When I was in high school we almost always did a mission trip with Habitat for Humanity in the summer. We would take a crew of about 70 people and take a house from just a foundation to having the walls up, the roof on, and sometimes even siding on in a week.

One year we went up to Port Huron, MI to work on a house there, and there was a girl in our group that desperately wanted to learn to hammer a nail. Over about two hours several people tried to teach her what to do, but she just wasn’t getting it. She was putting nails in a window sill and had probably 30 nails in the board bent all into various shapes.

Finally she got so frustrated that she just gave up. She was pretty upset that she couldn’t find anything to do to help, so she just went over and stood by the water cooler for a while. Then she saw someone who looked hot and thirsty, so she made them a cup of water and took it over to them. Then she took one to someone else. By the end of the day she was just making her rounds taking water to everyone who was doing the construction work.

We always had evening worship on our mission trips, and our youth minister always asked us where we saw Jesus that day. Almost everyone agreed that the person acting most like Jesus was the girl bringing water to everyone while they were working. She was so surprised, because she felt like she hadn’t done anything worthwhile that day. What she didn’t realize is that while everyone else was serving by building a house, she was serving by taking care of us.

Being a servant is not always easy. It means putting ourselves in a position below other people. Sometimes it means doing menial tasks that no one else wants to do. But as disciples of Jesus, being a servant is something we are expected to do. Paul often calls himself a servant of Jesus.

**Romans 1:1 ESV — 1** Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God,

**Philippians 1:1 ESV — 1** Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

**Titus 1:1 ESV — 1** Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness,

**Galatians 1:10 ESV — 10** For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

The word that Paul uses in all those Scriptures and the other New Testament writers use throughout the New Testament is the Greek word δουλος (doulos). This word is often translated servant in the New Testament, but a much closer translation is slave.

Slavery can be a pretty rough topic sometimes. Slavery can be an incredibly wicked thing. Often times we compare it to the history of slavery in our own nation which was in many ways a very different kind of slavery than they had in the first century.

Historians have estimated that somewhere between 25-33% of the population of the Greco-Roman world were slaves. Slavery in the ancient world was not based on ethnicity or race, but on things like military conquest, slavery as a punishment for crime, having a debt that could not be paid, or simply being born into a family of slaves.

The treatment of slaves by their master was completely dependent upon the goodness, or lack thereof, of their master.[[1]](#footnote-2) But most slave owners were encouraged to treat their slaves well and provide for their welfare. They were seen as living property of their owners.

Instead of being uneducated to keep them under control like slave owners did in the 1700-1800’s, slaves in the ancient world were often highly educated and trained for specialized tasks. Slaves often did hard labor, but sometimes they ran businesses, managed households, or even administrated entire provinces depending on who their masters were. Well educated slaves often served as private tutors and teachers for the children of their masters.

So slavery was a very different thing in the ancient world than we are accustomed to thinking about, but the one constant is that they were owned by another person. They had no legal standing and they were entirely under the authority and power of their master.

No one wants to be a slave. Most people don’t want to be under the authority and control of another person. We want to be our own master. We want to be in control of our own lives. We want to be the masters of our own destiny.

Pharaoh, Caesar, the Babylonian kings, and other leaders throughout history actually considered themselves to be gods and forced people to worship them. For many people in our culture today, they are their own gods. They are the thing they worship more than anything.

Just take a look at how many selfies get posted on social media every day. The word ‘selfie’ was actually the Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year in 2013. I never thought that word would make it into the dictionary, much less be the word of the year. One of my good friends said he thinks they had to call it a selfie because the word ‘narcissistie’ was too hard to spell. That’s the world we live in. People put themselves first and often give no thought to anyone else.

Paul tells us that as much as we might want to, we cannot be our own masters. At best we can choose who we will serve, whose slave, whose servant we will be.

**Romans 6:6, 16-18 ESV — 6** We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. ..**.16** Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? **17** But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, **18** and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.

