A GOOD AND FAITHFUL SERVANT

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An individual's opinion regarding the purpose of life may differ depending on their age, culture, and social status. Nevertheless, there are some things that all of us should agree upon. One of those is summarized by philosopher Nathan C. Schaeffer who wrote:

> At the close of life, the question will be not how much have you got, but how much have you given; nor how much have you won, but how much have you done; not how much have you saved, but how much have you sacrificed, how much have you loved and served; not how much were you honored (www.quotes.net/quote/17335, retr. 6/23/21).

These words have a profound implication for those who have been called by God for a unique purpose. The Almighty intended for us to develop a giving and serving mentality. This is found throughout the Scriptures. Christ related a parable that is the basis for our calling. In it He described the reward of those who will have learned to faithfully serve:

> For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. And

> likewise he who had received two gained two more also. But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord's money. After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them. So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, "Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them." His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord." He also who had received two talents came and said, "Lord, you delivered to me two talents; look, I have gained two more talents besides them." His lord said to him, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord" (Matthew 25:14-23).

Imagine being one of the chosen who will stand before Christ's throne of judgment. Surrounded by thousands of holy angels; the glorious King looks into your eyes and says, "Well done, good and faithful servant." The satisfaction of knowing that God was pleased with your service will be the happiest moment of your life. Further, the reward will be everlasting.

On the other hand, consider the agony of many who have been called, but will have failed to measure up. Christ said that "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mat 25:30). Those who do not qualify will not inherit the earth. They will not become the prophesied kings and priests of God's Kingdom. They will not hear the Savior pronounce these words of approval to them. The reason will be that they had not learned to be good and faithful servants.

The realization that only a relative few will be chosen should motivate us to understand exactly what faithful service means (Mat. 22:14). What if we believe that we are faithful, but something unknown to us will keep us from this honor? What if we have accepted a general misunderstanding of what faith means? What if the evidence of our faith has been adversely affected by family, friends or even traditions that have become a part of our religious culture? Are we fully committed to seeking the Kingdom

of God and His righteousness? (Mat. 6:33). This subject is vital, and could be the most important question we will ever ponder.

Reasonable Service

It is clear that many who claim to be Christian have been misled. This is due in part because human nature tends to nurture an obsession with itself. People are frequently being told to do whatever makes them happy and to strive to be whatever they wish. Men, women and children are encouraged to fully explore personal desires even if they violate biblical ethics that were once considered good sense and even a matter of common decency. In this age, the narcissistic trend is taught in schools and even found in religious literature. Exploring self-centered philosophies has resulted in a continual focus on feelings and individual desires. This trend has affected many Christians who are led away from the calling to prepare to become the literal help-mate of Christ (Gen. 2:20, Rev. 19:7).

This may be the biggest problem that Christians face. Self-centered thinking has caused many to believe that if they simply acknowledge belief in God, and occasionally attend church services, then they are faithful. Some might regularly observe the Sabbath, tithe, and avoid unclean meats thinking that this is all that is required for salvation. While those aspects of Christian living are essential, by themselves, they do not define a faithful servant. Christ made the following point:

> And which of you, having a servant plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, "Come at once and sit down to eat?' But will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare something for my supper, and gird yourself and serve me till I have eaten and drunk, and afterward you will eat and drink?" Does he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I think not. So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, "We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do" (Luke 17:7-10).

Believing that we fulfilled our service toward God by saying that we believe in Christ while performing basic obligations is a mindset that pervades most of professing Christianity. But think! While salvation is a gift, the fact is God will not give it to everyone. In addition, the reward of the saved entirely depends on works (Mat. 16:27). God requires more than words and fundamental obedience. If we truly believe in Jesus, we must understand that accepting Christ as our Savior includes accepting His way of life that includes faithful service. We cannot think that grace will cover a lack of effort on our part.

Contrary to what many think, grace is not defined as "unmerited pardon" or a "free gift." Eternal life will not be given to those who claim to believe and stick only to the basics. There is merit to the priceless gift of eternal life, and much is required if we hope to attain the better resurrection. The Apostle Paul made this point:

> I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service (Romans 12:1).

Are we doing what is considered reasonable service? Paul's expression means that devoting our entire life to serving God is considered reasonable as a "living sacrifice." Do we grasp what our duty toward God truly is? We need to question what we serve most. Is it Christ or something else? Consider the following words addressing this query:

> If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it. For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and is himself destroyed or lost? For whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His *own* glory, and *in His* Father's, and of the holy angels (Luke 9:23-26).

Again, nothing in this world should distract us from devoting our life to the service of God. But what does this devoutness mean?

Christ is Our Master

Jesus was given a divine position of great authority. He told the disciples, "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am" (John 13:13). His divine office can be understood by examining God's design for the human family which begins with a man and woman in marriage. The wife was given a special role to be supportive of her husband. Genesis 2:18 refers to Eve as a "helper" or "aid" to Adam. This never meant that women are of less value than men. It only means that they have different roles to play in the family structure. In contrast to her design, the influence of feminism has caused many to discount this truth—even though it is biblically based common knowledge. What many also tend to disregard is the fact that the marital relationship portrays the association between Christ and the Church of God. Paul explained:

> Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as also Christ is the head of the church… (Ephesians 5:22-23).

Christ is portrayed as a bridegroom more than 20 times in the Bible. This means that faithful members of the Church are betrothed—destined to become the wife of Christ (Rev. 19:7). However, not all who are called will be found worthy of such a great honor. We must prove ourselves by practicing strict obedience to Christ who is our future husband right now! We cannot obey God in part and think that we are good and faithful. As Paul again said, we must practice "bringing into captivity every thought into the obedience of Christ" (2Cor. 10:5).

God is the highest authority in our lives. As Christ said, we cannot serve two masters such as both God and mammon. Neither can we serve both God and ego and yet that is what many seek to do. We must make a choice regarding who will be our master. Will it be our self or will Christ be our Lord?

God's plan is to expand His family. It will be comprised of kings and priests whose function will be to serve the best interests

of others. That purpose must be understood and practiced right now! As Jesus said, "he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves" (Luke 22:26).

In that context, imagine a family of God-like beings all living by the same code of behavior. Picture all of them treating one another with respect, and always desiring to do what is best for others as a part of their reasonable service. This is the Almighty's vision for the Kingdom of Heaven when it comes to the earth. Our objective is to learn to be God's faithful servant in this life; if our desire is to be part of His future family.

What Faith Is

In order to understand what it takes to be considered a faithful servant; we must know exactly what faith is. Though faith has much to do with belief, it is much more than a mental exercise. The author of the book of Hebrews wrote:

> Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith goes beyond a conviction that God exists. Faith has substance! There will be tangible evidence of faith among those who are considered faithful. For this reason, Hebrews 11 continues by describing some of the works that were a result of men and women considered to be champions of faith. Every time Hebrews 11 mentions the kind of faith that a faithful individual had, a description of works is given as evidence.

