

Servanthood

by Michael Rudolph

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I want to speak to you about a subject that is easy to comprehend, but that many find difficult to achieve. The subject is "servanthood." The world is familiar with servants of all kinds. If we are wealthy enough, we might employ domestic servants to clean our house, go to market, cook our food, wash our clothes, answer our front door, and drive our automobile. If we own land and livestock, we may employ servants to plant and harvest our crops or care for our animals. If we are the owner of a business, we may have employees –willing servants that are paid to do what is asked of them.

In common understanding, being a servant is not thought of as a desirable occupation. Ask a boy or girl: "What do you want to be when you grow up?" He or she is not likely to say: "I want to be a servant." Why not? Because being a servant normally connotes a lack of personal freedom, and the doing of hard physical work at the sacrifice one's own pleasures in order to benefit another. Not an attractive prospect, and even less attractive if we are not being paid, and our having to give service to another is forced upon us. That state of affairs, we call "slavery."

The Bible acknowledges the difficulty and unattractiveness of being an unwilling servant or slave, but has a different take on performing service when it is given voluntarily, and is for a holy purpose. When that is the case, we call it "servanthood" – a concept that is very different in it being considered a high and revered calling. We see this clearly in the astonishing words of Yeshua; in Matthew 23:11-12 we read:

"The greatest among you must be your servant, for whoever promotes himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be promoted." (CJB).

And in Matthew 20:26b-27:

".. whoever among you wants to be a leader must become your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave!" (CJB) (See also, Mark 10:43b-44).

I know I am speaking mainly to believers here, but even to believers these words are sometimes a hard pill to swallow because none of us is yet perfected, and devoting our lives to serving others is quite the opposite of what the world and our natural flesh draws us to. It is much easier to think (and many of us have been taught) that selfless servanthood is for the very few whom we call "martyrs" – men and women of exceptional spiritual strength that we read about in the Bible, and that give us a glimpse into what the Kingdom of God will be like in the afterlife. But as for the here and now, we think, God cannot possibly expect such exemplary behavior from us.

We gravitate to this view because it puts off to the future what we do not want to face in the present, and it carries with it the theology that the Kingdom of God is for us in our afterlife, but that it is not manifest in the world today. It is an easy theology to believe, but it is a false one because God's Kingdom is wherever God is, and God dwells on earth today (via the Holy Spirit),

as He has dwelt on earth at one time or another, and in one form or another, since the creation. God walked with Adam in the Garden; His *Shechinah* dwelt in the Tabernacle and the Temple; and because of the New Covenant, the Holy Spirit dwells within those of us who believe, and receive Him today. Consider the words of the "Lord's Prayer" in Matthew 6:10:

"May your Kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven." (CJB).

Yeshua introduced the expectancy that God's Kingdom would be coming to earth, and that His will would be done here on earth. Yeshua prayed this when He lived here, but He was referring to the time when He would leave the earth and would send back the Holy Spirit in His place. According to Scripture, that occurred at the *Shavuot* that we call "Pentecost." Anyway, all of this has been to say, that the lofty goal of our embracing servanthood is not for some future time in heaven, but is His expectation of us today.

Now I want to point out something that I find quite amazing. The whole of our fallen world believes in servanthood, but servanthood of the kind that says: "It is right and natural that you should serve me." The appeal of using others for our own self-interest is as old as the Garden itself when Eve tempted Adam to join her in eating of the forbidden tree. It fuels dictators and despots, and even trickles down to families in which husbands and wives vie for power and control over the other. And in the Bible and in other accounts of history, it seems to be the way of all humanity and all of humanity's gods, with only one exception – the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and those people who take up God's challenge to repent, and to aspire to be like Him. We read in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

".. if my people, who bear my name, will humble themselves, pray, seek my face and turn from their evil ways, I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and heal their land." (CJB).

