

The Gift of Service

SCOTT HOEZEE

We think about, or encounter the idea of, service in different times and places in life. Perhaps you are talking with a military veteran, who served in Iraq, and so you say thank you for your service; or a restaurant that you frequent wants some customer feedback, and so you are sent a survey that, among other things, asks you rate the restaurant's service. Well, in the New Testament, service is often listed as a virtue and a practice all Christians should exercise. Today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder what that means. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now program number three in a short, four-part series that we are doing on what we have kind of referred to as the unsung virtues, some of the gifts and characteristics that are talked about in the New Testament, but that we don't always focus on so much. So, so far in this series we opened with the gift and the virtue of hospitality. In the previous program, we looked at mercy; now in this program, we are going to look at service; and in the final program, we will look at generosity.

DAVE BAST

Right; as you say, unsung virtues, or I like to refer to them as mundane gifts of the Spirit—the down-to-earth gifts of the Spirit—the ordinary, kind of humble things that you might not think of as a gift at all. If you think of the gifts of the Spirit, you are tempted to turn toward those sort of spectacular, or even supernatural things like healing or preaching or even speaking in tongues; but the New Testament seems to emphasize these things as much or more than the really special things.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and so, for this program, let's go straight to scripture and dig into it, as we say on *Groundwork*, from 1 Corinthians 12, where the Apostle Paul writes: Now, about the gifts of the Spirit, brothers and sisters, I do not want you to be uninformed: ²You know that when you were pagans, somehow or other you were influenced and led astray by mute idols. ³Therefore, I want you to know that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says Jesus, be cursed; and, no one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit. ⁴Now, there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. ⁵There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. ⁶There are different kinds of working, but in all of them, and in everyone, it is the same God at work. ⁷Now to each one, the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

DAVE BAST

So, there are several things of great interest there. We cannot touch on all of them, but one thing we can see is the sort of three-fold, or almost Trinitarian emphasis toward the end of that passage, where Paul actually does mention the Spirit, the Lord, and God—God the Father—but he also talks about gifts and service and working; and he associates each of those with a different Person in the Trinity, or the Godhead. So, we are thinking about gifts, and of course, they are gifts of the Spirit, but when Paul talks about service, he relates it more to the Lord Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; that is interesting. So, yes; there are different gifts but one Spirit, but for service, right, he connects it to the idea of Lord; and what is a lord? Well, in Paul's day, a lord was a master. Today it might be a boss or a manager or something, but the point is, when we say Jesus is the Christ, we mean he is the anointed one—the Messiah, but we also confess Jesus as Lord, which means he owns us in a sense. We are his servants—his slaves, the New Testament sometimes says, because he bought us with a price...the price of his own blood. So, service is connected to lordship, and lordship means that we are owned by the master...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we serve the Master.

DAVE BAST

You know, there is a famous passage in Matthew Chapter 11; it is sometimes referred to as the comfortable words—the words that are full of comfort for us, where Jesus invites us to come to him. He says: I am meek and lowly, and I will give rest for your souls; but he also, in that context says: Take my yoke upon you...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

And learn of me. So, the images of a yoke of oxen, and that wooden collar that they placed on top of the pair of beasts so that they could pull the load together; and that is how Jesus refers to following him...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

To coming to him, there is a yoke to be taken up, as well, and it is the yoke of service.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; the yoke is easy, the burden is light; but it is still a yoke, and we still serve Jesus; which also means, Dave, that if Jesus is the Master, and we then do our service to him and for him, that means we serve *like* the Master as well; and that is something that comes through clear as a bell in a well-known passage from John 13.

DAVE BAST

Yes; it happens in the upper room, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet in connection with the Last Supper, which is shocking to them, because that was the job of a slave...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

¹²And when he had finished washing their feet (John writes), 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...(there it is again...he is the Lord)...and rightly so, for that is what I am. ¹⁴Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. ¹⁵I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you. ¹⁶Truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master. ¹⁷Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them."

So, there it is...

SCOTT HOEZEE

There it is.

