

THE LESSON OF SERVICE

J.R. Miller:

Jesus taught that we should live, "not to be served" but to serve. This is a lesson that it is very hard to learn. It is easy enough to utter sentimental platitudes about the nobleness of service but no one can truly live after this heavenly pattern, until his being is saturated with divine grace.

Just what is the lesson that our Lord sets us? we should try definitely to understand. It is, in a word, so to relate ourselves to others that our chief thought concerning them shall be not how we may get pleasure, profit, honor, or advancement from them for ourselves but how we may give them pleasure, do them good, or put honor upon them. If we have this mind set, we shall see in every person who comes within the circle of our life one to whom we owe love and service.

God has so ordered, that we cannot love and serve Him, and not also love and serve our fellow-men. Jesus made this very plain in His picture of the last judgment, when He said that He is hungry in every hungry little one of His; that He is sick in every least one of His who is sick; that in the stranger who comes to our door He stands before us, waiting for the hospitality of love.

In serving His people we are serving Him; in neglecting His people we neglect Him.

We cannot fulfill our duty of loving Christ and serving Him, while we ignore our fellow-men. He accepts no such service. If we say we love Him He points to the needy, the hungry, the sick, the burdened ones, the suffering all around us, and says: "Show your love to My people. I do not need service now but these need it. Serve them in My name. Look at each one of them as if I were Myself the one in pain or need and do for these, My brethren, just what you would do for Me if I were actually in their condition."

We cannot get away from this relationship to Christ. It binds us to every other life. To act selfishly toward a believer is to act selfishly toward Christ. To neglect any who need our help is to neglect Christ himself. To do good to any in Christ's name is to serve Christ Himself.

If only we understood that Christ Himself is with us still and always, not only in his spiritual presence but in the person of every needy or suffering one who belongs to Him it would transform all life for us, putting glory into the commonest lives, and the splendor of angel service into the lowliest ministry. How sacred it would make all life if we saw Christ in everyone who comes to us in any need! We wish sometimes that we had lived when Jesus was here, and we say we would have served him most sweetly and lovingly. Would we really?

This teaching invests every life with a sacredness, which to disregard is a sacrilege. We must look upon everyone as if he were the Christ. We dare not pass by anyone carelessly. We know not to whom we may have a duty of love. The stranger whom mere seeming chance brings into our presence for an hour, may have been sent to us that in some way we may serve him. We are always safe in assuming that we have an errand of love to everyone we meet. We need not announce our mission, and we must never display ostentation in the discharge of our duty of love. We need only to hold ourselves in readiness, with all of love's humility, alacrity, and gentleness, to do whatever heart or hand may find to do in serving him. Our duty to him may be nothing more than the showing of kindness in our manner, the giving of a hearty salutation, or the inspiration of a cheerful countenance. But however small the service may be which it is ours to render, it is a divine ministry, and its value to the person we never may know.

Nothing is small that helps a human life. The Koran tells a myth of the sending of Gabriel to the earth to keep Solomon from some sin, and at the same time to help a little toiling ant to get home with its burden. The latter service was as angelic as the former. No ministry on which God sends us can be considered small.

No mere theoretical acknowledgment of this universal obligation of man to man will avail. Fine sentiment is not enough; we must get the sentiment into practical life. We must bring our visions down out of ethereal mists into something substantial and real. We must let the love of our heart flow out in life and act and helpful ministry.

Stern old Cromwell showed good common-sense when, seeing some silver statues in dusty niches, and learning that they were the twelve apostles, he gave orders that they be taken down, converted into money, and sent out to do good. That is what we should do with our fine professions of brotherly love. Brotherly love has no right to pose forever in mere creed and sentiment; there is something far better for it to do. In this world in which there is so much need, sorrow, and heart-hunger, loving service has a holy mission everywhere. If we

would be Christlike, we must, like our Master, go about doing good.

A little child is said once to have closed her prayer on a winter evening in this way: "I saw a little girl on the street this afternoon; and she was cold and barefooted; but it isn't any of our businessâ€"is it, God?" She was only more honest in her prayer than some older people; for many people certainly act as if they regarded it as none of their business, when they see their fellow-men suffering and in need. But the teaching of Christ shows that it is our business, that we are under obligation to love and serve all men. We are debtor to every man; we may not owe him moneyâ€"but we owe him love, and love means whatever help he needsâ€"bread for his hunger, or sympathy and cheer in his trial and struggle. "Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another." Romans 13:8

If we but look at people always in this way, we shall find ourselves asking concerning everyone we meet: "How can I be a help to this person? What does God want me to do for him?" We certainly have some errand of love to everyone who crosses our path. To busy men, the interruptions of frequent callers are trying, especially when the callers have no particular errand. There is apt to be a strong temptation to treat the visitors impatiently, almost rudely. We are in the midst of important duties, and the time is all too brief in which to finish what we must do before nightfall. Certainly we have no right to waste our time with any such interrupters, devastators of time, as someone calls them.

Yet doubtless we have an errand to each and every such caller. We owe him at least a kindly greeting, a pleasant word. To treat him rudely, and turn him away as if he were a dog, is to insult Christ himself. Perhaps we cannot do for him what he wants us to doâ€"but we can at least treat him kindly. People with sad, discouraged heartsâ€"need love more than they need money. We do not read that Jesus ever gave money to any poor person whom he saw; but he did give to everyone something far better than money. No one ever came to him with any real needâ€"and went away unblessed. We may always treat in the same way, those who come to us. Without losing many seconds of time, we may send our visitor from us with a lighter heart, and with a little new hope in his breast to strengthen him for the struggle of his life that goes on forever. All around us, are those who are forever in need of love's ministry. For many people life is very hard.

Some traveler speaks of the great stretches of the lava-fields for miles around a volcano, and of the desolateness and dreariness of the paths over those fields. There was not a blade of grass, nor a shrub, nor the tiniest living thing anywhere to be seen. But here and there as he went on, he saw, in the cracks and crevices of the lavabeds, little flowers growing; and flowers never before seemed so lovely, even in finest garden or conservatory, as there amid the bleakness. Like those walks across the lava-fields, are the paths of many in this world, with their hard toil, bitter sorrow, and heavy burden-bearing; and like the lovely little flowers that so cheered the traveler in those desolate regions, are the human kindnesses which here and there come, with their sweet fragrance and cheer, into these dreary lives.

We have it in our power to put untold gladness and help into the lives that touch ours every day. We can learn this divine lesson of serviceâ€"by regarding every person we meet, as one to whom we are sent on an errand of love. This attitude toward others will put an end to all supercilious pride and haughtiness. We shall no more set ourselves up on little pedestals of self-conceit, demanding homage from others; rather, like our Master, we shall stand with basin and towel, ready to wash the feet of the lowliest. We shall no more think ourselves too good to perform the humblest ministries to the poorestâ€"but shall consider it the highest honor to do the things that are least; for Jesus has said he is chief who serves the most.