KINGDOM MINISTRY

Do you ever go through times where you lose sight of God's purpose for your life? I do. Usually, this happens to me when I get caught up in ministry concerns but lose sight of my source for service: Jesus Christ. When I do this, God reminds me, gently but firmly, that I have been called to serve him first. We serve Him by living out the message and ministry of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Serving God and others is a fundamental aspect of Christian life. We need to abandon personal ambition and focus on fulfilling God's purposes through servanthood. Serving God is the primary calling of all Christians, but it is often overshadowed by personal ambitions. We lose sight of our initial calling to the demands of life.

EMBRACING THE CALL TO SERVE

Too often, we not only forget our duty, but we also lose sight of the very call that first prompted us to be a servant of God. This is the reality for many of us. Why is that? It is because of the massive responsibilities we so often carry, we get lured away from the very things that are central to Christian service. Jesus is Lord. We are his servants. He is master. We do what he tells us to do. "Jesus is my Lord," we say. "I am the Lord's servant." The words pass easily from our lips. But I think we rarely understand what these words really mean. Too often, being a servant in the church today means getting ahead, manipulating others, and doing what we want to do. The difference between service in the Kingdom of God and worldly authority in the secular realm. Jesus began with the model of leadership the disciples were most familiar with. *"You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," he said, "and their great men exercise authority over them."* **(Mat 20:25)** The disciples certainly knew this. The Romans had installed a king over Israel, were shipping off the olive oil and figs and wine of the land, and were taxing the people to death. A group of ambitious Jewish yes men and Roman minions had sprung up around the court of these pagan tyrants. Even the reformers–the Pharisees–were after power. They wanted to gain control of the religious life of the people. The disciples certainly knew about rulers who "lord it over them." We know all about them, too. In fact, we in the twenty-first century do tyranny a lot more efficiently and ruthlessly than the Romans did.

To this model, Jesus contrasts his own. "*It shall not be so among you," he said. "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave."* **(Matthew 20:26)** Jesus goes on and ends by offering himself as the new model: *"Even as the Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* **(Matthew 20:28)**

We are to do the same; we are called to serve, even when we are feeling overwhelmed or tired. This call to servanthood is a reminder of the duty to care for others. I know there is a struggle between personal desires and the call to serve others. The call to serve is a divine mandate that cannot be ignored! We need to recognise that serving others is a fundamental aspect of Christian life and ministry.

ABANDONING PERSONAL AMBITION

We become Christians and make a clean break with all those ugly worldly authorities–the money-grabbing con men we must do business with, the ambitious politicians, the unreasonable bosses we work for, the cruel tyrants who oppress most of the people in the world. We replace all this with leadership as service. Helping other people. Being nice. Doing what the Lord wants done. Serving. Sounds Easy, doesn't it? It isn't really. Not many of us serve the way Jesus did and then commanded us to do. I don't. Most of us do jobs in church and call them "service," and adopt a worldly role and call it "servant."

THE RADICAL TRANSFORMING POWER OF THE LORD HASN'T PENETRATED. WE DON'T WANT IT TO.

There is a challenge of letting go of personal ambitions in favour of serving God's purposes. I am an A-type personality; I want to get things done, and I want them done quickly. I was living my usual busy life doing ministry. I felt like I was successful in the eyes of the world, but I was empty inside, my prayers were hitting the ceiling, and everything I was reading just felt like the same stuff just repeated differently. I felt far from God, even though I was ministering for Him, or so I thought. A friend suggested I go for spiritual direction, and it was a profound two years in my life, and it changed my walk with the Lord. I asked the Lord where He was in all this, and He simply said, "Come to

me…" I replied, "Lord, I'm an evangelical. Don't you know what an evangelical is? I'm called to evangelise. That's the highest need of the church." He said, "Get out of your office and shut off your telephone, worship me. Cry a lot." The Lord led me to the story of Martha and Mary. I'd always disliked this story. Mary was one of my least favourite people in the bible. She's a wimp. Lord, I don't like people who sit around and do nothing. I'm an activist. I've got things to do and people to see.

