

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Serve One Another

by Dan Trygg

“For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but, by means of the *agapē*-love, serve-as-slaves one another. ¹⁴ For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word, in the statement, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” Galatians 5:13,14

“We do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your slaves because of Jesus.” II Corinthians 4:5

“You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. ¹⁴ If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. ¹⁵ For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. ¹⁶ Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. ¹⁷ If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them.” John 13:13-17

Today's “one-another” verb is a challenging one. The word-pictures associated with this kind of service have so many negative connotations in our culture that many people have difficulty taking an honest, clear minded look at what is being said. We have softened and retranslated the actual wording of the original Greek to make it more palatable to our modern ears, but by doing so we miss the radically challenging aspect of what is really being said. It is not unlike what has happened to the meaning of “the cross” over 21 centuries of religious history. For many people a cross is nothing more than a religious symbol. In the first century, it represented one of the most brutal, shameful, horrific deaths imaginable. When Jesus said, “Take up your cross daily and follow Me”, that was a mind-numbing, heart-stopping statement. It would be like saying, “Take up your electric chair and follow Me.” What does *that* mean? It means absolute self-denial, death to self, in order to follow Christ with no distraction or restriction. The word picture Paul uses here is like that, because the word for “serve” in this passage is the Greek word *douleuō*, which means, “serve as a slave”. The actual raw translation of what Paul wrote here is “serve one another as slaves”.

As I said, this stirs up all kinds of emotional mud and intellectual rationalizations, because of the history of slavery in our culture. Most of us think of the kidnapping and enslavement of people from Africa in the pre-civil war era, and many of the acts of abuse, hatred and prejudice that have followed in the nearly 150 years since that war ended, and the institution of slavery was officially abolished in our country. We have difficulty seeing slavery apart from the issue of race. In fact, however, the very notion of “race” is a relatively recent phenomenon. The term developed as a way of classifying people, like the word “type” or “kind”. It was relatively unknown until the 1700's when colonial Americans began to use it as a way to support and justify laws that would limit slavery to Africans and their descendants. Before that time, the English had enslaved the Irish since the 13th century, and put them to work on plantations, not unlike those in the American south. Some Englishmen had even proposed enslaving the poor, both in the colonies and at home, as a solution for poverty, but also to profit from their labor. Most of the slaves on English plantations in the Caribbean were Irish or captured Indians forced into servitude. To forestall Irish slave rebellions, and to block the hopes and claims of low-class former white slaves and freedmen to become landowners, and because there still remained a very high need for hand laborers, wealthy land-owners turned their focus to securing black men and women from Africa. They passed laws legitimizing this practice, and defining who was of this “race”. African slaves were better workers and were more easily identifiable. By developing propaganda to define, objectify and dehumanize them, slave owners were able to rationalize and justify cruel and inhumane treatment. Other, low class whites were able to differentiate themselves from these “others” who were even lower on the totem pole than they. Prejudice, disdain and hatred were fomented and reinforced in this environment, and American “racism” was born. It is important to see, however, that slavery has been a much bigger, more ancient phenomenon than race. It has been in existence since very early history. People voluntarily sold themselves to others as a last-ditch effort to preserve their lives in economically difficult times (e.g., Gen. 47:13-26; Lev. 25:35-55), or to settle a debt (e.g., II Kg. 4:1; Neh. 5:1-5). People defeated in war were often forced into slavery (Josh. 9; I Sam. 4:9; II Chr. 28:8-10), and people were also kidnapped and sold into slavery (Gen. 37:17-28; Ex. 21:16; Deut. 24:7). At the time of Paul's writing, over 60% of the population of the Roman empire consisted of slaves! It was such a widespread phenomenon that, though there were very clear distinctions in class and in rights, being a slave was not considered a shameful thing, just a fact of life.

The main thing about being a slave is that you had no rights. You were “owned” by your master, and you were obligated to obey and serve him. **A slave was to be totally devoted to his master, and at his beck and call 24 hours a day.** This was not an eight hour a day job; it was being on call, ready to serve, whenever the master called upon you. **Your service was expected to be wholehearted and without complaint.**

Another aspect of slavery was that slaves were usually given the most undesirable, lowly tasks to do.