The context of Christ's parable of the talents indicates that servants are expected to serve their Master in specific ways described as trading. Most were rewarded because they used what they were given wisely and gave back to their master more than they started with.

This symbolism explains that God creates opportunities for those who are called, but it is up to the individual to be productive in order to grow in grace and knowledge (2Pet. 3:18). Such growth includes love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, self-control, and other fruits of the spirit described by the Apostle Paul (Gal. 5:22-25). It means to become spiritually mature and is described by Christ as becoming perfect (Mat. 5:48). In this way, perfection

does not mean being flawless. It means to be complete—not lacking what is needed in order to qualify for the Kingdom (Jam. 1:4, 2Cor. 13:5).

These necessary attributes are not specifically mentioned in the parable of the talents, so we need to recognize that Christ's allegory illustrates the end result of good and faithful service. Therefore, the specific ways in which those who are called must serve their Master must be defined by examining verses that explain the behaviors of those who will faithfully serve God.

What a Servant Is

In this age, servants are generally thought to be people with low self-esteem who lack the motivation to become something more. Many simply consider them to be inferior human beings. Such thoughts might cause us to think that Christ does not want us to literally be His servants when in fact the exact opposite is true. Christ said that He is our *Lord* and this expression means "*supreme* in authority" and "master" (*Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible,* G2962). Bible scholar Joseph Thayer expounded on this term saying that *Lord* means "he to whom a person or thing belongs."

The Apostles Paul, James, Peter, and Jude described themselves as "bondservants" of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1, Jam. 1:1, 2Pet. 1:1, Jude 1). This term means a slave in subjection or subservience (*Strong's*, G1401). These terms mean that we are to serve God in whatever capacity He sees fit.

Another term used to describe Christ is "Teacher." Do we understand that we are to consider ourselves God's students? Faithful students do not decide for themselves what they will and will not do. A true Christian will strive to bring every thought and behavior into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2Cor. 10:5). We need to fully understand, and live by, the ways we are to serve God if we desire to receive the gift of eternal life.

We Are All Servants

Christ made a statement that might mislead some if it is considered out of context. At first glance, it might appear that we are not God's servants, but we must understand what our Lord really meant when He said:

> This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends. You are My friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you (John 15:12-15).

What Christ described was a closeness that is not usually shared between servants and their master. That is why He said that we are to love one another and do whatever He commands in order to be considered His friends. This was something Abraham achieved who was later called the friend of God (Jam. 2:23).

It is an enormous honor to be considered God's favored people. Nevertheless, this honor carries fundamental requirements. Being a friend of God means that we must serve God by doing what He commands. For this reason, Christ explained that He expects to find us performing faithful service when He returns:

> Watch therefore, for you do not know what hour your Lord is coming. But know this, that if the master of the house had known what hour the thief would come, he would have watched and not allowed his house to be broken into. Therefore you also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed *is* that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Assuredly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all his goods. But if that evil servant says in his heart, "My master is delaying his coming," and begins to beat *his* fellow servants, and to eat and drink with the drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him* and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites (Matthew 24:42-49).

Many have thought that the instruction to "watch" means that we should stay updated on world events such as watching the

news. However, that was NOT Christ's intent! His warning was to watch ourselves to make sure that our behavior is that of a faithful and wise servant. While giving a measure of attention to world events can motivate to prepare for Christ's return, we should not let it become a distraction.

All those who are called must be actively pursuing the righteousness of Christ. It is what we are to seek first in life (Mat. 6:33). This is what the Savior referred to when saying, "Blessed *is* that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing." Therefore, we must comprehend exactly what righteousness is.

What is Good

While most people think that they know what it means to be good, as the adage goes, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." This means that the choices people make are usually well intended, but they are often determined by interpretations of morality. Do we have a decent understanding of what God considers to be moral and good? A certain ruler wanted to know what God thought on this matter and asked Jesus:

> "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:16-17).

Christ implied that the definition of what is good can be known by considering the character of God. In order to know the quality of God's character, we only have to consider His laws. The commandments that He has given to mankind are the same ethics that He lives by. That is why Jesus also said:

> Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

The light of Christ is to be reflected in good servants. The only way others can see that light is through good behavior. Christ later told the disciples, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). He also said, "If you keep My commandments, you

will abide in My love" (John 14:21). The necessity of keeping God's commandments cannot be overstated. They are the foundation of all holy law and define righteousness. As the longest song in the Bible declares, "For all Your commandments are righteousness" (Psa. 119:172).

This explains that there is more to keeping the commandments than a basic understanding of idolatry, murder, stealing, adultery, and dishonesty. In that context, consider the instructions Paul gave to Timothy:

> But you must continue in the things which you have learned and been assured of, knowing from whom you have learned *them,* and that from childhood you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work (2Timothy 3:14-17).

Paul instructed Timothy to continue practicing those things he had learned from an early age in the "Holy Scriptures." What many do not realize is that Paul was speaking of the books now called the Old Testament. This fact is certain when we realize that the gospels and letters that now comprise the books of the New Testament did not exist when Timothy was young. Those writings began to be circulated during Paul's lifetime, but were not widely known until they were assembled into a single volume late in the first century A.D.

The books that Paul considered to be holy writ during the time of the apostles were those of the Law, the Prophets, and other writings such as Psalms and Proverbs as well as the history of Israel found in Kings and Chronicles. Paul understood that everything a person needed to know for salvation, including the faith of the Messiah, could be found in the books of the Old Testament!

The Apostle Paul amplified this saying that those books are "profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." This further indicates that God's laws are not

limited to a basic application of the Ten Commandments. There are additional laws that must be kept in order to be considered good and faithful Christians. There is the dietary law of unclean meats as well as cleanliness instructions when it comes to illness, carcasses, and contaminated culinary utensils (Lev. 11). There is the ordinance of annual holy day observance (Lev. 23, Deu. 16). There are instructions for the Passover ceremony (Luke 22:19-20, 1Cor. 11:24-25). There is the law of tithing on our increase (Gen. 14:20, 28:22, Lev. 27, Mal. 3:8, Mat. 22:21, Heb. 7).

We need to understand the necessity to keep all of those laws that fall within the framework of the Ten Commandments. These also must be kept; not just in part or only when it is convenient, but in the way that God prescribed. This is necessary in order to worship Him in spirit and truth and to be considered good and faithful (John 4:24). And yet there is more.

