

FROM THE SERVANT GENERAL

ON SERVANT LEADERSHIP

(Part 4)

BEING A DISCIPLE

To be a servant leader is to first of all be a disciple of Jesus. Since servant leaders are entrusted with Jesus' flock, then they need to reflect the mind of heart of the Chief Shepherd himself. Since as leaders they are servants, they need to look to the example of Jesus, who declared that he came not to be served but to serve.

True Christian leadership is being able to serve, not as a leader (or at least not as a secular leader), but as a servant.

How do we become a true disciple of Jesus? He himself instructed us:

“Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” (Mk 8:34)

If we desire to come after Jesus, that is, to be his disciple, then there are three things we need to do.

Self-denial

To be a disciple, we first of all need to deny self.

To deny self is to not look to our own welfare, well-being, interest, desires or gratification. It is to turn our back on ourself. It is to count ourself as nothing.

Now such a posture does not exist in a vacuum. If so, then it is just a lack of true self-worth or it is just self-flagellation, which are negative and not good. Rather, such a posture is in relation to Christ. Christ is everything and our life is attuned and offered to Christ. In that sense, then there is no place for self.

“None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself. For if we live, we live for the Lord, and if we die, we die for the Lord; so then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's.” (Rom 14:7-8)

In doing so, however, we gain everything, since Jesus himself will be the one to take care of us. And certainly God can take so much better care of ourselves than we ever can on our own. This in fact is what salvation is all about. God has redeemed us on the cross, thus purchasing us with the precious blood of Jesus. We now belong totally to Jesus. We are his slaves. As such we are to expend our whole life for Christ. We are to live for him and we are to live to proclaim him to others.

Letting go of self and taking hold of God is how we attain to the fullness of salvation. Such is the divine contradiction.

“For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.” (Mk 8:35)

Wishing to save our life is to live for self. It is the opposite of self-denial. It is what will ultimately cause us to lose the very life that we desire to save.

In what ways do we as servant leaders fail to deny ourselves?

When we serve God with a personal hidden agenda.

When we look to power and position.

When we look to being glorified and applauded.

When we look to being recognized and thanked for our work.

When we do not submit to those over us (note: we look to active submission, and not blind obedience).

When we refuse an assignment simply because we do not like it or have another preference.

When we look to comfort and convenience, or are limited by comfort zones.

When we fail to give our all, without counting the cost.

When we insist on our own way, contrary to what is right.

When we are unable to let an insult pass.

When we nurse our hurts.

When we fail to forgive.

Self-denial is what enables us to love God with our all, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. Loving God with our all leaves no room for self. But God shares the love we give Him with others—our neighbors and ultimately our own selves.

Self-denial is what allows us to give our very lives for the cause of Christ. It is what allows us to focus only on Christ in everything. Our life and service is not about ourselves but about Jesus alone. “He must increase; I must decrease.” (Jn 3:30).

Self-denial is what enables us to give our lives for others. In this we fulfill the very commandment of Jesus, to love one another as he has loved us, and to lay down one’s life for one’s friends (Jn 15:12-13).

The true servant leader, one who is a disciple, denies self, even life itself, in order to serve God and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

“Yet I consider life of no importance to me, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to bear witness to the gospel of God’s grace.” (Acts 20:24)

To deny self is to not embrace self. Once we have denied ourselves, then we are ready to embrace something else other than self. Our arms, and our hearts, are not full of ourselves. They are empty.

Now we are able to embrace the cross.

Embracing the cross

To be a disciple, the second thing we need to do is to take up our cross.

There is only one way of taking up the cross or carrying the cross, and that is to embrace it. With both hands and arms. With the horizontal bar across one's chest. With the wood weighing down on one's whole being. The cross is to be clasped tightly, otherwise it will fall away from one's shoulder.

And of course the cross is to be embraced, because it is the instrument of salvation.

One who decides to deny self and give his all to God will inevitably encounter the cross. This is because the cross is the very way of salvation. The cross is the very message of Jesus Christ. The cross is the very way of life of a committed Christian disciple.

