

Work Like a Servant

Part 3 of series "Take this job and love it"

Sermon for Sunday, September 5, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: John 13:4-17; Mark 8:35

This is part of a series of sermons I'm preaching on work. Two weeks ago, we read in the Bible that we should work as though we're doing it for God. Because of that, all our work a form of worship. Last week, we saw that our faith and our work relate to each other: problems at work help our faith to grow, and our faith means that we work with integrity.

Today, I'm going to focus on how we relate to other people in our work. There are many possible answers to this, all of them Biblical: love, kindness, gentleness, generosity, mercy, humility, and so on. But the one that I'm going to focus on is: be a servant.

John 13:4-5, 12-17, New Living Translation:
Jesus got up from the table, took off his robe, wrapped a towel around his waist, and poured water into a basin. Then he began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel he had around him...

After washing their feet, he put on his robe again and sat down and asked, "Do you understand what I was doing? You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and you are right, because it is true. And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. How true it is that a servant is not greater than the master. Nor are messengers more important than the one who sends them. You know these things — now do them! That is the path of blessing."

Back in those days, washing feet was the job of servants. Remember three things from back then: they didn't have paved roads, they didn't wear shoes, and there were lots of animals around. People wore sandals, and the dirt and mud and filth would collect on their feet as they walked around. Coming in from outdoors and having a footbath would feel wonderful. But it wasn't so wonderful for the one who had to put his or her face in it!

Of course none of this proud bunch of disciples would stoop to such a task! So Jesus did it. But when he was done he told them to do the same:

"And since I, the Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have

given you an example to follow." [verses 14-15 from above].

Jesus lived like a servant, even though he was their Lord. And he told them to follow his example. So that's what we do: we live as servants. And that includes our work.

Now there's one little glitch in how I've presented this Bible passage. Note that Jesus says, "You ought to wash *each other's* feet." He's talking about how we treat one another inside the church. He wasn't talking about how we treat people in the community, your neighbours, people around you at work. So I'm making a jump here to say, "Work like a servant." But I think it's warranted. Just look at the life of Jesus: he *lived* for other people, and not just those in his inner circle. He spent so much time with these others that he was labelled a "friend of sinners and tax collectors" [Matthew 11:19].

Why is this important? Why does Jesus tell us to be servants? Is it so that you'll get along better with people? So the boss will like you more? No! Those things might very well happen, but the reason is very simple: this is the right way to treat people. It might benefit you in the long run, but the motive is the love of others.

In one of the most amazing statements in the entire Bible, Jesus reveals one of the greatest secrets of life. It's about the key to happiness, to fulfillment, to having meaning in our lives. But the irony is you don't find these things by looking for them or working for them. Indeed, people whose lives are centred on doing things that make them happy are usually the most miserable, unsatisfied people around.

Mark 8:35, New Living Translation:
If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for my sake and for the sake of the Good News, you will find true life.

According to Jesus, if you want to be happy, stop focusing on being happy. Instead, focus on serving others. If you want to be blessed, simply be a blessing to others.

Now think what would happen if you applied that principle to your work. If you find lots to complain about in your work – too much stress, difficult people, it's boring – change your focus off of yourself and onto serving others. Have the heart of a servant: have compassion for others, pray for them, and try to bless their lives.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck (famous for his books *The Road Less Travelled* and *Whatever Happened to Sin?*) wrote, "When someone comes to me complaining of feeling bad about themselves and having no energy, I tell them

to go out and find someone who needs help, and do something for them. People who help others are rarely mentally ill people.”

How can you tell whether or not you have the heart of a servant? Easy: you don't get upset when people treat you like one.

At 3 am one winter morning a young man who was applying to become a missionary rang the doorbell at the home of the person who was to interview him. He was ushered into the study where he waited until 9 am for an interview. The examiner, an elderly missionary who had retired after many years in the field, asked him a few simple questions: “Spell ‘Farmer’” and “What is 3 + 3?” To the candidate's answers the pastor responded, “That's excellent. I believe you have passed. I'll be recommending you to the board tomorrow.”

At the board meeting, the elderly missionary began, “He has all the qualifications of a good missionary. First, I tested him on self-denial. I told him to be at my house at three o'clock in the morning. He left a warm house and bed to come out into the cold without a word of complaint. Second, he was prompt. He was there on time. Third, I examined him on patience. I made him wait six hours to see me after telling him to come at three. Fourth, I tried his temper. He didn't show the slightest sign of irritation. And fifth, I tested his humility. I asked him questions a six-year old could answer, and he showed me no indignation.

“So I believe this lad meets the requirements for missionary service. He just the sort of person we want and need for this work.”

“Work like a servant” applies to everyone, regardless what line of work you do. I was looking at some statistics about the types of work that people do. A certain percentage of the population work in agriculture, so many work in construction, so many in manufacturing, and so on. One group is called “the service industry,” which refers to restaurants, bars and the like, where workers serve customers their meals or their drinks. But the truth is that every type of work could be called the “service industry”: every type of work involves serving other people. And remember, I'm not just talking about paid employment. Students, homemakers, retired people: all of your work, too, involves serving other people.

Fred Craddock, himself a preacher, was speaking to a group of preachers about being a servant:

To give my life for Christ appears glorious,” he said. “To pour myself out for others ... to pay the

ultimate price of martyrdom—I'll do it. I'm ready, Lord, to go out in a blaze of glory.

We think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a \$1,000 bill and laying it on the table—‘Here's my life, Lord. I'm giving it all.’

But the reality for most of us is that he sends us to the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. We go through life putting out 25 cents here and 50 cents there. Listen to the neighbour kid's troubles instead of saying, ‘Get lost.’ Go to a committee meeting. Give up a cup of water to a shaky old man in a nursing home.

Usually giving our life to Christ isn't glorious. It's done in all those little acts of love, 25 cents at a time. It would be easy to go out in a flash of glory; it's harder to live the Christian life little by little over the long haul.

No one ever said it's easy to be a Christian. It's work. But the funny thing is, when we put these principles into practice in our work, it actually makes it easier. Figure that one out!

Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve: to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and not to ask for any reward save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.

- Ignatius of Loyola, 1548