

# **Truth for Today**

*The Bible teaching radio programme*

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## **The Christian Servant: At Church**

This morning we come to the third in our series of talks on the Christian servant. The previous two talks have looked at that service in the home and in the workplace. It is important to realise that every Christian, without exception, is called to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ. That calling is both a special privilege and a solemn responsibility. We ought to spend some time this morning considering the reasons for that statement.

First of all, and most importantly, we have the example of the Lord Jesus Himself. That example is seen both in His words and in His actions.

### **His words**

Jesus sums up the purpose of His coming in Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." It is surely significant that this verse occurs in the Gospel of Mark which especially portrays the Lord as the perfect Servant. This key verse effectively divides the Gospel into two. Prior to it, we see the Servant busily at work in blessing, in teaching and in healing. The rest of the Gospel is taken up by a description of the Lord's death and resurrection. Only by giving His life as a ransom in this way could our sins be forgiven.

### **His actions**

We cannot do better than read from John 13: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end. And supper being ended, the devil having already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray Him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded... So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, 'Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, happy are you if you do them'" (John 13:1-4; 12-17).

Remember that Jesus' crucifixion was only a few hours away. Yet at a time when He might have expected His disciples to comfort Him, He waits on them. In washing their feet, He does what ordinarily the lowest slave in the house would have done when visitors entered the house. All the disciples had been too proud to stoop to such a service! Jesus' words, "If you know these things, happy are you if you do them", must have challenged His disciples then, as they still challenge us today.

Little wonder, then, that Paul can write of the Lord Jesus, "who, being in the form of God...made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a servant" (Philippians 2:6-7). It is interesting that the Greek word for 'form' used here implies 'essence'. In fastening up His garments and taking a towel and a basin Jesus displayed the badge of a servant. But His Servanthood went deeper than that for it was part of His very being, His mindset on life. Today He calls us to be His servants in that kind of way.

I wonder, did Peter have that incident of feet washing in mind when he wrote many years later to those occupying positions of responsibility in the church then, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:2-3)?

The apostle Paul displayed that same sense of being a servant. Writing to Titus, and to the churches at Rome and Philippi, he introduces himself as a servant of Jesus Christ. The word he uses for servant, 'doulos', carries with it the

idea of being in bondage, and might be better translated 'bondservant'. So he writes to the church at Corinth, "ourselves your servants for Jesus' sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5).

We have spent some time this morning looking at the biblical concept of servant but I believe it is time well spent. So we say again that every Christian is called to be a servant of the Lord Jesus. There are no exemptions from this service! It is time now to move on and look at how each one of us can be His servants in the church.

All of us have at our disposal 168 hours in a week. Some of that time we spend in sleeping, in eating, in earning our living, and in the many other jobs which make up daily living. Many of us might count up on one hand the number of hours we actually spend in a church building. But being a servant of the Lord Jesus in church must extend beyond those few hours we might spend in church. As we are seeing in this series of talks, being a servant of the Lord Jesus today affects every department of life. Being a servant of the Lord Jesus in church may involve me in activities during those times when I meet with fellow believers, but it should also involve me in activities outside those times, as we shall see.

It is interesting that only one person in the New Testament appears to be described specifically as a servant of the church – her name is Phoebe. So Paul writes of her, "I commend to you Phoebe our sister, who is a servant of the church in Cenchrea, that you may receive her in the Lord in a manner worthy of the saints, and assist her in whatever business she has need of you; for indeed she has been a helper of many and of myself also" (Romans 16:1 and 2). The word used for 'servant' here is '*diakonos*' from which we derive our present day 'deacon' and 'deaconess'. ('*Diakonos*' is used to describe a servant's relationship to the work; '*doulos*' describes the relationship to the master.)

It is noteworthy that, in the gallery of faithful Christians mentioned by Paul in that chapter, Phoebe comes first. This is the only mention of Phoebe in Scripture so that we do not know a great deal about her service. Tradition has it that she was the bearer of Paul's letter to the Romans on her journey to Rome. If so, she must have been a sister in whom the apostle had total confidence.

Cenchrea was one of the two ports of Corinth. The church in Cenchrea would have found itself, then, in the midst of all kinds of people, rich and poor, good and bad, as is the situation in seaports today. Phoebe's role in that church would not have been an easy one. Some clue as to that role is provided by what the apostle writes: "she has been a helper of many and of myself also". That help might have taken many forms: hospitality, encouragement, counsel, teaching. Just as Aquila and Priscilla had been able to take Apollos aside, perhaps in the privacy of their own home, and together had "explained to him the way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:26), so Phoebe might have used her home to instruct other believers. Now she was on her way to Rome, the centre of the world at that time, on further business for her Master. The Roman Christians were told to help her as much as they could.