Preach the Gospel

The life of a true believer requires considerable effort. The Apostle Paul said that we must "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Php. 2:12). This means that we each have a responsibility to practice self-discipline and bring our body into subjection to our Master (1Cor. 9:27). Opposed to this obligation is the human tendency to choose the path of less resistance. As Christ said: "wide *is* the gate and broad *is* the way" of iniquity, but that path ultimately "leads to destruction" (Mat. 7:13). True Christians understand this concept, but is it possible that some will neglect the work of overcoming sin that is necessary in order to qualify for the Kingdom of God?

Christ dictated letters to each era of the Church. These are recorded in the first chapters of Revelation where the letter to our era reveals that negligence is a dominating characteristic of our time. A lack of zeal for God has affected every one of us! Despite the fact that Christ said, "Blessed *is* that servant whom his master will find so doing," many continue to avoid the shared responsibility of the Master's work. Christ likened this kind of neglect to absolute foolishness:

> But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall (Matthew 7:26-27).

As far back as the Scriptures go, we see that God works. There is also an extensive record of faithful people who went to great lengths to do the work of teaching, preaching, and prophesying. In a continuing effort, we are told that Christians are to "walk just as He walked" (1Jn. 2:6). Christ's activities were motivated by a responsibility to build and support God's Church—including preaching the gospel. Jesus suffered excruciating torment and ultimately died for this cause. While taking His last breath, the Savior said to the Father, "I have finished the work which You have given Me to do" (John 17:4).

A monumental stage of His work was complete, but it did not end there. His statement did not mean that there was nothing else for Jesus and Christians to do. Instead, it gives us great insight into the mind of God. We see that His thoughts were continually about the work. That is what motivated Him before His ministry on the earth, during His life as a man, and it continues to be His primary directive to this day (John 14:2). That work continues on the earth as Christ calls upon men and women to continue this vitally important work.

After His resurrection, a principal aspect of the work Christ commissioned to the Church was clearly stated when the disciples were told to "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mark 16:15). These instructions were not given to the apostles alone. This commission was given to everyone in God's Church. Even those who are not called to become elders have an important role that is necessary in order to fulfill this directive. This was documented in the book of Acts when the Church began to organize physically and financially while pooling everyone's resources (Acts 2:42-47, 4:32-37). If we want God's approval, we need to serve the Master by continuing the same assignment that Christ left all His followers.

All those who believe are required to study, pray, observe the holy days, and develop the character of Christ. What some

neglect is the fact that we are to support the work of God's Church. In these ways, every Christian has their part in the work of preaching the gospel to the world. This was pointed out by the Apostles Paul and James who described the Church as one body with many members:

> For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another. 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. Let love be without hypocrisy. Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another; not lagging in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord; rejoicing in hope, patient in tribulation, continuing steadfastly in prayer; distributing to the needs of the saints, given to hospitality (Romans 12:4-13).

> For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also (James 2:26).

We are told that works are necessary in order to be considered faithful. Plainly speaking, faith without works is non-existent. Works as a result of faith comes in various forms, and an important work is to support preaching of the gospel. The disciples of Jesus fulfilled this great commission even during times of resistance and persecution (Acts 14:21-23). Discrimination and maltreatment have persisted down through the ages. Nevertheless, Christ's faithful servants have continued to do the work as they were instructed.

Perseverance has never been easy. Christ warned the disciples that they would face arduous times as a result of preaching the gospel (Mark 13:9-11). However, the Savior commanded that this work must be done, and that their persistence

would be fruitful. In fact, our obligation to this cause is so important that Christ said His Kingdom would not be established on earth until this objective was complete:

> And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations, and then the end will come (Matthew 24:14).

Some think that this part of the work was completed a number of years ago. Even though it is our belief that this prophecy will not be entirely fulfilled until God raises up two witnesses at the end of the age, this commission was given to every generation in the past and it is to continue today (Rev. 11:3-6). This work of the has led to thousands of baptisms in recent decades just as it has in times past. As Christ directed:

> Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, *even* to the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).

The work of the Church continues to the end. Through this great commission many are exposed to the truth and it is a powerful witness of God. Even if the majority of those who hear it do not change their behavior, they cannot say that they were not warned. This work must be done through the ordained ministry of God's Church, and those men need and deserve our support.

But what about those who do not attend with an established organization: What about the home groups that lack the presence of elders, equipment, or manpower? Does Christ expect them to support preaching the gospel, or can brethren simply do their own thing? The only legitimate answer is that all of us should be doing what we can to support and encourage this important commission. It is a responsibility that comes to us directly from Christ. We must support those men who are striving to preach the truth as precisely as possible even when we are unable to attend with a Church of God that has an ordained ministry. This can be done in many

ways—particularly with tithes and offerings. For more about this, read our booklet *The Truth about Tithing*.

There has never been a time in history when God did not have this work for people to do. There was never a time when brethren were given the option to stop supporting the work. Even when Hophni and Phinehas were misusing their positions in the temple, God never told Israel to stop supporting the priesthood (1Sam. 1-4). God punished those brothers for their wickedness, and He will do the same for those who misuse an ordained position today (Deu. 32:35). Still, it is not up to us to decide whether or not to support Christ's work.

In our advanced age, it is entirely possible for anyone to be a part of this work no matter where we are located. Even if we have found that a particular minister is not teaching the entire truth, there are others who are continuing this work to the best of their ability and a good understanding of the Scriptures. We simply have no legitimate excuse.

Christ is our master and we are His servants. Will we carry out His command? Will we preach the gospel to the best of our ability, or would we rather sit on the sidelines? Do we prefer doing our own thing? Have we allowed Sabbath services to degenerate to the level of being a mere social gathering? Consider that if we lack participation in the work of preaching the gospel it could reflect faith that is dead.

We are told in both the Old Testament and New Testament books that we must live by every word of God (Deu. 8:3, Mat. 4:4). To disregard this important aspect of God's work is likened to building a home on the sand. However, when we do what we can to support Christ's work, it creates a strong foundation in our lives. Christ said it this way:

> Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock (Matthew 7:24-25).

Feed the Sheep

Jesus Christ said, "The spirit indeed *is* willing, but the flesh *is* weak" (Mat. 26:41). This statement portrays a multitude of human weaknesses each of which can easily affect our works. Members of God's Church need instruction, encouragement, and edification in order to learn how to faithfully walk with God. We need to be reminded of various doctrines and taught a deeper understanding of His ways. For this reason, God calls certain individuals to be ordained to perform ministerial tasks:

> And He Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

The ministry of God's Church has another, equally important, commission. They must care for those within the body of Christ. Jesus told Peter to feed My lambs and tend My sheep (John 21:15-16). This is a big responsibility and it requires teamwork.

In any organization, there must be people in charge. God's government is hierarchical and it is the same structure that is found in the angelic realm, the family, and the Church. This is the purpose for God choosing elders to serve in the positions of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers. All of these offices fall into the category of ministers. The Apostle Peter spoke to such ministers when he wrote:

> The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away (1Peter 5:1-4).