Paul says that we can either be slaves to sin or we can be slaves to righteousness. We have a choice of who our master will be, but we don’t have the option to be our own master.

Being a slave meant that you had no rights, no free will. The only thing you were expected to do was to follow every instruction of your master. The master was the one who controlled the lives of his slaves. He told them where to live, what work to do, when they could eat and sleep, even whether or not they were allowed to have children. The master controlled every aspect of their lives.

We have a choice to make. We can either continue to be slaves to sin and let our sinful human nature call the shots. Or we can decide to become disciples of Jesus and make him Lord of our lives. Whether we choose sin or we choose Jesus, we are choosing who or what controls our lives from that point forward.

If we decide that we want to be our own master, that we want to be in control of our own destiny, ultimately we are deciding to remain slaves to sin. When you put it in those terms, it seems so ridiculous to choose to be a slave to sin, but we do it all the time. We resist being led, we don’t like being told what to do. When we push away from Jesus, it pushes us right back into the sin that so easily ensnares us.

Being a disciple of Jesus means choosing on a daily basis to let Jesus be our master. It means choosing to be his servant. To obey what he tells us to do and follow his lead. Paul tells us to present ourselves as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification.

It’s by allowing Jesus into our lives and following after him, by allowing him to lead us and exert his influence on us to change our hearts that we are led into the process of sanctification. That means that as we offer ourselves as servants to Jesus, he makes us more holy. As we trust Jesus to lead us and follow after him, he makes us more like him. That’s what discipleship is all about.

Ultimately Paul tells us that every knee will bow to Jesus in Philippians 2. On that day, even the most prideful and arrogant in our world will bow the knee before Jesus. Until that day, even though everyone should be serving Jesus many never will. Even some who claim to be a followers of his are not actually serving him.

**Matthew 7:21–23 ESV — 21** “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [in other words, the one who lives as a disciple and servant of Jesus] **22** On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ **23** And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

We become servants of Jesus when we make the choice to make him the Lord of our lives. Making Jesus Lord of our lives is more than just a catchy phrase for coming to church. The Greek word for Lord is the word κύριος (kyrios) and it means someone who is the owner or master, someone who has authority over another person, the ruler over them.

Letting Jesus be Lord of our lives means that we let him make the calls. We let him lead and guide us. That means when we make decisions and choices, we make sure they are in line with the will of the one who is Lord over us. It also means we go and do what we see Jesus do.

As disciples of Jesus we should first and foremost be servants of Jesus. He is ultimately the one that we serve above all else. He is the one that we follow after and obey. He is the one that we are trying to be more like as we get closer to him.

We also have to recognize that a big part of being a servant to Jesus is learning to be servants to other people as well. In Matthew 25 Jesus tells us what it will be like when he returns. The King, God, will separate people who have been faithful to him from those who were not. The key differences between the faithful and unfaithful that Jesus mentions there are the ways they served other people. Giving food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, welcoming strangers, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and those in prison. Jesus says to the faithful **Matthew 25:40 ESV — 40** ...Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

To the unfaithful he says **Matthew 25:45 ESV — 45** ...Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.

If we want to be faithful servants of Jesus, it means we have to serve other people. We have to meet their needs, help them with their struggles, we have to be there for them when they hit rock bottom. And remember, Jesus is talking about the least of these. The people who are marginalized. The people who no one else really cares to see.

We saw that happen over and over again in New York. There were homeless people everywhere on the streets. Most New Yorkers were walking around the city with their headphones in, staring at their phone, trying to get from point A to point B with as little human interaction as possible.

Those homeless people on the street were the least of these. The single mom struggling to make ends meet is the least of these. The man who got laid off and can’t find a job to support his family is the least of these. The people struggling with addiction to drugs or alcohol are the least of these. Refugees fleeing a war torn country are the least of these. As disciples of Jesus, those are the kinds of people we are called to serve. The people no one else cares to see, no one else cares to help. When we serve the least of these, we are serving Jesus.

