

Called to Serve

In the name of him from whom and through whom and to whom are all things, dear friends in Christ: As I've mentioned before, I often listen to Christian radio talk shows, especially ones that allow listeners to call in and ask questions of the pastor or group of pastors who host the show. I find it instructive, and very often it gives me some good ideas. Mind you, I don't always like the answers people get – sometimes they're absolutely horrible – but at least it helps me to hear what kinds of questions people are asking. It gives me something of a feel for what today's Christians are thinking about, and it challenges me to find the answers to their questions myself.

Among the most frequently asked questions I hear on such programs – and I've had a few people ask me directly too – fall along these lines: "What does the Lord want *me* to do? What is the Lord's will for *my* life? In my heart and mind I really want to do something to serve God. What's the best way for me to do that?" And let me say that I think those are good questions. As God's children, we should all be asking what he wants us to do every day of our lives.

Now, very often, people who ask questions like that are thinking in terms of a calling or career that is directly tied to the work of the church. They are considering becoming pastors, deacons, parochial school teachers, evangelists or missionaries. And for a lot of them, it's as if they think that the only way (or perhaps the best way) to serve God is in such a capacity. And don't get me wrong: the church needs faithful people to fill these vital roles. But it should be equally clear that not everyone can or should be a fulltime worker in the church. You wouldn't have much of a community if everyone were – and really, the medieval monastic system was a failed attempt to do just that. Those who wanted to serve the Lord were directed to monasteries or convents to devote their lives to prayer and praise in the service of God, and everyone else was seen as being sort of worldly and inferior. If you had a secular career, or if you got married, became a parent, and raised a family, you were not truly serving God. One of the great gifts of the Reformation was to restore the truth that you didn't have to shun the world and disappear into a convent or monastery and devote yourself to a celibate life of study, prayer, and fasting to serve the Lord.

But if that's not what's required, the question remains for us: *How are we to serve the Lord?* And so I'll put the question to you. Ask yourself, *what does God want me to do?* Or, let me phrase it another way and narrow it down to be a bit more specific: *as a layperson, what would you say is your primary religious obligation to the Lord?*

Now, if you put that question to the standard group of Lutherans (like I just did), I'm guessing the majority of folks would think, "Let's see ... '*primary* obligation' sounds like first table of the law kind of stuff ... which, as I remember from my Catechism, has to do with honoring and worshipping God and him alone (1st commandment), using his name appropriately (2nd commandment), and remembering the Sabbath Day to keep it holy (3rd commandment). Therefore, summing all that up, my *primary* duty as a Christian, my most important religious obligation, is to show up for worship on a regular basis and bring my sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for all that he has done for me."

How's that? Sound about right? Oh, and let's not forget that part of all that worshipping and praising and thanking is bringing an appropriate offering to put in the collection plate. Okay then, does anyone have any serious objections with that as a Christian's primary religious

obligation? (And even if you do, would you still grant that it's the likely to be the most common response of Christians?)

Now, let me ask you what kind of answer do you suppose you'd get if you put the same question to a group of faithful Israelites in the Old Testament period? Ask them about their primary religious obligation, and they would have said, "Sacrifices. That's what God wants of us. We're to bring the prescribed sacrifices of lambs, goats, oxen, and birds according to the Law of Moses. We're to bring them to the temple and offer them to the Lord on his altar."

But was that it? You see, the mistake of the Old Testament Israelites, as well as the ones who lived at the time of Christ, was to think of their sacrifices as an obligation or as a service they provided to the Lord. They thought of them as a debt they owed to God, sort of a return for his investment in them. Now, it's true that the Lord asked them to bring sacrifices; but why was that? It certainly wasn't because he needed them for anything. I mean, think about it: what's the Lord going to do with a dead goat? —Or anything else the people brought for sacrifice, for that matter? He didn't need any of that stuff. And that should help us to see the truth that the sacrifices were not really *for* him; they were *for the people who brought them*.

How's that? Well it works like this: God gave his chosen people his holy law to tell them how he wanted them to conduct themselves as his children. He said he would live with them and be their God and bless them abundantly as long as they observed his law, because he couldn't live with them if they didn't; as the Scripture says, "With you the wicked cannot dwell". And besides that, as you know, the law carries a terrible penalty for those who violate it: "The soul that sins shall die". "So", the Lord says, "here's my law: Keep it and everything is going to be fine; we'll get along great together. Break it, and the deal's off. I can't live with you and you have to die." And it really is a wonderful deal, except for one thing: everybody breaks the law.

So the Lord gave them another way. He said, "I tell you what: when you break my law, instead of departing from you and leaving you to die wretched and alone, I'll take the life of an animal instead. I'll consider it your substitute. Your sin goes on it, and it will die the death you deserve. So then, I will stay with you and bless you, and you don't have to die." So, you see the sacrifices were not for God; they were *for* the people. By bringing their sacrifices, they received the benefit of God's promise to forgive them and continue to bless them. Or to say it another way, the sacrifices were not about the people's religious obligation to God, they were about the Lord's promise and obligation to them.