The authority given to ministers should not be taken lightly or for granted. It is an honor to serve in such positions, but the honor is to be reflective of Christ who is the Chief Shepherd. The work of ministers is to be performed cautiously and with all honesty. It is not an elder's position to micromanage people's lives. Their primary role is to teach and enforce doctrine according to the Bible.

There are a number of men, and even some women, who feel that they know just as much, if not more, than some of the elders in the Church. In some cases that might be true. However, what has happened is that some of these people form their own groups without the involvement of ordained men. We have personally seen groups like this become reckless by attempting to teach pet doctrines, and their speculation as biblical truth. Many of these dissidents have misrepresented the Scriptures and disparage elders thinking that their rejection of ordained leadership is by direction of God. However, nothing could be further from the truth!

From the very beginning, God has designated specific men to pastor His flock in order that chosen individuals would be responsible and answerable directly to God. Even the prophets had ordained positions when God spoke directly to them telling them precisely what to say and do. That is the highest form of ordination!

The seriousness of this position cannot be underestimated. It is to help ensure that the group is not led astray. Sadly, some have been led astray by ordained individuals which may be one reason that certain lay members have chosen to take matters into their own hands. However, starting your own group that lacks the involvement of an elder is assuming the duties of an elder without ordination, and we feel that it is a presumptuous sin (Psa. 19:13). The Apostle Peter spoke of such audacity, writing:

> Those who walk according to the flesh in the lust of uncleanness and despise authority. *They are* presumptuous, self-willed. They are not afraid to speak evil of dignitaries (2Peter 2:10).

Among the dignitaries that Peter said ego-driven individuals had spoken badly about were true ministers ordained to lead the Church. Further, the rhetoric of that time is still

occurring today within some groups who attempt to take credit for the teachings they have learned from others, discredit true ministers, and in turn try to elevate themselves. The result has led to numerous groups doing their own thing. Jude gave a harsh warning about such behavior:

> Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, have run greedily in the error of Balaam for profit, and perished in the rebellion of Korah. These are spots in your love feasts, while they feast with you without fear, serving only themselves (Jude 11-12).

Such behavior also reminds us of a similar situation among the tribes of Israel when God condemned the rejection of His ordained authority:

> You shall not at all do as we are doing here today—every man doing whatever is right in his own eyes (Deuteronomy 12:8).

The rebellion of Korah provides another example of those who felt that they should be in charge instead of Moses and Aaron (Jude 11). That vile attitude resulted in the death of more than 14,700 people who were struck by a plague from God. Such rebellion was addressed by one of the greatest apostles who said:

> But these, like natural brute beasts made to be caught and destroyed, speak evil of the things they do not understand, and will utterly perish in their own corruption, *and* will receive the wages of unrighteousness, *as* those who count it pleasure to carouse in the daytime. *They are* spots and blemishes, carousing in their own deceptions while they feast with you, having eyes full of adultery and that cannot cease from sin, enticing unstable souls. *They have* a heart trained in covetous practices, *and are* accursed children. They have forsaken the right way and gone astray (2Peter 2:12-15).

Pastoring God's people is a multifaceted responsibility that requires full-time elders who are dedicated to uphold the proven

doctrines of the Bible (2Tim. 3:16). Their job is to counsel and encourage people who come into Christ's fold. They are also a driving force to fulfilling God's command to preach the gospel! The Apostle Paul made this point:

> How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach unless they are sent? As it is written: "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace, who bring glad tidings of good things!" (Romans 10:14-15).

Those called to teach are to be of one mind and purpose. This ensures that the building of each person's faith is on solid ground. We are all a part of the same body and as such, elders must be vigilant to ensure that they do not misrepresent the Scriptures to brethren. Tragically, widespread unity has not always been the case.

It was not long after the beginning of the New Testament Church that the Apostle Paul was forced to deal with false teaching within certain congregations. His reaction was to defend the truth against those who acted as though they were Church leaders:

> But what I do, I will also continue to do, that I may cut off the opportunity from those who desire an opportunity to be regarded just as we are in the things of which they boast. For such *are* false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ (2Corinthians 11:12-13).

The Church of God continues to experience similar circumstances. It is now broken into many organizations with different names and a variety of ordained elders. And yet, ordination does not always mean that a minister is on the right track. It is our belief that all elders should be open to hearing the concerns of brethren. They should be approachable and allow for questions regarding what they teach. It has always been the policy of the Eternal Church of God to listen to the concerns of congregants as we continue to earnestly contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

In recent decades, false doctrines have been promoted by some elders. We have seen that not every minister in the Church of God can be entirely trusted. That is why Paul said to "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ (1Cor. 11:1).

While it is the duty of a faithful servant to support the Church and its ministry, we cannot blindly follow just anyone. It is our duty to search the Scriptures and prove whether or not the things being taught are right or wrong. We are to then support those ministers who are most closely aligned with the teaching of Jesus Christ. Jesus warned:

> Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor *can* a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them (Matthew 7:15-20).

In order to know good fruit from bad we must know what to look for. The Scriptures are the primary way we can tell that which is right from wrong. Thus, in order to be considered good and faithful, we have to know what good is. God expects His people to prove all things and hold fast what is good (1Ths. 5:21). This is an essential facet of faithful service.

Does this mean that all Christians should attempt to tend and feed Christ's sheep? The answer is no. While everyone participates in a variety of ways, not every Christian is called for the purpose of preaching to the public or teaching the Church. In this context, Paul said that women should not lead men within the Church (1Cor. 14:34-35). James pointed out:

> My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment (James 3:1).

While God expects much from everyone in the Church, elders are held to a higher standard (Luke 12:48). They must be

extremely careful in what they teach and to whom they instruct (Mat. 7:6). While some Church functions can be delegated, there should always be an ordained authority involved with any group of believers in order to ensure that brethren do not go astray. This point was made to an evangelist in training when the Apostle Paul instructed Timothy:

> Preach the word! Be ready in season *and* out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, *because* they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn *their* ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables. But you be watchful in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry (2Timothy 4:1-5).

Supporting the Ministry is an important aspect of being faithful. A Minister who instructs well is worthy of double honor (1Tim. 5:17). A Minister must not take advantage of his office, and brethren must respect those in office. Will God give rulership in His Kingdom to those who don't faithfully fulfill the responsibilities to others? The simple truth is, we are all servants in a variety of ways.

We Are All Servants

The previous section might appear to be focused on the importance of ordained ministers, but we must not think that elders are more important to God than other members. Paul described the Church as one body with many members; all of which should have the same care for one another (1Cor. 12:14-25). We all have an important part to play in the work that is done by the Church. Notice how Paul described the structure as designed by Christ:

> Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love (Ephesians 4:15-16).

