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The Character of Service

by T. Austin-Sparks

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We are going to think together about the service of the Lord.

The Eternal Character of Service

The service of the Lord is twofold. It is general and it is specific, and we shall consider it on both those sides, but before we can consider the matter of service in its different forms and aspects, it is essential that we understand what service is. I think our mentality about Christian service, the work of the Lord, needs to undergo a good deal of revision and fresh consideration.

When we speak about Christian service, the work of the Lord, immediately certain kinds of activity come to mind and we think of that in terms of this or that or some other kind or form of work; we give it names, and we give those who do it different titles according to the kind of work that they are doing or propose to do. That is where we begin usually in our ideas of the work of the Lord, and we have lost sight of the fact that it does not begin there at all; it begins a long, long way back, before and behind all that kind of thing. There was service to God before ever this work was created. There will be service to God when all the dispensations of this world are past. In the ages of eternity, service will go on and both before this world and after its present order, the kind of thing that is called "Christian work" now, neither did, nor will, have existence.

The service of God is eternal, it may come into different forms of expression at different times, but the principle and nature of service never changes. It is timeless, always the same, and everything has to be fitted into the eternal conception of service, the eternal nature of service, and nothing must be something in itself.

What, then, is the eternal character of the service of God? The answer could be put in several different ways, but I will put it this way: the service of God is to bring in God's glory. Before the world was, that is what was happening in heaven. The glory of God was the occupation of all heavenly orders, when time shall be no more, that will be the eternal nature of service and there is no other service recognized in heaven but that. Everything should be governed by one motive only - how can this minister to the glory of God? "Whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor. 10:31). That is the whole range, principle and nature of the service of the Lord.

Now, that may not sound very extraordinary or new, but if you come to think about it, a very great deal of what is called Christian work is for the glory of either the people or the institution or the enterprise, and if it is not that, it is very often for the thing itself, the work itself. What I am trying to stress is this: it must be the conscious motive, the governing and dominating motive, not the success or prosperity of any work in itself. Everything has to be tested by that rule, every bit of work and everyone in the work is to be judged by this: how much does that, and how much does that one, bring in the glory of God, make room for the glory of God, minister to the glory of God?

Adjustment is needed in that. The Lord said to Abraham, "Walk before Me, and be thou perfect" (Gen. 17:1). That was a motive in Abraham's life which saved him from a very great deal of trouble; if you are walking before men you will always be worried. If you are walking before people, serving the interest of things, you will always be in artificial difficulties. Really walking before the Lord you can leave all issues and all other liabilities with Him, He will look after them. Well, that is the eternal background of the service of the Lord, and it has to be brought right to the fore in every part of that service.

Service in General

Having said that, we can look at this matter of service in general first. Service is inherent in the creation. When the Lord made Adam and placed him in the garden, He gave him a great bit of work to do for him. He did not say, 'Here is a lovely garden, take your deck-chair and sit down and enjoy it.' He said, 'Here is a garden, develop it for My glory, for My pleasure, for My satisfaction.' He made him a servant of His, right at the beginning. The very form of our bodies will tell us that we were not made to lie or crawl on the ground. We are given hands, we are given feet, and these are for doing things. It is inherent in the creation. We could trace that through the whole creation and see function, vocation, service, work, going on.

But if it is inherent in creation, how much more is it seen to be so in redemption, it is in redemption that it comes out so clearly. Take the great illustration of Israel set in the midst of history as God's illustration and object lesson. The command to Pharaoh was "Let My son go, *that he may serve Me*" (Ex. 4:23). They were to go into the wilderness to serve the Lord. The whole governing conception of their redemption, their emancipation, was to serve the Lord. And what was that service when He got them into the wilderness? The service was worship, it was all unto the Lord. It was for His satisfaction, for His pleasure, it was all unto Him. Everything else as to their vocation and their influence among the nations was a result, and was consequent upon, this attitude towards the Lord, this service of worship, that is, bringing everything to the Lord.

The motive, the very basis, of service is worship to the Lord. Whatever you do, it has to be an expression of worship to the Lord. Everything, whatever may be the form or the forms subsequent, has all got to spring out of this central basic thing. It is worship to the Lord, I do this as an act of worship to the Lord, no other idea, no other motive, governed wholly by the Lord being glorified. The service of the Lord is the glorifying of the Lord.

Now remember that Israel was intended to be a serving nation, the whole nation as His servant. Things went wrong when Aaron made the calf and the worship went away from God. From that time only one tribe, a representative tribe, the tribe of the firstborn ones, but only the one tribe of Levi was the actual serving people. But God's original thought (and even then in them representatively contained) was that the whole nation should be a servant nation serving the Lord as priests unto Him. And that is God's thought concerning all His redeemed.