Now in the New Testament period we understand that all those sacrificed animals were meant to foreshadow God's ultimate obligation. They were meant to teach the people about the sacrificial death that God promised to provide when he sent his Son to take away the sin of the world once and for all. And we know that promise – that obligation – was fulfilled two thousand years ago when Jesus Christ was crucified for us. That was his service to us. Our gatherings here are to celebrate and remember what God has done for us. They are for the purpose of receiving the benefits of his sacrifice. So, in a proper sense, you do not serve God here today. God serves you. Here he gives you his grace and mercy. Here he forgives your sin for the sake of Christ's sacrifice and he cleanses your heart so that you are able to properly serve and worship him.

So, what are your religious obligations? Paul tells us in today's Epistle lesson, "Now in view of God's mercy, present your body as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Do you understand what he's saying? He's saying that your religious obligations are not about what you do in here on a typical Sunday morning; it's about what you do after we turn out the lights and lock the doors to this building. Here God gives you the

benefit of his sacrifice of death to make you holy so that you can serve him out there with the sacrifice of your holy life. Our mistake is to separate the sacred from the secular. We think of this as a holy hour, and the rest of life as ... I don't know, I don't want to say "unholy" ... but as "normal" or "regular time". Paul is saying that what happens here makes your whole life a sacred offering to the Lord.

So, someone still might ask, "Yes, but what does God want *me* to do?" And Paul gives us the answer: "What gifts or talents has God given you? Are you able to teach? Good. Teach correctly and well. Are you able to serve people in need? Good. Do that as best you can. Are you able to lead or manage? All right. Do it diligently." The important thing to understand is that what you do out there is your service for the Lord.

Now someone still might argue, "No, you don't understand, I want to serve God directly. What can I do to serve him?" The short answer to that is, "Nothing." God does not need your service because strictly speaking he has no needs. There's nothing you can do for him. But your neighbor does have needs. And so you serve God by doing good for your neighbor. Your living sacrifice is lending your heart and hands to the Lord to do his work in the world.

Let me make this as clear as I can. I serve the Lord in the role of pastor. But you understand that when I preach the word, it is the Lord's word that you hear and it is his power working in it to affect the changes he desires. Likewise it is his forgiveness I proclaim to you; my mouth, but his absolution. When I baptize with these hands, you understand that the Lord is doing the baptizing. When I distribute the sacramental elements, you understand that it is the Lord giving himself to you. In all that I do in ministry, you understand that it's not me; it is the Lord serving you.

In the same way the Lord works through *you*. If you farm, the Lord uses you to provide food for people. If you're a carpenter, to build and furnish homes for them to live in. If you're in medicine, to cure and care for them when they are sick. The Lord protects us through the work of police, firefighters, and soldiers; he maintains justice and social stability through our systems of law and corrections. The Lord works through parents to raise children in loving homes, and so on. The important thing to see is that we all represent the Lord in whatever we do. He hides himself in us to accomplish his good and gracious will.

And that makes a big difference in the way you should view your work *whatever* it is you do. Some time back while driving, I was listening on the radio to a morning show. The host was trying to find the person with the worst job in America, and he was asking people to call in if they thought they had it. I heard maybe ten of the callers who responded. And it soon became obvious that what made a job bad had far more to do with the attitude of the person than the job itself. One person complained her job was the worst because her boss made her life a living hell. She had some sort of office job and complained the boss was always on her case. Why was her boss so mean? Well, as she described the situation, it became clear that it was because the woman didn't want to do her job and she did everything she could to avoid it. I thought, "No wonder the boss is always after you! The real wonder is why she doesn't fire you!" But my point is, this woman had no concept that her job was a way of serving God by doing good for others. All she wanted was a paycheck for doing nothing.

Another woman who called in was a dental assistant in a clinic that served low income and government assisted families. She complained about having to work with patients who were homeless and indigent – people who hadn't owned a toothbrush in years, whose teeth were all green and black, and who had breath that could knock down a moose at fifty yards. Admittedly, some of the work sounded unpleasant. But someone with a Christian

understanding of serving God through their work would have seen what this woman could not. And that is through her hands God was serving people in great need by alleviating their pain, correcting their dental problems, teaching them about dental hygiene, and making it possible for them chew and eat without suffering. Even the most humble, dirty, or objectionable task becomes a sacred responsibility when we understand that God serves us so that we can serve one another through the work and vocations he has given us. It's good to remember too that he served us in what was unquestionably the most humble, dirty and objectionable way of all when he gave his life for our sin. The Lord, who is master of all, did not think of any task as beneath his dignity. Why should we?

An attitude of service is key. Paul says, "Don't think of yourself more highly than you ought." Suppose God has blessed you with a position of authority and power, and given you the gifts and talents to do that sort of work. Great. But understand that no matter how high you climb, you still serve the Lord. And though you are the boss, you serve those who work for you by coordinating and directing their efforts for maximum productivity, ensuring they are getting the training and experience they need to advance, and making sure that they are getting proper benefits and being paid fairly. We all have been called to serve others; we just do it in different capacities.

And we have been called to serve by him who first served us, and who makes our work a holy and acceptable sacrifice for him: that is your spiritual worship. So may he continue to bring us together here to receive his forgiveness and the gifts of his grace, so that we can go forth from here worshipping and serving him as living sacrifices. In the name of Jesus, to whom be glory forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!