The care we have for one another is an important part of faithful service. From the oldest to the youngest, lay-members and ministers are both servants under the authority of the head of the Church, our Lord and Savior—Jesus Christ. Simply because some might have more responsibility does not mean that there is little for other members to do. The kind of service that should be provided to members, whenever it is clearly needed, is an essential component of faith. James indicated:

> What *does it* profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what *does it* profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead (James 2:14-17).

Faithful servants acknowledge the needs of others and seek to help in whatever capacity they can. We all have a number of ways that we can assist others if we truly desire to do so. However, this should not be done if it means that we pay little attention to the needs of our personal families. Some have gone to great lengths to serve brethren and the Church while neglecting their spouse or children. This is unacceptable:

> But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1Timothy 5:8).

Taking care of a family is a big responsibility and it can take up much of our time throughout the week. Charity beginning at home is a concept taken from the kind of love expressed in the Bible. Nonetheless, neither does it mean that our focus should only be on our own family. There are always ways that we can serve others in the Church.

Those who have lost their job can be helped with groceries. Cards, prayers, and words of encouragement can be sent to those who are ill. Offers to help those who are unable to

take care of their property can be made. We are all a part of God's future family and generosity toward others should not be considered out of the ordinary.

Christ also taught that even the small acts of kindness reflect a bigger picture of who we really are, and what it is that we seek, saying "He who *is* faithful in *what is* least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in *what is* least is unjust also in much" (Luke 16:10). Whether in small or big ways, our acts directly reflect our faith. Notice what Christ said about those who choose to develop the mind of a faithful servant:

> Then the King will say to those on His right hand, "Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I *was* naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me" Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed *You,* or thirsty and give *You* drink? When did we see You a stranger and take *You* in, or naked and clothe *You?* Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?" And the King will answer and say to them, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did *it* to one of the least of these My brethren, you did *it* to Me" (Matthew 25:34-40).

Serving others is one way in which we express our love for God. We should expect that it will usually involve some form of personal inconvenience or sacrifice. But, discomfiting ourselves should not determine our decisions. Realize that nothing in this world actually belongs to us. Remember this truth, whether it is a home, automobile, furniture, food, clothing, or money—everything is God's (Hag. 2:8). Even our own life does not belong to us. Paul wrote:

> You are not your own. For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's (1Corinthians 6:19-20).

The time we have on this planet is a gift. Those who hope to be saved must realize that our life has been purchased by Jesus Christ. Therefore, willingness to help others is not only considered our reasonable service—it is our duty! In fact, Christ said that neglecting reasonable service toward others is tantamount to refusing to serve God, and this is something that He takes personally:

> "When the Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the holy angels with Him, then He will sit on the throne of His glory. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate them one from another, as a shepherd divides his sheep from the goats… Then He will also say to those on the left hand, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels: for I was hungry and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me." Then they also will answer Him, saying, "Lord, when did we see You hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to You?" Then He will answer them, saying, "Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do *it* to one of the least of these, you did not do *it* to Me" (Matthew 25:31-45).

Jesus said we are to help others when we are able. We are even encouraged to seek out ways to do so. This is a major part of the personal work we are called to do. Service toward others is such an important part of Christianity that James called it pure religion (Jam. 1:27).

Love Your Neighbor as Yourself

Service toward others cannot be underestimated. However, it does not mean we should neglect responsibilities to family or ourselves. In fact, Christ placed half of the ten commandments into a category of showing love toward our neighbor as if it were for our self (Mark 12:31). Both Paul and James quoted Christ stating, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Gal. 5:14, Jam. 2:8).

Paul also wrote that those who do not provide for their own deny the faith (1Tim. 5:8). Clearly, the care and concern we express toward others should reflect the care we have for our self. This is why Paul said that, "no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church" (Eph. 5:29).

Nonetheless, there are times when we should put the needs of others before our own. Self-sacrifice is a Christian attribute and a discipline that must be practiced, but we must admit that Christ's instructions do not say that we should love others more than self, or that we should provide for others without considering our needs.

Consider the example of Martha who was a disciple of Christ. This woman appeared to dedicate most of her time to serving others, but it seems that Christ did not praise her for it:

> Now it happened as they went that He entered a certain village; and a certain woman named Martha welcomed Him into her house. And she had a sister called Mary, who also sat at Jesus' feet and heard His word. But Martha was distracted with much serving, and she approached Him and said, "Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to serve alone? Therefore tell her to help me." And Jesus answered and said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are worried and troubled about many things. But one thing is needed, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

It appears that Martha was so focused on serving others that her own spiritual needs were not being taken care of. Neglecting our own needs may be necessary at times, but Christ indicated that there was a time for Martha to be concerned about herself instead of attending to others. Christ had clarified this point during His Sermon on the Mount:

> Not everyone who says to Me, "Lord, Lord," shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, "Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?" And then I will declare to them, "I never

> knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!" (Matthew 7:21-23).

It is obvious that there can be much service without great reward if we are not taking care of our own needs. The service we provide for others should not always supersede taking care of family or self. If we have made a commitment and later realize it might result in some kind of loss, we must keep our word (Psa. 15:4). However, we should not continually over extend ourselves to the point of recurrent harm. This a principle found in Christ's instructions that do not say to love others MORE than yourself, but "whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Mat. 7:12).

To Be Seen of Men

We are inclined to make judgments based on how a situation may affect us personally. This is a human tendency—to consider the world from our individual perspective. As a result, acknowledging ways to fulfill the needs of others is uncommon. However, the consistent practice of considering others can become habitual. Being a faithful servant requires changing our selfish human nature to reflect the nature of God. We can learn to experience a sense of gratitude for every opportunity we have to help others:

> *Let* nothing *be done* through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, *and* coming in the likeness of men (Philippians 2:3-7).

There are many examples in the Scriptures that faithfulness requires considering the interests of others along with our own. This is an indispensable characteristic of faith. When we take the

time to provide service for others, a common and often unavoidable result will be appreciation for our efforts.

Nonetheless, being recognized for faithful service should not be a motivating factor. Faithful servants will learn to have real concern for others that is not driven by personal recognition. We must always remember that the reward for faithful service will come from God. Christ advised us:

> Take heed that you do not do your charitable deeds before men, to be seen by them. Otherwise you have no reward from your Father in heaven. Therefore, when you do a charitable deed, do not sound a trumpet before you as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory from men. Assuredly, I say to you, they have their reward. But when you do a charitable deed, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, that your charitable deed may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will Himself reward you openly (Matthew 6:1-4).

There is no question that we want others to value our work. The caveat is that commendation may lead to ulterior motives. The kind of service we should provide toward God runs much deeper than a desire to be recognized. It is a hope for something more than this world could never give. The patriarch Abraham had this same hope and waited for the city whose builder and maker are God (Heb. 11:10). Through a series of tests and trials, he finally understood that faithful servants of God are not always to be at their own disposal, but also at the disposal of others. Paul came to this realization and wrote:

> Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *that is* in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's (1Corinthians 6:19-20).