This whole Old Testament tabernacle system is now transferred to a spiritual house and a spiritual ministry. All the functions remain. There is the High Priest - we know Who He is. There are the priests, there are the Levites, there are all the functions and the departments. I am not going to work that out, but they are there with the different functions distributed among all the Lord's people, so that not in this dispensation are we to regard this matter as belonging to a certain set of people called priests, a certain community who bear a certain title, but as belonging to *every* redeemed one, for God's thought in redemption is only to recover what was lost when redemption was made necessary: the universal conception of service to the Lord springing from heart worship. So that while there are the specific functions and there is specific ministry, do understand that there is not one of you, if you are a redeemed child of God, who ought not to be a priest or a Levite. As truly as those men, the Levites of old, served in tabernacle service and had their function, that ought to be so with you individually.

In the whole realm of the redeemed there is no place for an idler or a passenger or for anyone who is not making a contribution definitely and positively and personally to the glory of God in some way. It must be, if we are not to miss the very purpose of creation and the very purpose of redemption. If that was true of the old material creation, surely it should be more true of the new creation in Christ; service, that is the primary object.

Service a Test

Of course, this is a test as well as a statement of fact. Anyone who has really been brought into new life should quite naturally feel this impulse to service. I do not mean the impulse to be a missionary or a Bible teacher, but the impulse to serve, to glorify God, to be here for God's pleasure and satisfaction, to be themselves both an offering and a priest satisfying God. "I beseech you therefore," says Paul "to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service (or spiritual worship)" (Rom. 12:1). Let us receive that challenge, but it just may be that you are too much of a passenger, too much being carried by the rest; you are too much leaving it to others, too much considering yourself as not counting in this thing - but you do, if you are redeemed. With God you count, and if you are not actually counting, it is simply a disappointment to the Lord, a failure of the very purpose of your redemption. We should all in some way and in some degree be in the position where we are bringing the glory of God in.

Underlying Principles of Specific Service

This word is for everyone, but in the nature of this occasion I have to speak to those who have the sense of more definite calling to the Lord's service, that is, to specific service or to spiritual responsibility and leadership. What we mean by specific service may come under such things as preaching the gospel, ministering the Word and so on.

Now, here again there are certain underlying principles to that service. The principles of Divine service, we have said, are always the same. The persons and the form of the service may change from time to time, the instruments may vary, but the principles never vary, they are eternally the

same. All service rests upon something that is timeless. Let us look at some of these principles, and they are brought out very distinctly for us in outstanding instances of the servants of the Lord. And here is something to remember; we make a lot of certain outstanding men in the Bible.

We make a lot of Abraham, of Moses, we make a lot of these men, and rightly so, we honour them. But is it not impressive that as men themselves God did not make a lot of them? God never made a lot of them as men. God never looked after them as men. I mean, they were never favourites with God as men. You cannot find God excusing them because they held such a prominent position, because they were such outstanding servants of His. God dealt with them as He would deal with any man no matter who they are. And so great a man as Moses was, when he violated Divine principle, the land was shut on him. He might plead and beg of God that he might go into the land and God said, 'Do not ask Me any more about it, I am not being moved.' God will not change His mind even for a Moses as a man and yet God did tremendous things for Moses and for these men.

We make a great deal of these men and from a certain standpoint, rightly so, and give them all honour, but we must remember that they are not brought on to other principles than the common principles of service, the principles which are true of everybody, the smallest as well as the greatest. And so we come to look at Moses and at others and see these principles, which are principles, mark you, and they do not obtain simply because it is a great servant of God; they obtained simply because they are principles of all servants. With Moses called the servant of the Lord, called by God "My servant" (Joshua 1:2), we can see God's ways in principle with a chosen vessel.

(a) A Sense of Vocation

Well, the beginning of this was clearly and evidently in some deep-seated sense of vocation. Where it started we do not know, but it manifested itself, it asserted itself, it came to take possession of the man in such a way that he felt sooner or later he would have to act upon it, he would have to move with regard to it. It came out of he knew not where, but it was there. Probably there was a time when it was only just a sensing, 'I do not know what it is but I have a sense in me somewhere, somehow, my life has got to move in some direction that is not the ordinary direction; I am not just going to be lost in the crowd.' Moses had a sense of vocation, and it grew. It grew in Moses, it unsettled him for this world, it evidently affected his attitudes, and then we know it broke out that day in Egypt when he went out and saw his brethren in affliction. A sense of vocation broke out. I stop there, that is where it begins. It has been the sense of destiny. Special service begins with that sense. It may come very early in life even before you are saved. It may come at some later time, but come it must. If you would take note of that it would be a very instructive thing and would save a lot.

