

Servanthood vs. Servitude

Martin Luther wrote. "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all."

You are called to freedom as a Christian - to freedom from the coercive obligation to serve and from irresponsible apathy, but more importantly, to the freedom to serve.

Few aspects of Christianity are more subject to misgivings and misunderstanding than the call to servanthood. Guilt, anger, and miscommunication are often associated with it - all traceable to a basic confusion of servanthood with servitude. Servitude connotes bondage, slavery, and involuntary labor. Servanthood, on the other hand, incorporates the ideas of willingness, choice, and voluntary commitment.

There is a world of difference between servanthood and servitude. At best, the person snared by servitude acts out of a sense of duty and fear, but the person living in servanthood acts out of a sense of commitment and love. Servanthood is healthy and uplifting, although involving challenges, pains, and problems. Servitude is, by definition, unhealthy and demeaning for all concerned. The net result is that servitude creates more difficulties than no service at all - both for the server and the one being served.

Christians sometimes have difficulty distinguishing between servanthood and servitude. As a result, we can feel enslaved to our calling rather than freed by it. Under these circumstances training becomes an act of servitude.

Fantastic possibilities open up for us as Christians when we understand servanthood. If being a Christian servant is not easy - and it isn't - it can, nonetheless, be gratifying. With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we can make the most of our servanthood, bearing in mind that we allow God to guide us. Without God's direction, we are headed for trouble.

Servitude Pitfall #1: Overidentification

When people experience problems in life, it is as though they are stuck in the mud. When you, a trainer relate to someone in such a plight, you can be tempted to jump into the mud in order to assist him or her out of the mudhole.

If you do this, you are overidentifying with the other person. That is, you reach a level of emotional entanglement at which the other's pains, problems, and emotional burdens become your own. It is true that you achieve emotional solidarity with the other; but look at what you lose. By jumping into the mudhole and becoming totally submerged in the other's problems, you forfeit the objectivity necessary to get the other person out (not to mention getting out yourself).

The result is that no one benefits. The other person is still in need of training, and now you need help as well. Misery does indeed love company, but misery needs more than company in order to be helped.

The Servanthood Approach: Empathy

Walking in the freedom of servanthood, a Christian responds to the other's plight with empathy. Empathy involves experiencing another's problems as if they were your own, without losing the "as-if-ness" aspect. It entails jumping into the mudhole with the other, but at the same time firmly grasping a tree root. That is, you retain your sense of objectivity.

When you empathize, the other person senses that you share his or her problems, but you have the all-important objectivity that enables you to communicate, "Let's get out of this together." With empathy you firmly grasp the other person's hand and train him or her through the quagmire back onto stable ground.

Servitude pitfall #2: Superficial Sweetness and Gushiness

When someone claims to love everybody, especially when the person demonstrates this love in an excessively sweet and gushy manner, there is a question of Genuineness. This is often a good indication that the person is using incongruent behavior that covers over - and is usually the exact opposite of - his or her true feelings. So the person who feels reluctant, unwilling, or maybe even angry at the prospect of serving cloaks that feeling with an exaggerated and unnatural sweetness.

This defense mechanism is a denial of one's humanness and brokenness. It can even be a form of self-righteousness. The sweet and gushy trainer is out of touch with him or herself. He or she refuses to face the brokenness within, and often scorns the brokenness in others from some imagined height of spiritual maturity.

This situation is bondage. Individuals caught in its tenacious grasp are so deceived that they cannot see that anything has gone wrong with themselves. To be sure,

people like this can be the first to grovel over the presence and power of sin in their lives. Yet it is evident that the groveling is only a mask for an attitude of superior spirituality.

So long as the trainer is ensnared in this pitfall of superficial sweetness, no in-depth relating can take place. The one seeking help is only interacting with a mask.

The Servanthood Approach: Genuineness

The servanthood approach to others is not superficial sweetness and gushiness, but genuineness. Genuineness stems from being in touch with yourself. It is being who you are.

Being genuine does not mean being perfect, but entails a recognition of brokenness in yourself. As you learn to recognize your commitment and trust and feel at home with it, you will be able to capitalize creatively on the imperfections in your life of training. At these times God can be strong in your weakness.

Genuineness is disarmingly contagious. As you, the trainer, learn to set aside the masks that society and your own imperfection continually thrust upon you, you will be an enabler and a model for others to do the same. A genuine trainer's vulnerable openness at the point of his or her brokenness can indeed be an incentive for others to shed their masks and be themselves.

Genuine individuals are not liked by everyone. Sometimes others find it hard to like a person who, by being genuine, shatters their illusions. Perhaps the best example of this is Jesus. When he acted genuine, it aroused anger and hatred sufficient to lead to his crucifixion.

Sometimes you may feel that you are being "crucified." When you open up in a courageous act of training by being genuine, not all will be appreciative. Some might resent your trust and commitment. No matter. Your training results from a deliberate decision to care in a given situation and to care through the pains and burdens that reveal your own brokenness. Being a servant is not easy, but the reward of spreading genuineness to others is worth the price.

Servitude Pitfall #3: Being Manipulated

Perfectly sincere, caring Christians have shown by their actions that they consider being manipulated to be honorable and Christlike. Being manipulated is a means

of demonstrating their long-suffering endurance; it is part of the cross they are called on to bear.

