

Slave of All: Not What You Think
(Mark 9, 10; John 13; Phil 3)

Turn to Mark 9. "Slave of all; it's not what you think." One of the ways we love is other is by serving each other. Actually serving each other and loving each other are just two different ways of saying the same thing, as far as the NT is concerned.

The Bible makes Jesus the model of how to serve each other. Jesus makes himself the model of how we should serve each other. If we take Jesus as the one to imitate, some wrong ideas about serving each other drop away.

Mark 9:33-35 ³³ *They came to Capernaum. When he was in the house, he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the road?"* ³⁴ *But they kept quiet because on the way they had argued about who was the greatest.* ³⁵ *Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, "Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all."*

We don't get much information on how Jesus' twelve disciples actually got along with each other. This is one of a few clear stories.

It sounds like they were competitive with each other. It seems that they were embarrassed about their conversation. They knew Jesus would not approve.

The emphasis in v35, *the servant of all*, is on the word "all," *servant of all*. No person is too bad, too low, too dirty, to obnoxious, that followers of Jesus cannot act for their good.

Jesus does not actually seem to mind that they want to be great. If they want to be great, that's fine; but Jesus sure has an upside down recipe for how to be great, doesn't he.

Mark 9:36-37 ³⁶ *He took a little child whom he placed among them. Taking the child in his arms, he said to them,* ³⁷ *"Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me."*

We sometimes take this to mean that children were more important than the disciples thought. That is the teaching elsewhere, but not here.

Here, children do not have power, or wealth, or prestige. Those are the things that would cause others to treat children honourably and with respect. Children don't have those.

Jesus, and God himself, identifies most clearly with people like children who have no claim on our respect. To be first in the kingdom, no one is beneath my welcoming them respectfully. Receive a child into a room as if the child was an honoured guest.

In that society, more than ours, everyone had their own level of honour. This was measured carefully.

Depending on age, and wealth, and power, and position in society, and what kind of family one came from, each person had a certain level of honour.

Those with less honour always showed that to the greater person, the lesser served the greater, those with greater honour always expected those with less honour to show them respect, to submit to them.

By calling the Twelve and us to treat children carefully, Jesus stood all that on its head. Those who were great in the kingdom would treat low people with respect and service. Greatness is serving the low ones, the ones we think should be serving us.

Mark 10:35-45 ³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" ³⁹ "We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ 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."

⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The Twelve here are showing the same competitiveness as in Mark 9. In Mark 9 they were arguing. There we don't quite get the flavour of the discussion, but we do here.

In vv 41-42 Jesus explains to them and to us how this works everywhere else. Outside the kingdom of God, rulers and great ones rule and dominate and get all they can from those who are under them.

In vv 43-44 Jesus tells them and us how it is in the kingdom: *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.*

Again, in the line *whoever wants to be first must be slave of all*, the emphasis in the Greek phrase is on *of all*. The first among is slave of all. No one is beneath service.

And again, Jesus does not seem to mind their wanting to get ahead of each other. But his recipe for getting ahead is so backwards as to take all the normal fun out of it.

What Jesus taught was not only the opposite of how these things work in the world, but it also completely reversed the disciples' own instincts about being great and first.

It's v 45 that we must not miss, though. Jesus is the main example here *for even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.*

Jesus did not serve because no one would let him rule. He came to serve. He did not serve because the important jobs had been taken. He came to serve. He did not serve because people around him thought they owned him. He came to serve.

John 13:4-17 ⁴ *So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist.* ⁵ *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.*

⁶ *He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, are you going to wash my feet?"*
⁷ *Jesus replied, "You do not realize now what I am doing, but later you will understand."*

⁸ *"No," said Peter, "you shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."* ⁹ *"Then, Lord," Simon Peter replied, "not just my feet but my hands and my head as well!"*

¹⁰ *Jesus answered, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean. And you are clean, though not every one of you."* ¹¹ *For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.*

¹² *When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "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 *Very truly I tell you, servants are not greater than their master, nor are messengers greater than the one who sent them.* ¹⁷ *Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*

If a person had servants in their house, in those days, the lowest servant washed the feet of the guests. Feet needed washing. Most people walked everywhere, on the same road as sheep and donkeys walked, and cows and horses. People wore sandals.

Dirt and manure, count on it, on every foot. Jesus washed their feet. Because he was the lowest servant? No. Because he was their Lord and they were his servants, because he was the one who sent and they were the ones who went. That's why he washed their feet.

He did this to show them what it meant to be great in the kingdom. Jesus was great in the kingdom. He was giving them an example to follow. Were they blessed if they understood? No. They were blessed if they did the same.

Phil 2:3-15 ³ *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,* ⁴ *not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.* ⁵ *In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had:* ⁶ *Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with*

God something to be used to his own advantage; ⁷ rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. ⁸ And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross!

Again, as in Mark and John, Christ himself is the first example. In v7 it says Jesus took the very nature of a servant. Greek has a word for "servant," *diakonos*, and another stronger lower word that often means "slave," which is *doulos*.

In Mark 9:44 Jesus uses both words: *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant [diakonos], ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave [doulos] of all.* Here in Phil 2:7, Jesus is not just a "servant," but a "slave," a *doulos*.