Do not ever enter upon any specific service because an appeal is made to you to do it. However strong the appeal and the presentation of need, you have to stand up to something if you move in that direction which will come back to this very point: 'Did I, in my deepest being, know that I was called of God and that was my destiny?' If not, your life will be full of questions when you are really up against the evil forces. You will have to come to the place where those servants of God came, where you would get out of it if you possibly could. But somehow or other that something inside, that sense of destiny, of vocation, that sense that it is not of your choosing at all, but of God acting in you, and you know you could not do otherwise.

I know how easily I could get into trouble in saying anything like that in view of the way in which workers are obtained and service is secured, but I know the other side. I have recently been told by a foremost leader in charge of a worldwide missionary organization that fifty per cent of missionaries that come back never return to the field after their first furlough. There is no sense or vocation in

that, is there? Did they go because of an appeal, or an urge, or a presentation? It is not good enough. Well, Moses betrayed that there was something at work deep down in him, and that is the call, that is the choice, that is the inward apprehending.

(b) The Fulfilment of Vocation Must Be of God

But even so, look at the terrible set-back which he suffered as he went forward to put into expression and realization that sense of vocation. What a set-back, a set-back that day which so soon after resulted in his having to quit Egypt and quit the scene of service, quit the situation of need, and go away to the other side of the desert to spend years there. So far as he was concerned, what a steadily decreasing opportunity! A terrible set-back it seems, but a set-back absolutely essential in order to get a true state and position to fulfil his vocation. Strange ways of God, but it was necessary, the position that he had got to come to, and here is the principle, you can trace it in every true servant of God: he had got to come to the position where this fulfilment of vocation must be of God. It must be God or it cannot be at all. Sooner or later true servants of the Lord come there, however they start. It is as well to start there. It has to be all of God or leave it alone. He essayed to do it himself, he essayed to fulfil, express, a true Divine instinct. To realize a true Divine inward working and purpose, he took up something of God into his own hands to work it out. Disaster followed. It came quickly with Moses, sometimes it takes years with us, but it will come if we are right in line with what God wants.

What does God want? He wants all the glory. The principle is at work from eternity. Service is not to do something for God like that, even to bring a captive people out of Egypt. It is not a thing. These people have got to come out for the glory of God; the glory of God has to mark every stage of it. Every other glory has to be wholly exhausted, the glory of Egypt, the glory of the magicians, the glory of Moses. Every bit of any other glory has to be worked out to nothing and God's glory has to remain alone. Therefore the instrument must of necessity come to the place where it must be all of God or it cannot be at all. Was Moses there at the end of those forty years? "Send, I pray thee, by the hand of him whom Thou wilt send" (Ex. 4:13). 'I am not fit for this. I am not in this'. He had learned the lesson.

You see, God will run risks for His principle. He will run risks of being misunderstood, even by His servants; how often we His servants have felt offended with the Lord. We have had His service in view, we have been so devoted to His service and we have been so earnest about it. The Lord does not take us on that ground at all. He does not come out and pat us on the back and say, 'You are a fine servant.' He seems to be undoing us, breaking us up all the time. We want to get at it and the Lord says, 'No, you are not ready yet.' He does not say it in words, but in acts much more forcibly. He will risk being misunderstood. Moses understood the Lord later on perfectly well and was quite satisfied.

The Lord will take risks with what we call loss of time. 'Oh, so much time is being lost, I am having to wait so long, my life is going.' That is the trouble. Remember Phillip Brooks pacing up and down his room, his wife coming in and saying 'My dear, what is the matter?' And his answer was, 'I am in a hurry and the Lord is not!' Moses was in a hurry, and the Lord took risks in what we call loss of time. There is no time lost if God gets glory, however He gets it, and God can get more intrinsic glory in a short time than He might get in many years of our self-strength working for Him. He takes infinite pains with those who are really in the way of Divine vocation.