They provided the hands-on labor for a very labor-intensive time in human history. There was a definite class system in place, and certain jobs were considered as “lowly, menial or very low-class”. Anyone from the upper class would absolutely refuse to do such tasks, except under extreme duress. This was part of the backdrop of the foot washing in John 13. Washing the feet of a guest was a common courtesy in Palestine at that time. To actually wash someone’s feet, however, was considered one of the most menial of tasks. It was a job relegated to one of the lowliest of servants. When Jesus sent the disciples to prepare for the meal (Lk. 22:7-13), they should have made arrangements for a servant to be there to make the guests comfortable. The fact that no one had been assigned to this task, and no servant was available to them for this purpose was an oversight on their part. When they had all come, and were beginning to recline at the table, this break in decorum would have been apparent to all, yet no one was willing to do this lowliest of tasks for the comfort of his brother disciples, ...or even for the Master Himself! The twelve disciples were all *free* men, not *slaves*. It was beneath their position in society to do the task of a slave! They would rather that everyone lay there with sticky, dusty, unwashed feet than to be the one who would lower himself to do this task, ...or even take responsibility for the oversight and go *find* someone to do this job. They weren’t motivated by love for the others; they were motivated by self-pride. At that point, John paints a very clear contrast in Jesus’ view of power and authority in the Kingdom of God. “During supper, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, to betray Him,³ Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God,⁴ got up from supper, and laid aside His garments; and taking a towel, He girded Himself.⁵ Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded” (John 13:2-5). The disciples were shocked! Their Master, the Messiah, the King of Israel and even God in the flesh, stripped Himself of His normal clothing, wrapped Himself with a towel, and began to wash their feet! (You will notice that Jesus did this “during supper”. He waited to give every possible opportunity for someone else to step in to serve, but there were no takers.) Peter couldn’t even process it! “Master, do *You* wash *my* feet?” Then, in his eagerness to protect Jesus’ respectability and to honor Him, he quickly recovered and said, “*Never* shall You wash my feet!” Jesus’ response was that if he did not permit Him to wash his feet, Peter would have no part or portion with Him. What does this mean? Jesus was attempting to teach a principle to His disciples. For Peter to refuse to cooperate out of mock humility (If he had truly been humble, *he* would have washed their feet!) or misguided pride, or even out of loyalty of an *image* of Jesus that was different than the real Jesus, was putting Peter’s opinion of how things *should be* above his Master’s rightful place of being the Teacher. Peter’s resistance was *against Jesus*! He thought He was protecting Jesus, but He was *opposing* Him! Therefore, Jesus stood His ground. “If I do not wash you, ...if you will not yield to Me or My ways..., you will have no part with Me.” After He finished washing their feet, Jesus asked, “Do you know what I have done? You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for indeed I am. If I then the Lord and Teacher serve you as one of the lowliest of slaves would (by washing your feet), then you also ought to serve one another as a slave would. For I gave you an example that you should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his Master, nor is the one sent greater than the one who sent Him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them.” Luke adds, “And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called “Benefactors.”’²⁶ But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must *become like* the youngest, and the leader *become like* the servant.²⁷ For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one serving’”. **Jesus’ way is very different than the world’s way. Jesus took the form of a slave (Phil. 2:7). Those who follow Him must be willing to serve in lowly, hands-on ways, ...ways that other people may disdain or consider as “beneath them”.**

When Paul wrote that we were to “serve-as-slaves to one another”, it was *this* backdrop that would have come to mind. **The apostles identified themselves, their co-workers, indeed all Christians as “slaves of Christ”** (Rom. 1:1; I Cor. 7:22; Gal. 1:10; Phil. 1:1; Col. 4:12; II Tim. 2:24; Tit. 1:1; cf. Jas. 1:1; I Pet. 2:16; II Pet 1:1; Jude 1:1; Rev. 1:1; 7:3; 10:7; 11:18; 19:2,5; 22:3,6). Because we have been bought with the price of Christ’s blood, we are not to attach ourselves as slaves to people, although **because of Christ, we are called to be slaves to one another in Jesus** (I Cor. 7:23; II Cor. 4:5). **Being slaves means we have no rights, but we are to be willing to serve God without complaint in any and everything He may call us to do.** In fact, the more we grow into maturity in Christ, the more willing we will be to serve as a slave. **God has assigned us to serve one another as slaves.** Again, this means putting aside rights, class, or privilege and being willing to attend to whatever tasks may be necessary in order to minister to one another’s needs. **We are to serve-as-slaves through the power of agapē-love.** This is so important. Our calling as slaves of Christ or one another is not to be a compulsory, legalistic obligation. It is to be birthed out of the leading of the Holy Spirit, who energizes us by His indwelling power to serve out of that unselfish, sacrificial, joy-filled agapē He produces.