We must realize that we are our Master's property. All who will be chosen to become Kings and Priests in God's Kingdom will learn to be meek.

The Meek Shall Inherit the Earth

Anyone desiring to be God's servant must learn to be humble. It is a basic and vital key to becoming faithful. In God's eyes, "before honor *is* humility" (Pro. 18:12). On the other hand, "before destruction the heart of a man is haughty" (ibid). Remember that pride was the spiritual cancer that perverted one of God's greatest angels who became corrupted by ego:

> You *were* perfect in your ways from the day you were created, till iniquity was found in you. By the abundance of your trading you became filled with violence within, and you sinned; Therefore I cast you as a profane thing out of the mountain of God; and I destroyed you, O covering cherub, from the midst of the fiery stones. Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; You corrupted your wisdom for the sake of your splendor (Ezekiel 28:15-17).

This once great angel became a driving force behind the sin of all mankind. As a prince of the power of the airwaves, his pride and self-driven ideals have corrupted the entire planet. Selfish behavior dominates the human race, but God resists the proud and promises to assist the humble (Jam. 4:6). Christ said that God will eventually give the earth to those who are meek (Mat. 5:5). We need to actively seek this trait of humility if we hope to be exalted by God. The Apostle Peter advised:

> Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you (1Peter 5:6-7).

It is not the approval of men that we seek. Those who will ultimately be chosen shall attain glory and honor in the better resurrection (1John 3:2). The only acclamation that we need to be concerned with is of God. Notice the example found in some of the rules Paul gave to Christian households:

> Bondservants, obey in all things your masters according to the flesh, not with eye service, as men-pleasers, but in sincerity of heart, fearing God. And whatever you do,

> do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:22-24).

Slaves of Sin or Servants of God?

Every believer needs to understand the following point. Those who continue in sin are slaves of sin. Nobody in such a position serves God. As Jesus said to those who believed in Him:

> Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed. And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." They answered Him, "We are Abraham's descendants, and have never been in bondage to anyone. How *can* You say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:31-34).

Everyone makes occasional mistakes and may sin out of ignorance or weakness. The point that Christ made is that we must not continue to practice sin. We cannot consider some sins to be tolerable believing that we are still capable of being chosen while failing to exert self-control. We must work toward changing the behavior whenever a sin in our lives is recognized. If we don't repent and correct the wrongs, we will repeat them which will lead to becoming a servant of that sin.

Our conscience is also affected when we allow sin to remain. Our opinion of the sin's severity can become altered to the point that we are no longer alarmed when it occurs again. Sin that is allowed to remain becomes habit and much harder to overcome. That is how we could become a servant of sin. Paul understood this and continued to preach the same admonishment:

> Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin *leading* to death, or of obedience *leading* to righteousness? But God be thanked that *though* you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered.

> And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:16-18).

We can all become captive to prisons of our own making. Freedom of choice has allowed countless numbers to choose to explore the limits of this life instead of the unlimited potential of eternal life through Christ. That is why we must fully understand what it means to be God's servant. Recognize the fact that we are required to do as He commands under all circumstances. Some might think that this presents enormous difficulties, but the opposite is true. Christ said that "My yoke *is* easy and My burden is light" (Mat. 11:30). With Christ as our guide, the difficult decisions in life can become rather simple. A servant does whatever the Master commands.

Upon baptism we accept Christ as our Master and King. We agree to become His servant by a profound commitment. By telling God that we have repented, and will change our ways for good, it becomes a binding contract much like betrothal where a woman promises to be undefiled for her future husband. This means that Christ owns us. Paul made this clear:

> Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit *which is* in you, which you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's (1Corinthians 6:19-20).

Everything throughout the entire universe belongs to God (Exo. 19:5, Job 38). We are merely custodians of all that is His. This includes our own bodies. While we are free to make many choices, our Master declared that there are boundaries to what we should choose. Those boundaries are found in His law which is why He said, "If you love Me, keep My commandments" (John 14:15). The Apostle John continued:

> For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments. And His commandments are not burdensome (1John 5:3).

Most sects of Christianity make God's laws out to be something too difficult to adhere to. Some even claim that it is impossible to keep the commandments perfectly. Nothing could be further from the truth. Christ lived as a faithful servant of God to show us what is possible.

While being without flaw is not possible as mortal beings, we can keep the commandments in a mature manner. That is what Christ meant when He said, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mat. 5:48). It is entirely possible to have the righteousness of God reflected in us which is why Christ powerfully preached "Seek first the kingdom of God AND HIS RIGHTEOUSNESS" (Mat. 6:33).

The freedom found in Christ does not mean that we are free to do as we please. Our future can be secured by the blood of Christ. What this means is that we were purchased by Him to become His servants:

> For he who is called in the Lord *while* a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise he who is called *while* free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men (1Corinthians 7:22-23).

Now is the time to ask ourselves if we are serving God or lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes and the pride found throughout humanity. There is no other way to be considered a good and faithful servant. We must focus on how Christ expects us to live. It is time to whole-heartedly apply this life changing truth by sincerely saying, "Not my will, but Yours be done."

The Character of Christ

God has called many for the purpose of learning what good and faithful service is. The process requires developing the character necessary in order to qualify for a place in God's Kingdom. Christ gave us the perfect example of what service means both now and in the future. He indicated that the calling many have received is not to be waited on hand and foot after He returns. Rather, it is to learn how to best serve others. Notice an example that Christ gave:

> The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called "benefactors." But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves (Luke 22:25-27).

Christ came to provide a great service to humanity. The kind of service that He provided will be required of those who are called to become leaders under Him in the Kingdom of God. If chosen, it means more than a thousand years of serving mankind in a variety of ways (Luke 19:17).

When people go about their lives primarily serving themselves, they become servants of ego, pleasure, money and possessions. This is not a faithful servant's way of life. In the end we would find that we have wasted precious time on that which will have no lasting value. This was the conclusion of one of the wisest men who ever lived when Solomon pondered his decadent life and wrote, "all *is* vanity" (Ecc. 1:2).

It seems that human nature influences people to be focused primarily on the self. In contrast to this tendency, Christians are charged with the task of turning what seems natural around. Learn to first consider God, and then others along with the self. This is exactly what Christ did as an example for us. He came as a servant and considered the needs of others knowing that He was literally divine royalty. We are likewise told to "Let this mind be in you that was also in Christ Jesus" (Php. 2:5). Thus, with the mindset of Christ, we are to genuinely care for other people, and help them live more rewarding lives.