(c) The Necessity of Meekness

But Moses had to come to a state; that is, there had to be produced in him in a very large measure the supreme virtue, the virtue of all virtues, meekness. "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth" (Num. 12:3). Meekness is the ground upon which God can step right in and can commit Himself. You remember that it was when others were challenging his rights, disputing his position and authority, when it says, "Now the man Moses was very meek, above all the men that were upon the face of the earth", which meant that he did not assert his authority, he did not stand up for his rights. He went back to the Lord, and said, 'Lord, you know I am nobody, I have no interests to serve, I have no ambitions to realize, I am not here for myself, You have dealt with all that thoroughly, Lord; You must meet this situation, I cannot.' And did the Lord meet it? The Lord committed Himself. Meekness is the supreme virtue. "Behold, My servant... he will not cry, nor lift up his voice" (Isa. 42:1-2). "A meek and quiet spirit, which is in the sight of God of great price" (1 Pet. 3:4). It is the very secret of service because it so wholly gives God the opportunity to get all the glory.

(d) Natural Ability or Disability not the Criterion

There is one other thing about Moses, which is very comforting, a thing that comforted my own heart through many years and does so more and more. Moses did come, under the discipline of the Lord, to the place where he said, "I am not eloquent... I am slow of speech" (Ex. 4:10). He might have said, 'I have no natural gifts or qualifications for this thing for which You are calling me. You have chosen the wrong man, Lord, You have made a mistake this time. Really, if You want that kind of thing done, You need a man with qualities that I have not got; here You are telling me to go and speak to Pharaoh.' "Who hath made man's mouth?" (Ex. 4:11). The one who made it can re-make it, the One Who made you that way knows why He made you that way and then called you to do a thing for which you are not naturally qualified at all.

The Lord mercifully save us from getting into anything for which we are not qualified, if He does not put us into it. A lot do that. They are where they ought not to be and therefore their natural disabilities are showing themselves constantly to hurt. But, you see, that is not the criterion with God. The anointing of the Holy Spirit may make up many lacks, may overcome and transcend many faults, many flaws, many things that are against us naturally. If the Spirit of God really does take hold, He sees to it that on the one hand, if there are natural abilities they are undercut so that no one depends upon them; no true servant of His depends upon them. If the Spirit of God gets hold of someone, He is going to work on this principle: Be they gifted or not, the glory is going to come to God. You see the principle working all the time.

The Lord may be more greatly glorified in taking up things that are not, that no flesh should glory before Him (1 Cor.1:27-29). It is a great comfort to us. He made you as you are. 'I know how I made you; why did I call you? You think you are so naturally unfit to respond to My call; why have I called you? That I might get all the glory Myself.'

(e) A Heart Burden

May I pass to another servant of the Lord, covering both general and specific. I pass to that man Gideon. Gideon called himself the least in his father's house (Judges 6:15). God took the least of his father's house and did a great thing by Gideon. There are some things here which should be very helpful, for the principle of leadership does come out so clearly in the case of Gideon. You do not find there those things which men regard to be necessary to leadership. When we think of leadership now, we always see certain requirements.

We say that you can come to as many classes as you like and you may work on with Bible study most diligently and it will not make you a spiritual leader. Gideon had none of the things that the world would say were necessary for leadership, but he had the essential - he had a burden on his heart. His estimate of himself was very small indeed. "I am the least in my father's house". He could not understand the address of the angel to him at all, but he had this one thing which God always looks for at the beginning from our side.

There are two sides to Divine calling. There is God's side which is sovereign. He chooses whom He will, He calls whom He will. He acts sovereignly. He gives no reasons at all why He takes this one and that one. He acts sovereignly. And yet there is always the other side to the sovereignty. God takes account of something in the person, looks to find that something in the person concerned, and He found in the beginning with Gideon this heart burden about the situation which existed. We use the word 'exercise' and there was no doubt that Gideon was exercised about the situation in which the Lord's people were. It was a heart matter, and God took notice of that inner concern of Gideon.

The angel of the Lord came and stood under the tree in the shadow and watched Gideon. The Lord is always standing in the shadows watching us when we do not know. God's eye was upon him, so to speak, in the secret. God took account of this man when this man did not know that God was taking account of him, when this man did not think that anybody's eye was on him at all. That is the test. It is so easy when we know that all eyes are on us to stand up and do something, to know that something is being expected of us, but the real test is elsewhere. It is what God sees in secret as to our hearts and our heart relationship to and concern for the spiritual situation.

What was Gideon doing? Well, a little imagination will lead you to see Gideon going outside his door and seeing what was happening: the enemy stealing the people's food and carrying off the very life of the people of God. Gideon had discernment as to the activities of the enemy, and he said, 'This must not be, something must be done about this, and I am going to do something about it.' And so he was threshing wheat to hide it from the enemy. It was secret exercise in discernment of the activity of the enemy in a private way.