Jesus not only calls us to serve others. He showed us what it looked like. In John 13 Jesus gave us an incredible example of what it means to be a servant. He took on the role of the lowest of servants to wash the feet of his disciples and show them what it meant to truly serve others with humility. After he had washed the feet of all twelve of his disciples he challenged them to serve each other in the same way.

**John 13:12–16 ESV — 12** When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? **13** You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. **14** If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. **15** For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. **16** Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.

Jesus lived out what it meant to truly be a servant right in front of his disciples and then told them to follow his example. He led by example and modeled the humility and the service he wanted them to emulate in their own lives.

Jesus was their leader, he was their rabbi and teacher, and he was the Son of God. Yet he humbled himself to the place of the lowest of servants so that he could serve his disciples and model what that looked like for them.

The whole point of the disciples following after Jesus, and for us to follow after Jesus as well, was for them to learn how to be more like Jesus. In verse 14 he tells them, if you have seen me, your teacher, rabbi, and Lord, your master, the one in authority over you, if you have seen me serve you like this, how much more should you be serving each other as well. We are in exactly the same position as the disciples.

If Jesus was willing to lower himself to wash his disciples’ stinky dirty feet, how much more should we be willing to do whatever needs to be done to serve others? How much more should we be willing to humble ourselves and lower ourselves in order to serve other people? Our Lord, our Master acted as a servant to others, and so should we

In Matthew 28 Jesus gave us the Great Commission.

**Matthew 28:18–20 ESV — 18** And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. [He is our Lord, our Master, the one with the authority over us, which gives him the right to give us commands] **19** Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, **20** teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Jesus told us to make disciples of all nations. How do we do that? If we think that we can fulfill the Great Commission only by funding missionaries who will go out and do it for us then we’ve missed the call of Jesus for each one of us to make disciples. It was not a call for people to support the professionals, it was a call for each individual disciple to multiply and make disciples themselves.

That means getting out of our comfort zone. I think a lot of Christians are trapped in a little bubble of Christianity. Think about the people you interact with on a regular basis. If those people are all already believers, you might be trapped in a bubble of Chrisitanity. We cannot accomplish Jesus’ mission for us if we never step outside that bubble. If we never interact with people who need Jesus we will never make more disciples for him.

The Great Commission means that we have to be willing to step outside our comfort zone, humble ourselves, and serve people who are the least of these. I think you will find that most people will not hear the gospel message unless there is a relationship already built. They need to know that we care about them as a person before they will hear about their spiritual needs. Most people will not hear their need for Jesus while they still have needs like food, shelter, healthcare, or they struggle with things like keeping the lights on, being evicted from their home, or buying diapers for their kids.

When we serve other people, meet their physical needs, and show them the love of Jesus, when people find out that we actually care about them, they will almost always be more open to hearing the message of the Gospel.

I’d like to leave you today with four characteristics we need to develop if we are going to be true servants of Jesus.

1. Being a servant requires humility.

Voluntarily placing ourselves under the lordship of Jesus means we have to have some humility. We have to place him and his will above our own. We have to place the ambitions of Jesus and his Kingdom above our own. We have make reaching people for Jesus more important than our own wants, desires, and hobbies.

Serving other people as servants of Jesus means that we also have to put other people above ourselves. It means putting other peoples’ needs above our own and letting other people be the priority instead of us. That might mean we have to give some things up, whether that’s our time, our money, or maybe some other resources. Maybe the biggest thing we have to give up is our own pride. To lower ourselves like Jesus did so that we can serve the least of these.

1. Being a humble servant means we don’t seek after recognition for serving others.

We have all seen people who do some great things, but they also have to let everyone else know about it. The only way they will do something good for someone else, they only way they will serve others, is if they get some recognition and glory for it. That’s not what it means to be a humble servant of Jesus. We have to be okay with never being recognized for any good that we do and not seek it out.