This was an important reason why Christ came to earth in the form of a human—to show us firsthand how God desires His begotten children to live. However, tragically, the vast majority do not acknowledge the miracle of life or its grand purpose for humanity. Most seek personal fulfillment above all else. They fail to realize that if everybody focused on the needs and concerns of others that we would have countless people looking out for our safety and well-being. Instead, the predominant attitude

influencing humanity has long been serving the self even at the expense of others. These self-centered ways may seem natural, but they are not the way God intended for us to be:

> Yes, *they are* greedy dogs *which* never have enough. And they *are* shepherds who cannot understand; they all look to their own way, everyone for his own gain, from his *own* territory. "Come," *one says,* "I will bring wine, and we will fill ourselves with intoxicating drink; tomorrow will be as today, *and* much more abundant" (Isaiah 56:11-12).

God hated the corruption that had developed among Israel. He warned of the suffering it would ultimately bring. Centuries later, Christ considered the selfish attitude that continues to mislead people and said:

> O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under *her* wings, but you were not willing (Matthew 23:37).

Christ wanted to protect and nurture people, but their self-centered ways led them to reject their own Savior. As a result, their destruction would again come because of a lack of the character gained by faithful service. Christ foresaw their tragic end and wept while stating:

> For days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side (Luke 19:43).

People have not changed. Though there have been moments in time when communities have come together to do what is right for the greater good, even when it meant harm to them, selfless and faithful service has not been the predominant way of mankind. Even with all of the advancements in technology and industry, thousands of years of history clearly reveal the ways that lead to failure. Still, the teeming masses continue to reject the

love of God. Nations have degenerated spiritually to the point where people call good evil and wicked behavior is claimed to be good. Notice what the Herald News wrote a few years ago about our time:

> The decline of community; the rise of individualism; consumerism; falling values; family breakdown; youth crime; drugs and alcohol abuse; poverty; immigration and racism; and crime. These, according to an influential think tank, are the 10 modern social evils... (https://www.heraldscotland.com /news/12767733.our-10-modern-evils, retr. 9/4/2019).

This reporter's evaluation of the world today is a mirror image of the Paul's hideous portrait of the end of the age. Notice the blatant similarities between the apostle's prophecy and the behavior of billions in this country and around the world:

> But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self- control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2Timothy 3:1-4).

World leaders claim that they are expressing love while denying the ethics of God, but Paul said that their foolish behaviors have a form of godliness while denying His moral authority. From such people we must turn away (2Tim. 3:5).

Christ came to save us from a corrupt way of life that would lead to certain death. He came to teach us the right way to live—the way of giving to others instead of continuing to attempt getting more for the self. God set the moral boundaries that we are to live by in preparation for the future. Christ literally showed us how people will live in God's Kingdom:

> I have come that they may have life, and that they may have *it* more abundantly (John 10:10).

What many do not realize is how the life of a faithful servant of God is rewarding. A deep sense of accomplishment and purpose comes when we learn how to best serve Christ. We must not neglect our duty towards God and man for this is the reason for our calling.

To illustrate this point, consider the famous violinist Niccolo Paganini. This extremely talented musician also designed and built his instrument of choice. He willed his exquisite violin to the city of Genoa on condition that it must never be played. The wood of such an instrument will wear only slightly when it is regularly played and handled, but untouched it begins to decay. Due to a lack of regular use and care, Paganini's historic violin has become worm-eaten and useless except as a relic.

In a like manner, God has bestowed upon us one of the gifts of His love. That gift is the ability and opportunity to serve. However, if we do not consistently exercise this precious gift, we will become spiritually weak and less useful to both God and others. Striving to increase the frequency and ways in which we serve will lead to spiritual growth and with it our ultimate reward in heaven. Thus, we should commit ourselves to following the example of our King; not fearing, but rather looking to the future in enormous hope:

> For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works (Matthew 16:27).

Assistance of the Holy Spirit

God does not leave the understanding of His way of life up to our interpretation (2Pet. 1:20). We have the written Word for the purpose of knowing exactly what He expects of us. From Genesis to Revelation there is a consistent record of God's ethics that were displayed by the example of Jesus Christ. However, the Bible alone will not lead us to the perfection that Christ spoke of. It is this gift of the Holy Spirit that is needed to finish the Father's work in us:

> For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows

> the things of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit *that* is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual. But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know *them,* because they are spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual judges all things, yet he himself is *rightly* judged by no one. For "Who has known the mind of the lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ (1Corinthians 2:11-16).

The mind of Christ cannot be gained by reading alone. A key to growing in grace, and developing the righteousness of God, is to attain and exercise the Holy Spirit in us. That spirit provides us with the means to understand the depth of God's wisdom that is found within His law. As the Savior related:

> But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything that I have told you (ISV, John 14:26).

God's Spirit is a power that is used in many miraculous ways. One is to influence our thoughts. It can lead us to the right way to think and live. Those who have God's Spirit are prompted by it, but it is up to the individual to pay attention to the quiet encouragement inside the mind. "By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error" (1Jn. 4:6). In this way, each believer is to use God's Spirit to develop the mind of Christ. If we choose not to heed—beware!

> The master of that servant will come on a day when he is not looking for *him* and at an hour that he is not aware of, and will cut him in two and appoint *him* his portion with the hypocrites. There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matthew 24:50-51).

Christ is our Master! He rules in a depth of love that humans do not realize. We should be motivated with great passion to accomplish the work our Master has given us. If we do not, the Scriptures speak of a terrible time of tribulation in which only those found worthy will escape (Luke 21:36). Christ said that out of the many called only a relative few will be chosen (Mat. 20:16). What makes those people who are chosen different from the rest? Why are there many called who will NOT be chosen?

The quality that will save a relative few is something frequently discussed by believers, but infrequently expressed. They will be saved by faith! Faith is not just a mental exercise of belief in God the Father and Christ the Son. Faith is recognized through the works of those who share the common hope to one day be considered as part of the faithful. The respected Church elder James expressed:

> What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled," but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works… For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also (James 2:14-26).

If we are committed to God and repent of sin, if we are baptized and receive the Holy Spirit and then consistently heed the prompting of that spirit, we will be good and faithful servants of the Almighty God. This is our calling. We have been called to reflect the values found in the mind of Christ.

What Do We Seek?

Pontius Pilate was a Roman procurator overseeing Judea during the time of Christ's ministry. The Jewish authorities had seized Jesus and accused Him of blasphemy. They proceeded to

take Him to Pilate in the hopes that this governor would sentence Jesus to death. Pilate had the opportunity to acquit Christ of any wrongdoing. Instead, he washed his hands before the crowd attempting to indicate that he was innocent of any bloodshed in the matter (Mat. 27:24). Pilate simply refused to accept the responsibility that was his own.

Are there times when we attempt to deny responsibility for our failure to act? Do we mentally wash our hands of matters? Do we blame circumstances, point the finger at others, or refuse to censure ourselves? If so, that is not the behavior of a faithful servant.