Being manipulated is not Christian servanthood. In 'The Manipulator and the Church' there is a definition of a manipulator as "one who exploits, uses, and/or controls himself and others as things or objects." You are being manipulated when another person controls your behavior or plays on your emotions for selfish ends - treating you more as an object than a person. When you are manipulated, the relationship ceases to be meaningful. When you permit someone to treat you as an object, you block any genuine relating. A one-sided "relationship" in which the manipulator has all his or her whims fulfilled is no relationship at all.

Allowing yourself to be manipulated demeans yourself. When you let it happen, you are in effect saying, "Okay. I am an object. I am your slave." Furthermore, when you permit manipulation, you allow the other person to demean his or her own self. You give your approval to the diminution of the individual's personhood. Far from following the apostolic injunction to "build one another up," you help the other person to tear himself or herself down.

The Servanthood Approach: Filling Needs, Not Wants

If you love people and seek to build them up, you must meet their needs, not their wants.

Being a true Christian servant involves not allowing yourself to be manipulated. It entails giving people what they need, which is not necessarily what they want or state as a need. To pander to their whims is usually a good way to insure that their true needs will not be met. Certainly, you will keep their wants in mind. Many times, what people want will help them along the road of healthy growth. But to grant an individual's every whim is, to cultivate overly dependent, and unhealthy behavior.

I do not mean to imply that you are excused from being warm, caring, and gentle with people. There must be time for nurturing in the training process. But when the individual manipulates as a life pattern, you must not allow yourself to become another one of the person's toys.

Resisting this temptation will not be easy. You will need to learn skills of relating with and serving others. Sometimes you will need to be confrontive. A direct, forthright approach is the only way I know to successfully combat manipulation.

Servitude Pitfall #4: Begrudging Care

Occasionally you can stumble into a relationship that you really did not want anything to do with. Yet, because you feel obliged to train, you continue in the situation - while at the same time constantly complaining about the individual and the relationship. If you find yourself in this predicament, you might seriously consider ending the situation, rather than continuing to participate grudgingly in it.

At times you will experience great inconvenience and pain relating to another person, without the slightest urge to complain. Rather, you will find joy in bearing the burdens of another. But there are times when just the thought of associating with a certain person will fill you with bitterness and dread. In this case your resentment is probably blocking any effective relating and caring. Consequently, you might wish to reassess your involvement.

The Servanthood Approach: Intentionality

The individual who acts out of the freedom of servanthood will consciously choose to enter and remain in relationships. A deliberate decision to care lends power to your presence. Intentionality stands in stark contrast to unwilling care that results from a warped sense of obligation.

Even with intentionality, relationships will not always be sparkling and dynamic. Some relationships are more stimulating and rewarding than others. This could lead naturally to trainers seeking out the more exciting relationships and shunning the less exciting ones. It is often easier to relate to attractive people than unattractive ones - especially when no deliberate decision was made in the first place. But when such a decision is made, the strength of your commitment will carry you through some exceedingly dull times.

This glorious gift called freedom that God gives in servanthood rules out rule-giving. Rather than requirements, what I offer are some guidelines. Learn them for the value they have, but also rely on the promptings of the Holy Spirit who gives you the gifts you need as a Christian servant. God does not give all gifts to all people. It follows that you cannot expect to be able to serve every person who is in need. Still, you need to use the gifts God has given you, recognizing both your strengths and your limitations.

You also need to beware of expecting others to have the same gifts you do. Do not judge those who are not involved in Christian service in the same way as you.

By God's grace, you can continue to grow in your servanthood attitudes and capabilities. A limitation today could become a strength tomorrow, God isn't finished with you yet. Accept your limitations; give the training you can. Some gifts you might never have.

In a *Thousand Reasons for Living*, Don Helder Camara summarized the difference between servanthood and servitude.

Do people let you down?
Don't carry them on your shoulders
Take them in your heart.

Homework

Discussion Questions

1. How can a Christian be "free" and dutiful" at the same time?
2. What clues can we look for in ourselves to determine whether we are acting out of servanthood or servitude in a given situation?
3. How do we obtain the freedom to "go the extra mile" - to be willing to give ourselves to others as much as we are able?
4. A primary reason Christians become entangled in the web of servitude is the fear of not pleasing God enough. Have you ever experienced this fear/ What other problems might this fear cause in a person's life? What is God's answer to this fear?
5. Have you ever found yourself in a trap of servitude in your relating with others? Which of the four "pitfalls" covered is most difficult for you to avoid? What steps might you take in your next caring experience to avoid that pitfall and respond as a "servant?"
6. How do you distinguish between a trainee's needs and his or her wants?
7. "Begrudging Care" Time: 15 minutes. Think back to the last time you undertook a task begrudgingly. You might have been manipulated into it, or you should or had to do it. Share the experience. Tell what happened, but particularly relate how you felt about the task, and how you performed it.
8. Share a time when you have been manipulated. Take two to three minutes for this.
9. Now share how this manipulation was dealt with or, if it was not dealt with, what the results of leaving the manipulation unconforted were. Take five minutes for this.