1. Being a humble servant means we don’t use our position or status as an excuse not to serve.

Jesus is the perfect example of this kind of humility. Even though he was the teacher and rabbi, even though he was the son of God himself, he still humbled himself to serve others and take on the role of the lowest of servants. If Jesus did that even though he was God, how much more should we be willing to lower ourselves to serve no matter what position we might hold.

I’ve known people with doctorate degrees who weren’t too proud to go work at a McDonald’s when they were out of work. I’ve also known people who desperately needed work who had nowhere near that kind of education or qualifications. When I suggested they look at fast food restaurants, they scoffed and said they would never work in the food industry. When I suggested a factory, they said they couldn’t stand for that long. When I suggested a grocery store they said they didn’t want to work in a retail store. Turns out they didn’t want to work very badly after all.

Some people look at serving others the same way. They might sound like they are interested in serving others, but when you tell them about a need, they have a quick excuse why that particular job won’t suit them. They don’t want to work with children, they don’t want to serve food, they would really rather serve in a ministry that’s not even offered at the church they currently go to.

Being a true servant of others means being willing to do what needs to be done, not just what you want to do. It means that no task is too menial, no job is below you. It means you don’t stop serving when the toilets need to be cleaned or the dishes need washed. You don’t stop serving because it’s not a job you particularly wanted to do.

Again, Jesus is our example of this. In Luke 5, a man came to see Jesus that Luke tells us was full of leprosy. These were people that no one else would touch, no one else would be around. Leprosy was a contagious skin disease, so the lepers were forced to live outside the city walls and they were not allowed to worship with the rest of their people in the Temple.

This man came up to Jesus and fell down before him asking Jesus to make him clean. Jesus could have spoken a word, he could have done all kinds of different things to heal this man. Instead he touched this man full of leprosy and healed him of his disease. Jesus reached out and touched a man with a horribly contagious disease, someone no one else would touch, so that he could meet his need and show him love.

My question for you this morning is this: are there certain acts of service you will not do even if you felt God calling you to do it? Is there a certain place you would not go to serve other people or a certain people group or ethnicity you would not reach out to if you felt God calling you to do so? If so, you need to check your heart, because a true servant of Jesus is willing to go and do whatever the Master asks of them to serve others.

1. Being a servant means serving even when people don’t respond the way we want them to.

I have to say out of all the prophets except maybe Hosea, I think Jeremiah had one of the hardest ministries. I say that because he went into it knowing from the start that the people he was going to would not listen to him.

**Jeremiah 7:27–28 ESV — 27** “So you shall speak all these words to them, but they will not listen to you. You shall call to them, but they will not answer you. **28** And you shall say to them, ‘This is the nation that did not obey the voice of the Lord their God, and did not accept discipline; truth has perished; it is cut off from their lips.

God sent Jeremiah to tell his prophecies to the people of Judah even though he knew from the very beginning that it would do no good. Jeremiah went into his ministry knowing that all the things he did, all the effort he put into it, all that he went through as he was persecuted by his own people for simply speaking the word of God, it was all for nothing in a sense. He knew from the very beginning that there was no hope. He knew that there would be no response to his message, but he did it anyway.

Jeremiah’s experience and his faithfulness nonetheless has been my encouragement and anchor during times in ministry that I felt like I wasn’t doing a whole lot of good. My resounding theme for a while in my prayers was, ‘Let me be faithful like Jeremiah was faithful.’

Sometimes even when we are serving other people, they will still treat us like garbage. Sometimes there is no response at all. Sometimes there is a negative response of some kind. Often times there is no thank you from the people that you serve. As disciples of Jesus and ultimately as his servants, we have to be okay with that. After all, we are ultimately serving to serve our Lord, not to get anything out of it ourselves.

Becoming true servants of Jesus is a hard thing to do, mostly because of our own selfishness and pride. But being disciples of Jesus means we serve other people because it ultimately serves the one we call Lord and Master of our lives. May we all become more willing and humble servants as we grow closer to Jesus.

1. David Arthur deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods and Ministry Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 672. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)