Consider another example. There are many tasks in life that people do not want to do. Nobody enjoys cleaning bathrooms or washing somebody else's feet. The tendency is to try and pass such chores along to someone else. However, that was not the kind of service displayed by Jesus. Instead of passing the buck, He chose to accept the duty of a common household servant:

> 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… 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, blessed are you if you do them" (John 13:3-17).

A servant does not share the social status of his master. Regardless, the most important man who ever lived assumed the role of a servant. We have probably read this example many times, and yet a majority of believers continue to avoid tasks that they feel are below them.

This was a profound and powerful illustration of the kind of service that Christ was willing to provide for us. His mind was set to entirely fulfill His responsibility to the Father and to mankind. He did not feel that any task that was needed and helpful to others was below Him. Why is it that, even though many understand the faithful service that the Savior provided, most do not whole heartedly follow His example?

We must admit that there are times when we know that God would not approve of our attitude. During such instances we should realize that we are not humbling ourselves before God. These moments should prompt us to consider what we are really seeking. Is it the righteousness of Christ, or do we display a form of godliness by giving God lip service while denying His authority in our lives?

Obedience is a fundamental trait that all true Christians must have. The kind of obedience that Christ had could be summarized in a single sentence that He uttered while pouring His heart out to the Father. "Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

If we truly seek Christ, why is it rare for anyone to behave like a servant? People prefer instead to be served. We want to be liked, admired, and coddled. We want others to think that we are special. The human tendency is self-focused which is the opposite of how Christians should behave. This has affected all of us in every age—even those called to a life of ministerial service in God's Church. Notice what the Prophet Ezekiel declared:

> Thus says the Lord GOD to the shepherds: "Woe to the shepherds of Israel who feed themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flocks? You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool; you slaughter the fatlings, but you do not feed the flock" (Ezekiel 34:2-3).

As they did in ancient times, some ministers continue to take advantage of their positions. But the rebuke is not toward ministers alone. God does not mince words while reprimanding His people:

> And *as for* you, O My flock, thus says the Lord GOD: "Behold, I shall judge between sheep and sheep, between rams and goats. Is it too little for you to have eaten up the good pasture, that you must tread down with your feet the residue of your pasture—and to have drunk of the clear waters, that you must foul the residue with your feet? And *as for* My flock, they eat what you have trampled with your feet, and they drink what you have fouled with your feet." Therefore thus says the Lord GOD to them: "Behold, I Myself will judge between the fat and the lean sheep. Because you have pushed with side and shoulder, butted all the weak ones with your horns, and scattered them abroad, therefore I will save My flock, and they shall no longer be a prey; and I will judge between sheep and sheep" (Ezekiel 34:17-22).

God's rebuke applies to all! Unto this day, ministers and lay members alike are motivated by personal interests. Brethren sometimes verbally attack one another, misuse tithes & offerings, and itching ears are focused on smooth things, or pet doctrines. Tragically, some have tried to make "merchandise" out of God's people (2Pet. 2:3). Some ministers have abused their authority over congregations. Others are too lenient. Groups have even formed claiming to be "independent" from an ordained ministry. In these ways, many are committing presumptuous sins, and abuse the people of God by causing division and conflicts among brethren (Luke 12:43-46, 2Pet. 2:10, Psa. 19:13).

With all the trouble both inside and outside of the Church, perhaps this has caused some to focus on self-centered habits. It appears that relative few put good and faithful service toward God and His people foremost in their lives. We must wake up from this halfhearted state of slumber that the Church is now experiencing!

A Never-Ending Work

In order to be considered faithful servants of God, we cannot seek to primarily serve ourselves. The tendency of human nature is to think God will excuse misbehavior when we do "some" things right. However, the Almighty warns us, saying that "every

way of a man *is* right in his own eyes," but we must remember that, "the LORD weighs the hearts" (Pro. 21:2).

We are to strive to keep all aspects of God's law; for if we keep some laws while neglecting others, we are guilty of breaking them all (Jam. 2:10-11). Disciples of Christ do not get to decide what the standards of our Master will be. In order to mature in the ways of God, we must comply with the instructions of our Teacher who has presented us with the greatest hope that can ever be instilled. We have an opportunity to one day hear these words:

> Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord (Matthew 25:23).

In this grand calling, are we honestly trying to be faithful over the few things in our care? Do we sincerely desire to enter into the joy of our Lord whose Father's good pleasure is to give us the Kingdom? As insignificant as our lives might seem at this time, God sees enormous potential in us if we will stay the course. A fascinating story reflects this truth.

NASA launched the exploratory space probe Pioneer 10 in 1972. The satellite's mission was to capture images of Jupiter, and its moons, and send the data back to earth. Scientists regarded this as a bold plan, and some feared the asteroid belt would destroy the satellite before it could reach its target. Amazingly, Pioneer 10 accomplished its mission and much more.

In 1973, at 15.5 million miles from Jupiter, a series of 16,000 commands were uploaded to the spacecraft to control the flyby operations during the next 60 days. Around 500 images were transmitted back to earth over a period of six months, but Pioneers 10's journey did not end there.

After crossing Jupiter's "bow shock" 17 times, Pioneer 10 was hurled toward the edge of the solar system as it continued to send data back to earth. The half-ton space probe crossed the orbit of Saturn in 1976, and then the orbit of Uranus in 1979. On June 13, 1983, the craft crossed the orbit of Neptune becoming the first man-made object to leave the proximity of the planets in our solar system.

The last successful reception of telemetry from Pioneer 10 was received April 27, 2002. Subsequent signals were barely strong enough to detect. The final signal was received on January 23, 2003. Something else remarkable is the fact that those signals emanated from an eight-watt transmitter—emitting about as much power as a night-light.

What has been called "the little satellite that could" was not intended to carry out what it accomplished. And yet it has done more than anyone thought possible. It is projected that Pioneer 10 is currently some 20 billion miles from the earth and still cruising outside of our solar system and attempting to transmit data, but the signal is too weak for us to receive.

This story illustrates God's plan for the elect. Out of all those who are called by God, a select group of individuals will be chosen to perform a bold task. They may be thought of as the foolish and the weak of the world, but Christ will ultimately do more with them than anyone could have imagined! However, they must meet God's criteria in order to attain that goal. Thus, it would behoove us to sincerely consider Paul's conclusion of this matter when he wrote:

> I discipline my body and bring *it* into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified (1Corinthians 9:27).

Being called by God is the first step of a long journey toward His Kingdom. There will be many challenges along the way, but God will support and empower us through His Spirit if we are diligent in our efforts to be faithful to Him. We can succeed! It is entirely possible for us to be considered a good and faithful servant. Stay the course that the Captain of our salvation has directed. If we do, He will take us out of this world and beyond.

> A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone who is perfectly trained will be like his teacher (Luke 6:40).

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