Do you realize the enormous implication of this? To my way of thinking, it is absolute proof of the existence of God and of the truth of the Scriptures because, considering what we know of the natural inclinations of men, who could possibly have invented a god to write about, that is so good, so pure, so giving, so compassionate, so sacrificing and so serving of his created beings? All the other gods we read about demand service for themselves, and give little in return.

Yes, our God is a God who serves more than He receives. We are familiar with 1 John 4:19 that says:

"We love because He first loved us." (NAS).

Well, there is a corollary to it that could very well say:

"We serve because He first served us." (not Scripture).

God has been our example of giving service to others since the very beginning. Consider these examples:

1. God was Adam's gardener:

Genesis 2:8: "ADONAI, God, planted a garden toward the east, in 'Eden, and there He put the person whom He had formed." (CJB).

2. God served as Adam's grocer:

Genesis 2:16-17: "ADONAI, God, gave the person this order: "You may freely eat from every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." (CJB).

3. God was Adam's matchmaker:

Genesis 2:18: "ADONAI, God, said, "It isn't good that the person should be alone. I will make for him a companion suitable for helping him." (CJB).

4. After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, instead of destroying them, God served as their clothier and tailor:

Genesis 3:21: "ADONAI, God, made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them." (CJB).

5. Many years later, God served Noah as a ship designer, by giving him detailed instructions on how to build a special kind of boat:

Genesis 6:14-16: "Make yourself an ark of *gopher*-wood; you are to make the ark with rooms and cover it with pitch both outside and inside. Here is how you are to build it: the length of the ark is to be 450 feet, its width seventy-five feet and its height forty-five feet. You are to make an opening for daylight in the ark eighteen inches below its roof. Put a door in its side; and build it with lower, second and third decks." (CJB).

6. When Abraham's wife Sarah was too old to bear children, God served as her fertility doctor:

Genesis 18:11-14: "Avraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years; Sarah was past the age of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself, thinking, "I am old, and so is my lord; am I to have pleasure again?" ADONAI said to Avraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and ask, 'Am I really going to bear a child when I am so old?' Is anything too hard for ADONAI? At the time set for it, at this season next year, I will return to you; and Sarah will have a son." (CJB).

7. When God brought Israel out of Egypt, He served as Israel's guide in the wilderness:

Exodus 13:17-18: "After Pharaoh had let the people go, God did not guide them to the highway that goes through the land of the P'lishtim, because it was close by – God thought that the people, upon seeing war, might change their minds and return to Egypt. Rather, God led the people by a roundabout route, through the desert by the Sea of Suf." (CJB).

8. When the Israelites ran out of food in the desert, God served as their baker:

Exodus 16:4: "ADONAI said to Moshe, "Here, I will cause bread to rain down from heaven for you." (CJB).

9. When the Israelites reached Mount Sinai, God served as their community organizer and their legislator of covenant law:

Exodus 19:3-6a: "Moshe went up to God, and ADONAI called to him from the mountain: "Here is what you are to say to the household of Ya'akov, to tell the people of Isra'el: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you will pay careful attention to what I say and keep my covenant, then you will be my own treasure from among all the peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you will be a kingdom of *cohanim* for me, a nation set apart.'" (CJB).

I could give many more examples of how God served the Israelites during the Mosaic period, but let's move forward in time to see how God continues to serve us in the New Covenant. To begin with, Isaiah prophetically described a coming Messiah – God in human form – who would be our servant, and who would suffer in our behalf:

Isaiah 53:4-7: "In fact, it was our diseases He bore, our pains from which He suffered; yet we regarded him as punished, stricken and afflicted by God. But He was wounded because of our crimes, crushed because of our sins; the disciplining that makes us whole fell on him, and by his bruises we are healed. We all, like sheep, went astray; we turned, each one, to his own way; yet ADONAI laid on him the guilt of all of us. Though mistreated, He was submissive – He did not open his mouth. Like a lamb led to be slaughtered, like a sheep silent before its shearers, He did not open his mouth." (CJB).

