CENTER FOR STEWARDSHIP

Your Story
Living for the Neighbor:
We Serve Our Neighbor

INTRODUCTION

It is axiomatic: Christians are to use their lives to serve God. We hear this repeatedly in sermons, Bible studies, prayers, and conversations. Everyone knows this truth and recognizes it as a unique and distinct component of the Christian life. Instead of "looking out for number one," and serving self, Christians live to serve the Lord. Christians claim that this is the true and only key to finding meaning in life.

Based on what you see and hear, what are some of the goals and objectives that direct the lives of people? What do you think about the assertion that meaning in life comes only when people live to serve the Lord?

During one part of his long musical career, Bob Dylan produced a couple of albums with overtly Christian lyrics. One of them, Slow Train Coming, featured Dylan's song, "Gotta Serve Somebody," which made an unflinching assertion about the reality of human life:

You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed
You're gonna have to serve somebody.
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

Dylan was rather blunt about our contingent and submissive nature. Though we may deceive ourselves to think otherwise, we are not really our own Lord. We are built to serve, and serve we will. Whether to Satan or to God, service will be rendered. Offended by Dylan's profession of faith and his affirmation of our submissive nature, John Lennon responded with his own song: "Serve Yourself," a rather caustic and disdainful criticism of Christianity (and virtually any other religion for good measure). For Lennon it was simple: religion is toxic. The best thing, then, is to do what is right for you.

The contrast is sharp and clear. Either we live to serve ourselves, which Dylan would argue is in reality serving the devil; or we live to serve the Lord. Christians, of course, renounce Satan, reject the sinful inclination to serve self, and encourage people to live to serve God.

But, what if the idea is not quite right? What if the assertion that the purpose of human life is to use time, resources, skills, and energy in service to God is off target and ultimately wrong? The notion that there is something wrong with serving God seems contrary to all that is holy and good. Indeed, the idea that it is wrong to serve God seems to undercut what we have learned about the goal and purpose of life. It seems to be an impious and heathen idea. It seems impossible that it could be true.

Nevertheless, it is . . . it is true, that is. It is true that the purpose of the Christian life is not to serve God—at least not exactly. Though it seems an absurd claim, this study will encourage you to consider the possibility that Christians are not to spend their lives serving God.

Q & A

1. Read Luke 10:25–29. How does the lawyer's answer capture the twofold nature of the Christian life?

2. Continue reading the parable, Luke 10:30–37. Whom, do you think, the priest and the Levite were serving? Who was the object of the Samaritan's willing service?

3. According to this text, what is the best definition of "neighbor"? What role does God play in the actions of the neighbor-loving Samaritan?

4. According to this parable, whom should Christians be serving? What might it look like today for Christians to fulfill Jesus's pointed direction in the final verse of this parable?

5. Read Matthew 25:31–46. How is this parable unsettling or challenging to the central conviction of justification by grace through faith alone? How is this text reconciled with the doctrine of justification?

6. Verses 37–40 record the dialogue between the king and the sheep. How do these verses support the idea that Christians are to serve God with their lives? How do the verses support the position that Christians serve not God, but fellow creatures? Which is right?

7. Look up Paul's counsel to slaves in Colossians 3:22–25. In what way do these verses undermine the contention that Christians serve their neighbors . . . and not God? How are these verses reconciled with the teaching that the neighbor is the object of our service?

8. Turn to Psalm 50:7–12. According to these verses, what does God need from human creatures? How do verses 13–15 answer what it means to "serve God"?

9. In 1521, Martin Luther began an essay with this pair of assertions:

   > A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none.
   > A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. (LW 31, 344)

   How does Luther's twofold claim support the discussion in this study?

10. What difference might it make for the way that you live to think less about "serving God," and more about serving the neighbor God gives you to love?

PRAYER

Offer thanks to God for calling you to faith and for freely justifying you. Then pray for his direction as you strive to serve your neighbors.