serve, You Open Your Life to the Holy Spirit**

A third reason that the way up is down, is because when you serve, you open your life to the Holy Spirit. People want to experience God's Spirit working in their lives. Serving is the way to unlock the door and throw it wide open.

So many want to know the power of the Holy Spirit. Unfortunately, they think the key to experiencing the power of the Spirit is through some mysterious or mystical experiences. They eagerly seek supernatural. This has made many Christians vulnerable to charlatans that put on a good show. It exposes them to false teaching. They are looking for some sort of Holy Spirit trick to get the power of God in their lives.

Do you want to know what Scripture says is the real key to experiencing the power of the Holy Spirit in your life? Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:7, *“A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other.”* Peter says in 1 Peter 4:10, *“God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another.”*

God has enabled and equipped every one of us to serve within the body. When you serve, God through his Spirit, works his power, his gift, through you. In humble service you become a conduit through which the spiritual power of God works. Far from being menial and meaningless, you become the very instrument of God.

What does a servant look like? John Stennis and Mark Hatfield were staunch political opponents on Capitol Hill. They debated fiercely in the senate, and often voted on opposite sides of issues. However, they were also spiritual brothers. They shared a common faith in Christ, and they were members of prayer group together.

In 1973, after a long day on Capitol Hill, John Stennis, was mugged outside of his Washington home. He was nearly fatally wounded from two gunshots. His life hung in the balance, and for nearly seven hours, Senator Stennis was on the operating table at Walter Reed Naval Hospital.

News quickly spread and a shocked Washington and a stunned nation awaited the outcome. At the same time Mark Hatfield was driving home when he heard about the shooting. He turned his car around and drove directly to the hospital. Once there, he noticed that the staff was swamped and could not keep up with all of the incoming calls about the Senator's condition. He spotted an unattended switchboard, so he sat down and went to work answering calls.

He manned the switchboard all night long. The next morning, after it was clear that Senator Stennis would be fine, senator Hatfield stood, and stretched, and put on his overcoat. The curious, but thankful staff asked about this strange helper. *“I'm Mark Hatfield. Happy to help out.”* He then left.

What does a servant look like? A servant looks like Richard Bailey who comes to the building when no one else is here to make sure our toilets flush and everything functions when all of you are here. He does this even though he's working two full-time jobs. A servant looks like Tim and Josh who spend countless hours here working on the sound, the lights, the network and computers. A couple of weeks ago, we had a real bad echo in the sound system. On Monday, Josh was here spending hours tracing down the problem and fixing it. There's rarely a project around here that time isn't involved in.

What does a servant look like? She looks like Brenda Nease, Lisa Hardy and and Sue Gross who are here hours before Wednesday night church starts making food and getting everything ready to feed dozens. They look like Chuck and Joyce who come in to make sure we have communion ready to go each and every Sunday.

What does a servant look like? It looks like Amber and Pat Theobald, Jessica Diercks, Roy & Carmen Diehl, Teresa Raymond, Shawn and Betty Jester, David and Ellen Visconte, Crystal Hilton and Chrystal Barnes, Sarah Perkins and Sara Wilson and everyone who works with our kids on Wednesday nights and Sunday mornings. Servants look like Terry Hardy, Natalie Crawford, Alyssa Stelmach, Ty and Meredith Diehl, Gene Hyder, Melissa Dudley and Jeff Graves and all those who work with our teens.

Servants look like who do our Junior Worship each week. Servants look like Curtis Dudley, Carmen, Shawn and all of our Sunday School teachers. Servants look like Kim, Wes, Nate, Marissa, Amber, Angela and all those who help with praise and worship on Sunday mornings. They look like nursery volunteers, and those who do communion meditations. They look like small group leaders, and those who work at the food pantry. Servants look like those who jump in and set up tables and chairs without being asked. They look like those who come and clean the building each weekend. They look like those who open their hearts and their homes. They look like ladies who sneak in to something nice for others anonymously.

These people seek no praise. They call no attention to themselves. They work quietly and unassumingly behind the scenes, often unseen and unknown. You wouldn't even know what they do, unless one Sunday it wasn't done. It's not until there's no one in the nursery; It's not until there's no doughnuts to eat and no coffee to drink; It's not until you go in the restroom and there's no toilet paper, that you begin to appreciate all that these people do.

It reminds me of a story that the late Peter Marshall, an eloquent speaker and for several years the chaplain of the United States Senate, used to love to tell. It was about "The keeper of the spring," a quiet forest dweller who lived high above an Austrian village along the eastern slopes of the Alps.

The old gentleman had been hired many years ago by a town council to clear away the debris from the pools of water up in the mountain crevices that fed their town's water supply. With faithful, silent regularity, he patrolled the hills, removed the leaves and branches, and wiped away the silt that would otherwise choke and contaminate the fresh flow of water.

Over the years, the idyllic mountain village became a popular attraction for vacationers. Graceful swans floated along the crystal clear spring, the millwheels of various businesses located near the water turned day and night, farmlands were naturally irrigated. It was postcard picture beautiful.

Years passed. One evening the town council met for its semi-annual meeting. As they reviewed the budget, one man's eye caught the salary figure being paid to the obscure keeper of the spring. Said the keeper of the purse, "Who is the old man? Why do we keep him on year after year? No one ever sees him. For all we know the strange ranger of the hills is doing us no good. He isn't necessary any longer!" By a unanimous vote, they dispensed with the old man's services.

For several weeks nothing changed. By early autumn the trees began to shed their leaves. Small branches snapped off and fell into the pools, hindering the rushing flow of sparkling water. One afternoon someone noticed a slight yellowish-brown tint in the spring. A couple days later that water was much darker. Within another week, a slimy film covered sections of the water along the banks and a foul odor was soon detected. The mill wheels moved more slowly, some finally ground to a halt. Swans left as did the tourists. Clammy fingers of disease and sickness reached deeply into the village.

Quickly, the embarrassed council called a special meeting. Realizing their gross error in judgment, they hired back the old keeper of the spring...and within a few weeks the veritable river of life began to clear up. The wheels started to turn, and new life returned to the hamlet in the Alps once again.

What does a servant look like? Look in the mirror. A servant looks like you.