Jesus made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a slave, it says in Phil 2:7. And v8 is so startling: (1) he humbled himself, (2) he became obedient, (3) obedient right up to death, (4) and cross death at that. Jesus was a humble obedient man.

⁹ Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

¹² Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,

"Work out your salvation" means "make your salvation fruitful." Just as you have always obeyed, keep making your salvation productive, make it fruitful and active.

"Fear and trembling" does *not* mean we are terrified of getting it wrong, of sinning, of making a mistake. "Fear and trembling" are symptoms of being in God's presence. "Fear and trembling" is more like a code for "God is present" or "you're in God's presence."

That's why the very next line says, (v13) *for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.* Paul may be absent, but God will be present.

He works in us, but to do what? How do we make our salvation fruitful? God will be working among us, to make us willing and to help us do . . . what exactly?

¹⁴ Do everything without grumbling or arguing, ¹⁵ so that you may become blameless and pure, "children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation." Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky.

Do everything without grumbling or arguing! Jesus took on the existence of a slave. Jesus chose to be a humble obedient man. Follow him: do everything without grumbling or arguing.

Then we will be blameless and pure, children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation. They we will shine among them like stars in the sky!

Slave of all: it's not what you think.

When I have taught "slave of all," which comes up in my Bible classes, students have sometimes been distressed. In the conversations that come up in class, I have discovered that people sometimes understand "slave of all" to mean things it does not mean.

I have tried this morning to make it clear that Jesus is our example in this, because taking Jesus as our example cures most of the wrong ideas people have about this. So let's talk for a while about what being "slave of all" does not mean.

It does not mean we do whatever people ask us to do. It does not mean that. Jesus didn't. He did what his Father asked him to do. "Your wish is my command" - that is not how Jesus lived, and our being slave of all does not mean that either.

Jesus loved people, he devoted himself to what was good for people, he was always respectful, always compassionate. No one was too low or evil. We should be like this.

But he was obedient to God, and we are obedient first of all to Jesus. We do not answer to people; we answer to Jesus the Lord. We will have to answer for how we live. But to Christ, not to people.

It does not mean we need people's approval. This is another way of saying the same thing. Jesus did not need people's approval, he did not need people to agree with how he lived. We don't need people to like us. Many people did not approve of Jesus.

We are never free to be arrogant or indifferent. But our goal is not to make people like us. Needing people to like is us actually the opposite of serving people. Needing people to like us means we're doing good because of what it will bring us.

Mostly we have both motives mixed, I think. We genuinely want to do what is good for others, and we also want them to like us. I don't know if we can get out of this. Just understand that being slave of all does not mean people need to like us.

It means we will live in order to do what is good for people, we will live to serve them, and sometimes they will like this and sometimes they will not.

Slave of all does not mean we always do what people need. We must be careful here, because what people need was important to Jesus, and should be to us also. But the need in front of us is not our god. Here are two little stories about Jesus, to illustrate.

In Mark 1, Jesus healed Peter's mother-in-law, and then stayed at that house and healed late into the night. Early the next morning he went out to pray. The disciples found him and told him that everyone was gathered again for more healing. Ill people waited there.

Sick, and perhaps demon-possessed were there. Right? Jesus said, no, I'm not going back there. Let's go to other villages so I can preach, because that's why I've come.

Luke 5 is similar: it says that crowds were always coming to Jesus to be healed, and that Jesus was always withdrawing into wilderness places to pray. Jesus left before the crowds left. People in those crowds were still in God's care. But Jesus walked away.

Jesus' purpose was to serve people, but the need in front of him was not his ruler. He often met the need in front of him, but not always. A life devoted to serving people is not the same as being ruled by the need in front of us.

Slave of all does not mean we're the lowest of all. There is a dangerous and ugly teaching around that twists godly humility into something dark. This teaching says that true humility is to decide that I am the lowest of all, the least worthy of all.

This wrong teaching says that God wants me to put myself down so low that everyone is better than me, so then of course I should be their slave.

I deserve it because I am so sinful and bad. This wrong teaching says God wants me to take the lowest position because that is my true worth. This is the humility God wants.

Wrong, wrong, wrong. This is nothing at all like Jesus. He did not serve that way, and neither should we. Jesus was the Christ, and knew it; the one and only Son of God, and knew it. And that is why he came to serve.

"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.

Jesus took the position of slave because he was the Lord and the Teacher. We take the position of slave not because we are low or worthless, but the very opposite: because that is the sign of greatness in the kingdom of God, more than any other sign.

What does being slave of all mean?

It means we want to be like Jesus. It means we want Jesus to be our Teacher, and our Lord, and our example. It means we want Jesus to like how we live.

It means we want to learn to love people the way Jesus loved people. It means we want to be great in the kingdom. It means no one is too low or too worthless for us to serve, for no one was too low or worthless for Jesus to serve. This is humility like Jesus had.

This is how we make our salvation fruitful. And we do it with fear and trembling, because God is Present, in us and among us, working to lead us down this path. He's so close, and He's working so powerfully, that if we could see it we would shake with fear. *In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had.*