DAVE BAST

He set us an example. He is our Lord, he is our Master; but if he does it, how much more should we, the servants, these slaves, really, do the same?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And of course, now and then we do see sometimes in connection to an ordination or an instillation service of a new pastor, or a president of a seminary perhaps...sometimes we see people reenact, literally, foot washing. A few people volunteer. They come to church with extremely clean feet, and then they have their feet washed, but of course...and that is fine, to remind us...but, that was a standard cultural practice then. Most people in most parts of the world don't do that; but the point was, in whatever culture you are, if there is something you regard as something only for the lowly to do, don't you only leave it to them, and think you are too good for it. "Do as I have done; I have set you an example," Jesus said. So, in other words, serve each other even if that means taking on the role of, yes, the lowest of the low.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, it has become sort of ritualized in many Christian churches or traditions. In fact, I remember going to a Good Friday service a couple of years ago in a church from a different denomination, and they invited the congregation to come up and have their feet washed if they chose, but it was very much voluntary, because this is not a part of our cultural tradition, certainly; but it is more than a ritual. What Jesus is getting at here is not that we should try to reenact this literally in some liturgical setting, but rather that we should be willing to take up the lowest kind of task; do it cheerfully; do it humbly; because that is what he has done for us. We are going to see in the next program on giving how much Christ actually did give...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

He gave everything; and so, who are we to hold back anything as we follow him? The servant is not greater than the Master.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and what Jesus did in the upper room that night, although it took the disciples aback, and you might remember the story: Peter didn't even want any part of it because he thought it was demeaning for Jesus to do that to his dirty feet; but that was really just the capper of how Jesus lived all along through his ministry. He never saw...and we will think in a little while in this program about the importance of seeing the need in the first place...but Jesus never saw a lonely person...a lowly person...a leper person...an ostracized person...a prostitute...he never saw somebody and thought to himself: Well, I will not associate with *that* person; that would be beneath me. He was always associating with those people. So, Jesus in the upper room after washing their feet said, "I have set you an example," but not just that day, it was his whole ministry that showed that he was a servant himself.

DAVE BAST

Right; and the word that is used here in 1 Corinthians 12 is significant really. Later in the program, we want to look at some specific examples of what service might look like in our lives; but here, we should note the word is *diakonia* in Greek, and that word originally had a very special and specific meaning. That is what we are going to look at in just a moment.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast; and we have just been talking here about the act of serving, or the mundane gift, the virtue...the unsung virtue...of service. Scott, as we went out in the last segment, we said that the word in Greek is *diakonia*, which literally means a table waiter.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and it is the basis of our word for deacon. It means deacon; and here is one of the first places that we encounter it. Paul will talk about this a lot later in the New Testament, in his final letters...the Pastoral Epistles to Timothy and Titus. He will talk a lot about the qualifications of a deacon; but it is in Acts Chapter 6, where we first encounter this idea; and here is what it says there:

In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food. ²So, the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the Word of God in order to wait on tables. ³Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them, ⁴and we will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the Word."

DAVE BAST

So, there is the first establishment of the office, if we want to think of it as an office, of deacon in the early Church, and it was in response to a very practical problem or issue that had arisen...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

There was some kind of tension between the different cultural groups...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

They were all Jewish Christians, but some of them were native to Palestine and were Aramaic speaking or Hebrew speaking; others were more Greek in their cultural background, and yet they were all joined together. The one group felt like they were maybe being shorted a little bit...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

In the need and the care for their widows.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which they refer to as waiting on tables, as we just said. That is the literal meaning of the word *diakonia*, our root word for deacon. As we said at the top of the program, Dave, it places where people literally wait on tables...restaurants today...service is a pretty big deal. In fact, in the *New York Times*, when they publish their weekly restaurant review, there is always a little summary box on the side that shows recommended dishes, prices, reservations, atmosphere, accessibility; but then they always have service as a category, and if it is a good restaurant, the service will be described as, you know, attentive and knowledgeable, welcoming

and friendly, but in bad restaurant reviews, service is often chalked up as absent, scattered, bored, rude...and if you think about it, how we serve makes a big difference. A good server, a good waiter or waitress, can make an okay restaurant seem better than it is; even as a rude server can make a good restaurant not seem very good at all. So, that is literally what it means to wait on tables, but even in Acts 6 it went beyond that. It wasn't a restaurant, but it was waiting on widows and the orphan and the alien...those vulnerable people who were always identified as needing special care in the Old Testament.

DAVE BAST

Well, yes; and actually, financial need as well. So, there has always been, from the start, a sense of finance associated with the idea of being a deacon.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Although they did mention the daily distribution of food, as well; so there was a food component as well as money...whatever was needed.