It ought to be said that Phoebe's service in the church would not have included oral participation in the worship and teaching of the church when they were met together, though it would be none the less valuable for that. So Paul writes to Timothy, "I desire that the men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting". Here Paul uses the word for 'men' which means 'males' in contrast to mankind in general. He goes on to add, "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man, but to be in silence" (1 Timothy 2:8-12). This plain teaching of the apostle has been largely set aside in the church today. It is felt that women can only make a significant contribution to church life if they fulfil all the roles given to men.

It is true that as to coming to faith in Christ, all of us, men and women alike, come in exactly the same way. There is no difference. So Paul writes, "For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus...There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26-28). But that does not do away with the fact that in the church God has given different roles to men and women. Those roles are different, though one is not necessarily better than the other.

When the Lord stopped Saul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus and turned his life around, Saul's immediate response was, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" (Acts 9:6). That ought to be the birth-cry of every Christian. We very much need to get away from the idea that only what is done and said in public view in the church is important. The fact is that if the Lord has given me a job to do, then that job is important to Him. Carrying out that job for Him will earn His "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21), whether I think the job is important or not. In the church today, there is work for every one of us to do – women and men, young and old. The important thing for each of us is to find out from the Lord just what He wants us to do.

It is true that there are positions of authority and leadership in the church. So Paul writes, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in the word and doctrine" (1 Timothy 5:17). Hebrews 13:17 adds, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account". Those who rule in this way need to take very much to heart Peter's words which we considered earlier: "nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock". 1 Timothy 3 lists the qualifications for

those who would be bishops (the word literally means 'overseers') and deacons in the church. From Philippians 1:1, we learn that in the church at Philippi there were bishops and deacons (both in the plural). The biblical concept of bishop is clearly different from that commonly understood in the church today.

Other avenues of service are mentioned in Romans 12:6-8: "Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, let us prophesy in proportion to our faith; or ministry, let us use it in our ministering; he who teaches, in teaching; he who exhorts, in exhortation; he who gives with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness." It is interesting that the word used for 'ministry' is closely related to the word 'servant' used to describe Phoebe. Many, if not all, of these avenues of service are open to both men and women, though, as we have already said, will not lead to the audible participation of women during the church service. Again many, if not all, of these avenues of service will carry on beyond the normal hours of church attendance.

Today, there is a great need for those men and women who are able to shepherd the flock of God, to care for those who are going astray or who are hurting because of situations in life in which they are caught up. We need to hear the call of God which Isaiah heard, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Will our response be then like his: "Here am I! Send me."? (Isaiah 6:8).

We have not yet touched on the many other opportunities there are likely to be for those who are ready to be servants in the church today. Who will help teach the word of God to children and teenagers in a world which desperately needs to hear the good news of the Saviour? Who will be there to make sure that the church building is open and warm and ready to welcome others in? Who will be ready to help maintain the fabric of the church building, in painting and decorating, in keeping the building clean? Who will be ready to call on those who through illness are not able to get to church, or who have simply lost interest? Who will be ready to help just by being there and ready to offer a word of encouragement and help to others? And so we could go on!

Being a Christian servant in church will not necessarily win you plaudits – alas, sometimes the reverse! One cold, wet night, a group of passengers alighted from the train at a small, country station. The young ticket inspector carefully checked the tickets of each one before allowing them to leave. Many of the passengers complained bitterly, wondering why they could not just be let through on such a night. One of them remarked to the young man, "You're not very popular tonight". The young man pointed to the stationmaster's office up above and replied, "It's not so much what you think, but what he thinks"! However small the service as men judge things, we have the promise of Jesus, "If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honour" (John 12:26).

We must mention one final avenue of service, so urgently needed in the church today. Paul writes of Epaphras, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, greets you, labouring fervently for you in prayers, that you may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God" (Colossians 4:12). Each one of us is able to take up this ministry of prayer for others, with what valuable consequences for eternity! Some of you listening this morning may be saying, "But what can I do? Because of illness or circumstances outside my control, I am not even able to meet with fellow Christians". Perhaps the Lord wants you to take up this ministry of prayer for Himself and for the blessing of others.

In the church today, so many are happy just to be passengers – to enjoy what the church has to offer and to let others get on with the work. Don't wait to be served! Be ready today to be a servant for the Master!

I close with a verse of a hymn:

*By and by when I look on His face,  
Beautiful face, thorn-shadowed face,  
By and by when I look on His face,  
I'll wish I had given Him more –  
More, so much more,  
More of my life than I e'er gave before;  
By and by when I look on His face,  
I'll wish I had given Him more.*

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