One who serves to proclaim the gospel will encounter hardships and trials. One who is committed to Christ's ways will inevitably be persecuted. Paul asserts this as a matter of fact. "In fact, all who want to live religiously in Christ Jesus will be persecuted." (2 Tm 3:12). This is because fallen humanity is antagonistic to God, and the evil one stokes such antagonism.

But the cross is something that we cannot avoid, if we are to live for God. Indeed, as Paul and Barnabas asserted, "It is necessary for us to undergo many hardships to enter the kingdom of God." (Acts 14:22b).

And so it is that one who decides to serve God will inevitably have to embrace the cross. In fact, just like Paul, it is our very participation in the salvific work of God, and we are to rejoice in such a privilege. "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, of which I am a minister in accordance with God's stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God" (Col 1:24-25).

In what ways then, as servant leaders, are we called to embrace the cross?

By not counting the cost of service.

By giving our all for the cause of Christ, even unto death.

By rejoicing even in the most trying of circumstances. "Consider it all joy, my brothers, when you encounter various trials" (Jas 1:2).

By not retaliating in kind whenever insulted or maligned. "Do not return evil for evil, or insult for insult; but, on the contrary, a blessing, because to this you were called, that you might inherit a blessing." (1 Pt 3:9).

By gladly accepting and being thankful for fraternal correction.

By continuing to care for those placed under us even if they do not appreciate what we do or even speak against us.

By enduring and persevering through the trials and tribulations of life, focused only on Christ and his work.

By having hope amidst lamentations.

By accepting seeming defeats while looking to the inevitable victory of Christ.

By accepting humiliation, abandonment and desolation according to God's will.

By continuing to serve even when ignored, forgotten or unrewarded.

The cross is our way to be purified. The way of the cross is the way of holiness. It is the only way for the servant leader.

With self-denial and embrace of our cross, we are now ready to follow Jesus, all the way and wherever he may lead us.

Following Jesus

So the third aspect of discipleship is following Jesus.

To follow Jesus is to obey him, to live according to his ways, to reflect him in all we think, say and do.

A servant, by definition, is one who is obedient. He obeys the master. How can one be a servant if one is not obedient?

In what ways do we as servant leaders obey and follow our Lord and Master Jesus?

We evangelize and do mission. "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." (Mk 16:15).

We proclaim Christ in everything we say and do, including by means of a silent witness.

We care for those placed under us according to how God would. "Tend the flock of God in your midst, overseeing not by constraint but willingly, as God would have it, not for shameful profit but eagerly." (1 Pt 5:2).

We do not lord it over our subordinates. "Do not lord it over those assigned to you" (1 Pt 5:3a).

We are living examples of paternal/fraternal leadership. We are to "be examples to the flock" (1 Pt 5:3b).

We submit to and respect those over us. "Obey your leaders and defer to them" (Heb 13:17a).

We are single-minded and single-hearted for mission. We are not deterred by disappointments, or even betrayals.

We do not hold grudges against brethren but continue to serve and love those placed under our care.

We rejoice in the privilege of suffering for Christ. "But even if you should suffer because of righteousness, blessed are you." (1 Pt 3:14a).

We strive for holiness unto the Lord. "Like obedient children, ... as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in every aspect of your conduct, for it is written, 'Be holy because I am holy.'" (1 Pt 1:14-15).

Being a disciple

If we wish to come after Jesus, then the way forward is clear. We are to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow him. If we carry our cross and follow Jesus all the way to Calvary, and in our life participate in his salvific work through our sufferings and dying to self, then we can truly say:

"I have been crucified with Christ; yet I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal 2:19b-20a)

The true disciple, the one who is a genuine servant leader, is the one who not only lives for Christ, but one in whom Christ lives. He has denied self, such that there is nothing more of self to come in the way of serving Christ. He has embraced the cross, such that there is no suffering that cannot be endured for the sake of Christ. He has followed Jesus, such that there is no other Teacher, Master or Lord, who will direct his life and work.

May all of us who have responded to the call to leadership be true disciples and servants of Jesus.

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