DAVE BAST

There was a need, in other words—a physical need; so, you've got varieties of service in the early Church, and once kind of service is what we would maybe tag as more spiritual; it is the ministry of the Word and prayer; and the apostles said: We need to devote ourselves to that. We need other people who have a more practical turn of mind, a more practical set of gifts...they are good with finances...they are people of integrity...they have a heart for those in need...physical need. So, that is the job and role of the deacon; although, we shouldn't make this too hard and fast because some of those early deacons were pretty spiritual people, too.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, right.

DAVE BAST

You've got Stephen, who was the first martyr; Philip, who was a premier evangelist...in his own right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Stephen preached a sermon as he was dying.

DAVE BAST

Yes, right; so, without making that too hard and fast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we also should say that Peter and John and the others were not saying that they would never wait on tables or take care of widows. Based on Peter's and Paul's later writings, we know that they included themselves as having the mindset of being a deacon; but, there was that formal office of deacon, and that continues to this day; but, we are all supposed to be deacons, whether you are in that office or not. We are all supposed to serve.

DAVE BAST

Right; so, let's think about that more broadly now by going back to what has really been sort of the core passage for this whole series: Romans Chapter 12; and we want to listen to the opening verses of that chapter, where Paul talks about our service. So, Paul writes:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper *worship*. (That is a word there that could also be translated *service*.) ²Do not be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind; then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is; his good, pleasing, and perfect will.

^{3a}For by the grace given me, I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, as you pointed out while you were reading that, Dave, that first verse is interesting. It concludes with a line about begin a living sacrifice as our true and proper worship, but a lot of listeners probably remember older translations that it was our true and proper or our spiritual service, and that is because the Greek word there is *latreia*, which is another word like *diakonia*, which literally means service. Now, in the early Church, that became synonymous with worship; and you know, we still refer to Sunday mornings as the worship service; but *latreia*, like *diakonia*, literally meant service; and again, this is pointing to our overall mindset; and again, it is pointing to the fact that this is because Jesus is Lord. He is our Master; and so, we are his servants, and we serve him.

DAVE BAST

Right; and you notice also that Paul says present your bodies as this kind of sacrifice in worship or service. It is not a purely spiritual thing; it is not just something we do inside our heads when we kind of offer our thoughts to God in thanksgiving for his great mercies to us—his salvation. No; Paul says this is something you do with your hands and your feet. This is a whole body exercise. It is worked out when you serve other people practically for Jesus' sake. That is really part of your worship of God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But he also concludes that chapter with that little line: Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought; and the reason he concludes that passage this way is pretty obvious, because thinking of yourself as too lofty to stoop down is probably the number one hindrance of service; and in just a moment, we will want to wonder about why that is, as well as a few practical, day-to-day implications of what it means to live a life of service. Stay tuned.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are talking about the virtue of service; the practical gift that, really, all of us as followers of Jesus need to exercise, because he is the Master; we are his servants, first of all. He is our Lord, and he has set us an example of what we are supposed to be doing, too. We need to lower ourselves; we need to, figuratively speaking, pick up the towel and the basin, as he did in the upper room, and be prepared to wash another person's feet in his name.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we said, there is, in the church, the office—the formal office—in most churches there are elders and there are deacons. The deacons, in our tradition anyway, are specifically charged...when they are ordained into their office...they are specifically charged with collecting funds and equitably distributing them to the widows and the poor in the congregation, and in the wider community where the church is located. So, there are deacons, but we are all supposed to be deacons; and we just said, Dave...Paul said we should not think of ourselves more highly than we ought, and what he is really getting at there is the deadly sin of pride; which, we did a whole series of the deadly sins here on *Groundwork* a while back, and when we talked about pride, we noted images associated with pride always tie in with height or loftiness...

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

She has her nose in the air. He is riding his high horse. She has a lofty opinion of herself. He is constantly looking down his nose at others; and you know, if you go at life with that kind of an attitude, indeed, you are probably not going to be terribly inclined to serve. It reminds me of a movie called *Working Girl*, in which there is this higher-up person in a firm who thinks of herself very highly, but she treats her secretary like a slave. So, she throws a party for herself and has her secretary go around the room with a steam tray of dim

sum appetizers, and it is hot, and it is sweaty, and it is kind of a miserable thing. She asks her boss at one point: Do you think everybody has had enough to eat? And the boss says: You better go around one more time; I would love to help you, but you know, you cannot distract the quarterback by passing out the Gatorade. In other words, I am the quarterback and I am too good to pass out the Gatorade. I am too good to stoop over a steam tray; you do that.