As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them. "Master, don't you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand." The Master said, "Martha, dear Martha, you're fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it--it's the main course, and won't be taken from her." **(Luke 10:38-42 MSG)**

I said, "Lord, I am doing all of this for you", and He said, "No, you're not. You're doing it for you. You want to be a success." That shifted my focus from success to faithfulness in ministry. True service is not about personal success but about faithfulness to God. I realised I couldn't handle my life anymore. I asked Jesus to become Lord of it. And what did that mean? It meant that he was Lord. I wasn't. That was the whole point. I asked him to be Lord of my life, because I had made a mess of the job, didn't want to do it, couldn't do it. He brought me to a place of humility and a willingness to prioritise His will over my personal desires.

SERVING GOD'S PURPOSES ABOVE ALL

The ultimate goal of Christianity is to serve God's purposes rather than seeking personal benefits. Material blessings are secondary to the call to serve. Sometimes when I stroll through a Christian bookstore or hear some preachers on TV, I wonder why everyone doesn't become a Christian. The Christianity package includes material prosperity, a better marriage, virtuous kids, better time management, a better sex life, a budget that works, a self-image that will knock your socks off, and godly grooming and skin care. These benefits really are showered on Christians often enough. Why doesn't everyone in the world line up to get theirs? Because all these benefits are beside the point. We are here to serve his purposes, not our own. Some of us are blessed materially. Some of us aren't. Some have better marriages after their conversion. Some don't. But every Christian must make Jesus the Lord of his or her life. We've been saved from eternal death, not to follow our own fancies, but to do his will and his purposes. It's hard to do this. We are called to serve God's purposes, regardless of personal circumstances or material wealth. The reality is that our fulfilment comes from serving God and others, not from seeking personal gain. It is all about Him! But we do need to understand our identity and where it should lie. When we have a good relationship with God, we begin to understand that our identity is in Him and He is the One Who gives us purpose in life.

Fortunately, the Lord has given us the ability to be faithful servants. He doesn't expect us to do this alone; He gives us the Holy Spirit to guide and empower us.

But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor, the Comforter (Helper, Advocate, Intercessor, Strengthener, Standby) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. **(John 16:7)**

Anyone here need *the Comforter (Counsellor, Helper, Advocate, Intercessor, Strengthener, Standby* to serve God's purposes above all? I know I certainly do…Jesus' life and example to us illustrate the model of servanthood and obedience to God's will. When we understand that we should do the same, that understanding leads us to a more profound commitment to serving others.

THE IMPORTANCE OF DEEDS OVER WORDS

Mother Teresa has taught me much about the whole idea of servanthood. She is a woman who has spent many years tending to the needs of the poorest of the poor in the streets of Calcutta and throughout the world. Her service was not characterised by a lot of preaching or proclamation of the gospel, but she displayed the gospel of deeds over and against the gospel of words. In her care for abandoned babies, for those who are dying, and for those who are

impoverished, she has communicated the truth that there is indeed a God of mercy and holiness in the world, who is willing to reach out and touch people. Mother Teresa was a servant in every classic sense of the scriptural term. It seems to me that one of the key lessons that Mother Teresa learned was how to be single-hearted in her ministry. Often, when approached by others who were curious about the nature of her ministry, she responded with the simple phrase–"*come and see.*" True ministry is about practical care for others. Mother Teresa exemplified the principle of serving through actions rather than just preaching. Effective ministry involves practical acts of kindness and support for those in need. The focus should be on serving others directly.

IMITATING JESUS IN SERVANTHOOD

We learn how to be servants of the master by imitating the way our master serves his Lord. Jesus did the Father's bidding on earth. The Father's will is all he did. He spent many hours in solitary prayer seeking the Father's will, and he lived a life of total dedication to his service.

"Truly, truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise." **John 5:19** *"For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me commandment — what to say and what to speak."* **John 12:49** *"For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me."* **John 6:38**

Think about that. He even led a slave's life, virtually empty of "blessings" the books say Christians should enjoy. He was estranged from his family. He was celibate and had no family of his own. He had no education, no wealth or property, no status, no home. He spent the last three years of his life as a wanderer with no place to lay his head. He died a squalid criminal's death. He lived and died this way in obedience to his Father's will.

Here is your model for your service as a servant. We are to model our lives into lives of service like Jesus did. Jesus was a model of humility and obedience. Remember is serving is beneath you, then leading is beyond you. The essence of servanthood is to prioritise the needs of others. The call to servanthood involves self-emptying and a commitment to doing God's will.