And these are words of Yeshua Himself, recorded by his disciples, that exemplify the servanthood that He came to exemplify and teach us:

Matthew 20:28: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve – and to give his life as a ransom for many." (CJB). (also, Mark 10:45).

Luke 22:27: "For who *is* greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? *Is* it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves." (NKJ).

John 13:3-5: "Yeshua was aware that the Father had put everything in his power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God. So He rose from the table, removed his outer garments and wrapped a towel around his waist. Then He poured some water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the *talmidim* and wipe them off with the towel wrapped around him." (CJB).

And here is what the Apostle Paul says about Yeshua's servanthood:

Philippians 2:6-8: "Though He was in the form of God, He did not regard equality with God something to be possessed by force. On the contrary, He emptied himself, in that He took the form of a slave by becoming like human beings are. And when He appeared as a human being, He humbled himself still more by becoming obedient even to death- death on a stake as a criminal!" (CJB).

Do you find all of this as awesome as I do? Our omnipotent God serving the likes of us through the ages, and then sending His son Yeshua to earth to be the servant of us all – to exemplify godly servanthood, and finally to sacrifice His life in a most painful way, so that we could live? Does it not deserve a significant response from us? The response that God has always wanted from us is recorded in Deuteronomy 10:12:

"So now, Isra'el, all that *ADONAI* your God asks from you is to fear *ADONAI* your God, follow all his ways, love him and serve *ADONAI* your God with all your heart and all your being;" (CJB).

So, loving and serving God, and loving and serving our brother human beings are what God wants as our response. Quoting the Hebrew Scriptures, Yeshua commanded:

Matthew 22:37b-39: "You are to love *ADONAI* your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.' This is the greatest and most important *mitzvah*. And a second is similar to it, 'You are to love your neighbor as yourself.'" (CJB).

Here are some other Scriptures, with examples of how we are to love and serve our fellow man:

Deuteronomy 22:1-2: "You are not to watch your brother's ox or sheep straying and behave as if you hadn't seen it; you must bring them back to your brother. If your brother is not close by, or you don't know who the owner is, you are to bring it home to your house; and it will remain with you until your brother asks for it; then you are to give it back to him." (CJB).

Proverbs 22:9: "He who is generous is blessed, because he shares his food with the poor." (CJB).

Proverbs 25:21: "If someone who hates you is hungry, give him food to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink." (see also, Romans 12:19). (CJB).

John 12: 26: Yeshua: "He who loves his life loses it, but he who hates his life in this world will keep it safe right on into eternal life! If someone is serving me, let him follow me; wherever I am, my servant will be there too. My Father will honor anyone who serves me." (CJB)

Romans 12 1: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is your reasonable service*." (NKJ).

Galatians 5:13: "For, brothers, you were called to be free. Only do not let that freedom become an excuse for allowing your old nature to have its way. Instead, serve one another in love." (CJB).

If the foregoing Scriptures have convinced you (or perhaps you were already convinced) that servanthood – i.e. serving both God and man – is an indispensable part of the life of a believer, then be encouraged that your being part of Messianic Judaism in a Messianic Jewish congregation is an ideal and exciting platform from which to serve. We are on the cutting edge of theological understanding, and we are steadily gaining in influence within the larger Body of Believers in a way that enables us to make a difference. We have much to offer our Jewish brethren who do not yet know their Messiah, and much to offer the Christian Church that, for the most part, has yet to rediscover, and make a reality, its grafted-in connection to Israel.

Ohev Yisrael describes itself as "a congregational home for Jewish believers in *Yeshua*, and for Gentile believers called to serve *Messiah* alongside their Jewish brethren." If we fulfill that goal, we will indeed be doing well in rendering service, and I am confident that God will be pleased. But there is more we can do to serve individually both within and outside of Ohev, and I believe that God is calling each of us to seek the Holy Spirit for what those ways might be.