DAVE BAST

Yes; passing out the Gatorade, that is the water boy's job...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Or water girl; and consistently the New Testament urges us to sort of put to death that kind of pride...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DAVE BAST

That kind of attitude that says: I am too good for that job; I am too important; I am too high... One place where this happens explicitly is in Philippians 2, a famous passage that Paul introduces about the mind of Christ...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

⁵Have this mind which was in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped (or held onto).

So, you don't get higher than that! Talk about thinking highly of yourself! Jesus was the Son of God, but he gave it all up...he let it go so that...

SCOTT HOEZEE

He emptied himself, Paul says. He just let all that go, right. That has to be our attitude, too. So, I mean, if you are the pastor of a church, and there is a potluck, and people need help cleaning up, then help clean up. I don't care if you are the pastor. I mean, pick up the plates with smeared spaghetti and baked beans on them, and don't just leave it for the kitchen people; or at work even, you know; if your trashcan gets full, empty it. Don't just assume that is the custodian's job and it is beneath you to empty your own trash. You can always be on the lookout for little opportunities like that to fetch somebody else coffee instead of having them only bring it to you. That is the mindset of *diakonia* and *latreia* that we have been talking about—the mindset of Christ.

DAVE BAST

Yes; be willing to clean the toilet, in other words, if you are working in the building, no matter what your job might be. Really, one of the most important things, probably, in developing this attitude is to have the vision to see things that need doing.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

We just did a program in this series on the virtue of mercy, and we pointed out that one of the most important things in order to be merciful is to see the need that is around you, and not kind of harden your heart, or shut

it off...look the other way...so that you don't, like the people who pass by in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; seeing is a precondition for compassion and mercy, but also, of course, for service. You have to see the need, and have to assume that you can move in to help. We remember the Charles Dickens classic, *A Christmas Carol*, right, with the character of Scrooge; and when he is confronted by one of the ghosts, you know, with needy people and urchins out in the street, and orphans, he responds: Well, you know, are there not social agencies? Are there not other people who do this? Why should I have to help?

DAVE BAST

Are there not workhouses for the poor? Have they closed them all? Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am not going to get my hands dirty; that is somebody else's job in society. Again, that is a proud attitude. It is also a miserly attitude, which we will talk about in our next program on generosity; but that will never do if we want to live lives and present our whole bodies as living sacrifices, as Paul said in Romans 12.

DAVE BAST

Which, incidentally, is not to denigrate or dismiss the need for social institutions...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right. They are still important.

DAVE BAST

To meet people's needs on a large scale, and needs are massive in a modern society; in our culture, it is a complicated business. So, we need professionals who are being about meeting those needs. We need government agencies. We need voluntary associations in communities. You need to go about this systematically and in a big way...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

So, we are not denying the need for that, but we are saying, on a personal level, we still have to be willing to get our hands dirty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, that is why congregations can do more than the individual in the congregation; denominations can do more than any one congregation; we do need that, but it doesn't alleviate us of all responsibility; we still have to do that, because, as somebody pointed out, Dave, in so much of society, the goal of life is to seize the top rung of the ladder, you know, to get the brass ring; but when we follow Christ, when he is, as we have said, our Lord—our Master, then it is almost as though Christians are in a competition to seize the bottom rung of the ladder, because that is what Jesus did. We are not trying to elevate ourselves; we should be constantly trying to stoop low, as Jesus stooped low; see people at eye level; look, as we just said; see the opportunities for service, in the fellowship hall, at the office, on the street, and then move into action.

DAVE BAST

Yes, exactly; I mean, if you are a member of a church...of a congregation...there is somebody who needs a visit. If you are walking down the street and someone in need approaches you, you don't have to go through a whole series of convoluted, well, what if this, what if that, just give them a little something. Somebody once said years ago: Find a need and fill it; and that is a pretty good and simple rule in our approach to this unsung virtue of service.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, and that is what it means to follow Jesus, and we all await the verdict of our Lord at the end of our lives, when he says, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant.”

DAVE BAST

Servant, exactly. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we discuss the spiritual gift of generosity.

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Printed on July 26, 2025