OTHER-CENTERED MINISTRY APPROACH

This is what ministry is–serving and caring for others. I will often tell someone to "minister" to someone in need. "What will I say?" he or she will often ask. "I don't have any good advice to give them." Usually, I will say something like: "Don't say anything, just take care of them. Hug them. Cry with them. Laugh with them. Get them dinner. Mow their lawn. Fix their car. That's ministry." Ministry means doing whatever is necessary to help others overcome their problems and grow in confidence and holiness. The truth is that ministry is much more than wise counsel and inspired prayer. It includes these things, but most of the most important and necessary kind of ministry is simple, practical stuff. Listening. Babysitting. Driving people around town. Ministry means taking care of people, putting them first. Ministry is the work of a servant. It's simple work, but also hard work, because it means putting yourself in the back seat, and that is never easy. Ministry should focus on caring for others rather than seeking personal recognition. Practical support is a vital aspect of effective ministry.

UTILISING TALENTS FOR GOD'S KINGDOM

If you think you are too ordinary and too humble to do anything for the kingdom, go to Matthew 25 and re-read the parable of the talents. This is the parable for the modest, apprehensive, ordinary Christian. It's for every man and woman who gets tongue-tied when eloquence is needed, who feels like running when that disturbed person comes in the door, who is convinced that he or she isn't bright enough, doesn't know the Bible well enough, and doesn't have enough time to help anybody. Remember the story? The master is going away for a while. He entrusts his property to three servants. One gets five talents; the second gets two; the third gets one. The master divides according to the servants' abilities. The more able servants do well. The most gifted servant wheels and deals, gets up early to read the Business Day, spends hours on the phone with his broker every day, gets into the best tax shelters, and manages to double his master's money. His five talents become ten, and the master is delighted.

The second servant has less money to work with and is less sharp as an investor. He probably put the money in a safe, profitable portfolio of tax-free savings, blue chip stocks, and money markets. But he doubles his money, too. The master was very pleased to get four talents back when he returned. The third servant was afraid. As soon as his master left, the poor guy rushed off and buried his one talent in the ground. Years later, when the master asked for an explanation, the little guy explained that he didn't want to take any chances. "You are a hard man," he told the master. "I didn't want to make any mistakes. Here's your one talent back, good as the day you gave it to me." "You bet I'm a hard man," the master said. "You could have at least put my money in a savings account and gotten a little interest. Your fear got the better of you, and that shows that you are an unworthy servant." If you aren't doing anything to serve the Lord because you are afraid of messing up, making mistakes, and looking like a fool, watch out. You are eventually going to have to account for your stewardship to God, and that's really something to be afraid of. Even if you have only one talent, or even half a talent, the master expects you to use it. Use it or lose it. The choice is yours.

Fear of failure should not prevent us from serving. Faithfulness in using one's gifts is essential for effective service in the kingdom. Servants are rewarded for their faithfulness, not for their cleverness or success. The kingdom of God values reliability and steadfastness over worldly measures of success. Faithfulness in service leads to greater responsibilities and opportunities in God's kingdom. Where do I start? We serve Him by living out the message and ministry of Jesus, empowered by the Holy Spirit.

STEWARDSHIP OF GOD'S MYSTERIES

Too often, our service to the kingdom is lip service. Our lips say, "Of course I want to always be under God's immediate direction and control." Meanwhile, our minds say, "But if you really want to get something done, you've got to..."

What? Organise it. Run the numbers on it. Set up a committee to plan the job. Set up another committee to do it. Hire an administrator who will shape things up. Do some professional marketing.

All this is done "in the Lord," of course, but often it's not in the Lord at all. The brutal fact is that our flesh rebels against submission to God's authority and control. It hates being off centre stage. We are infinitely resourceful in devising a host of approaches and techniques that will allow us to appear to be doing one thing while doing another. We say "Lord, Lord" with our lips, while our hearts are wandering from him.

All things are ours. Forgiveness, salvation, eternal life. We belong to Christ. Preserve that mystery. Offer it to those who are hurting. It is more creative than your best idea. It contains infinitely more wisdom than your deepest insight. It brings more healing than your most concerned care.

We must preserve and proclaim the truth. Faithful stewardship involves humility and obedience. As Christians, we are called to be stewards of the mysteries of God, preserving and sharing the gospel. True stewardship requires submission to God's authority and a commitment to His purposes. Our focus should be on proclaiming the gospel rather than seeking personal recognition or success.

Take your place as a servant. Attend to the Lord, do what he tells you, be faithful, and let his power flow through you.

Come Holy Spirit