Now, here I have to be very careful, but there is such a thing as unofficial action. I am not speaking about independent action, people taking on things without regard for the corporate life. Gideon was not dressed up in a certain way and given a badge and told, 'Now you are a missionary and this is your job.' Unofficially, out of a heart burden, he became exercised to do something and to do what he could.

Some of you would do things if it was asked of you. Some of you may be waiting for that. Your voice is not heard in the prayer time, you are not doing anything. You are among the passengers and you have been for years, perhaps because you have not been appointed to something. It will not do. God is waiting for you to have personal, secret exercise about the situation and to show that concern, and without self-assertiveness, without taking hold in possessiveness, but in a spiritual earnest way to come in and make, as we say, your weight felt in the Lord. Oh, do not sit back and wait till you are recognized. I am certainly against any kind of pushing forward of self but that it might be recognized that this one and that has the burden of this on their heart and it is coming out. They are not waiting to be appointed and designated and called this, that and the other, but they are doing the thing, they are in it unofficially. It ought to have been the oldest brother that was doing this, but he was the least in his father's house. Unofficially he was so burdened about this situation and what the enemy was doing that he himself had to do something under spiritual constraint. Do not think always of the work of the Lord in official terms. It is always spiritual. Paul said, "whom I serve in my spirit" (Rom. 1:9). So Gideon said, 'We must nullify this work of the enemy somehow' and he went to it.

Here is a man who embodies the principle of human weakness. His whole mighty work embodied that principle, himself personally and then the three hundred, the thousands reduced to the three hundred. This is all going to give great ground for the glory of God; no self-interest, just God's glory.

(f) The Servant as an Example

Then note this, for I think this is one of the great things to be observed in serving the Lord. When Gideon had got the three hundred, when he had allowed the Lord to carry out that great work of reduction in order to get effectiveness, he said to them "Look on me, and do likewise" (Judges 7:17). That is a risky thing to say, and yet the Lord would bring us to the place where we are the example. We can truly say, 'Follow me as I follow Christ', where people can see in us the very nature of service and get inspiration from us. "He sent a man before them". The Lord would have His thoughts represented in men so that His thoughts are seen in this one and in that one. 'Look on me and do likewise.' The Lord would so work in us and so deal with us that we can be true leaders, that it is possible to say, 'Now look on me and do likewise!' Jehu said, "Come with me, and see my zeal for the Lord" (2 Kings 10:16). Well, whatever you may say about Jehu, you saw his zeal for the Lord. It is to be able to see in us the thing that we are talking about. It is not that we are just preaching at people or to people, but we *are* the thing, and they see that really in us.

(g) The Costliness of Leadership

If I add one word, it is this. Leadership is very costly and perhaps the most costly element in spiritual leadership is loneliness. Leadership means that you are ahead and you meet the first, fierce brunt of the battle; you go through things before anybody else does. You have gone through it and they are only going through because you have gone through and have been the spearhead for others, and that is very lonely.

The Lord does not allow leaders to have supports and very often He never allows them to have anyone at all upon whom they can lean. You may long for a man who has gone this way before, and you can go and consult him and get it all second-hand, but if you are going to be a leader, the Lord will not allow you to do that. He will make you learn it all for yourself, to know the Lord for yourself and not another for you. It is the law of leadership. It is a lonely way. It will be as though you and the Lord were the only persons in the universe in some situations, as though there was no one else at all.

I have often referred to it, and that will show what an impression it made upon me, something that I saw many years ago during the South African war, and that is a long time ago! I went up to Buckingham Gate one day as a lad, and I walked in the open door of the great hall of the headquarters of the London Scottish in the days of the volunteers when everybody who went out to war went voluntarily. As I walked into the great drill hall, what did I see? I saw one man, fully equipped in his war kit, being regimented up and down that hall by an officer, put through it. One man, one volunteer, going out to Africa, and he was being put through it. Up and down he went. Those commands rang out like shots from a gun. He was being perfected, alone in the loneliness of that great hall. That man was being perfected for the battle as though he were the only man going to war. All the need of an army was concentrated upon a man. He had to come up to the full standard of an army. They were not taking the attitude, "This is only one man, it does not matter very much, we will get him through somehow." No, the standard was the highest for one man. He was going through it. It left an impression upon me so strongly because of the atmosphere, the great hollow hall and the echo of the commands and this man marching up and down, the ring of his boots, going through it.

I have often thought since, that sometimes it seems like that. The Lord deals with us as though we were only one; He has us to Himself and is putting us through it. It is a lonely business. No one else seems to be able to help us. The Lord shuts us up to Himself. It is the cost of leadership. Remember that the Lord is getting you alone because he is going to pioneer the way for others by means of you.