



## 2. A Passion to Serve God (Joshua 24:14-28)

Greece said,	“Be wise, know yourself!”
Rome said,	“Be strong, discipline yourself!”
Religion says,	“Be good, conform yourself!”
Epicureanism says,	“Be sensuous, enjoy yourself!”
Education says,	“Be resourceful, expand yourself!”
Asceticism says,	“Be lowly, suppress yourself!”
Psychology says,	“Be confident, assert yourself!”
Materialism says,	“Be satisfied, please yourself!”
Pride says,	“Be superior, promote yourself!”
Humanism says,	“Be capable, believe in yourself!”
Legalism says,	“Be pious, limit yourself!”
Philanthropy says,	“Be generous, release yourself!”
In contrast Jesus says,	“Be a servant of God, serve others!”

This is the second sermon in our Heart of Service series. Service is not something that is popular in modern society. In many ways as we have seen from the item I just read, almost the whole sum of human philosophy is – yourself, myself.

But it wasn't always like that. If you go back just 60 years ago, we saw that service to king and country wasn't just a phrase that tripped off the tongue. People were genuinely engaged in a battle against tyranny. There was an enemy. There was a real threat to our society and people as a community served their country, whether they were combatants or whether they contributed to the war effort at home. But all has changed in the twenty first century. No-one likes the idea of service. It's thought that service is demeaning in some way and the importance is ourselves. ME is important.

We are given a number of pictures of what being a Christian is like. God is our Father and we are His sons. We are objects of His grace, mercy and love. It's one of the dominant themes in modern evangelical theology. Being the children of God gives us dignity, importance and closeness to our Saviour and our Friend. It's modern. It's comforting and comfortable.

But the Bible uses many pictures of what our relationship is with God. Why? Because the relationship God has brought us into with Him can never be anything other than profound and exceeding the number of words human language may have to describe it. So our God has given us lots of metaphors to describe our relationship between Father, Son and Spirit: friendship, brotherhood, royal subjects, citizens of His eternal city, combatants in His army, servants particularly bond servants. Bond servant? What's that? In the Roman empire there were a number of sorts of servants.

- ➔ Slaves – who were usually barbarian or “lower races” within the empire, often captured enemy troops, who were sold as slaves and often poorly treated.
- ➔ Bond servants – these were people that entered into slavery willingly, because often being a slave was better than being destitute. Many Roman masters were quite philanthropic and happy to take on bond servants, provide them with work, housing and food and usually their whole family too. There were real prospects of promotion and progress in the master's house.
- ➔ House Servants – people the master would trust in his house.
- ➔ Trusted Servants – these were the senior servants and trusted in the masters house. We see lots of pictures in scripture of servants with trusted positions in households as managers of estates and the master's finance. Sometimes the master treated them as his own family.

Needless to say only the latter two out of that three apply in exploring our relationship with God. Nobody is press-ganged into the Christian faith: we come as free people and accept the Lordship of Christ over us.

We find two particular pictures of servant hood applying to Christians

*Doulos* – a bond servant is used frequently to describe the Christian' s service to God. Take this for example: *1 Thess 1:8 The Lord's message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia-- your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it, 9 for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God*

The word for serve here is *douleo* – to serve as a bond servant

Another word is *pais* – the servant that the master trusts so much. There' s another word as well; *diakonos* – the word we use for Deacon – a trusted servant in the church.

Our relationship with God is a servant relationship. When we accepted Christ we accepted the authority of God over us. The authority is described in scripture as kingly, masterly, “teacherly” - all involved lordship over us and that lordship means servant hood. As I said earlier, this comes tough to people in this century when we talk about rights, self-expression and controlling our destinies. Servants obey. But servant hood was more than just serving someone – the servant received the benefits of the master' s house and most importantly – the master' s protection.

In fact in modern society, service and obedience aren' t that unusual. We may not like it but the majority of people working in this country are in some kind of service industry! As workers we have to obey our employers if we want a job and money. As citizens we are expected to obey the law of the land. In fact, I could argue that we all serve or have served someone and we probably quite liked the experience! So service to God should not be that alien to us. As we will find out in forthcoming weeks, His service should be the most satisfying in all of creation, He equips us as servants, He gives us the power to serve by His Spirit, He gives us His protection.

As human beings, servant hood is something we naturally do without making any conscious decision. Bob Dylan once penned a song in this way:

*You may be an ambassador to England or France;  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance;  
You may be the heavy-weight champion of the world;  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls;  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Yes indeed you're gonna have to serve some body.  
Well it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.*

And that' s a truth that comes from scripture:

*Col 1:12 13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, 14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

We were never free before we became Christians. We were born into slavery unwillingly. Which begs a question: how did people get out of slavery? Someone bought them – either another master or their family. And this is the picture we just read about in Colossians – we have been redeemed – bought back out of the slavery that our race fell into. And how was this achieved? By an act of obedience. This was my text last time.

*Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

The word here is *diakoneo* – serve as a trusted servant. But it' s still service. The Eternal Son had no need to serve anyone but he chose to obey His Father and pay the price for our redemption. And what did He do – paid a ransom – another way of describing how a price has been paid for our freedom. Ransoms were common in that period. For a slave who had been captured, say in battle, he could be freed if someone paid a ransom. Jesus has ransomed us and freed us from the dominion of satan.

So we are freed from servant hood to the devil to serve the living and true God. It' s a strange paradox and Peter puts it well

*1 Pet 2:16 Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God.*

It seems a strange paradox. We have been made free – to live a servants of God. But that' s how it is. The illustration I' ve given you before on this is that of Sierra Leone where freed were brought back from the Caribbean and other places and freed in the country' s capital, Freetown. As former slaves, they became free men, but free to be citizens of Sierra Leone and come under its laws. We are freed from the dominion of satan and are now free to serve God.

This is a fundamental part of our faith. We are free – free to serve God. When we think of the way in which *the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*, then how do we respond? As we see His passion to serve and to redeem us, what of our passion to serve God? It' s the challenge of the example of Christ.

Let' s explore this a little further. At the beginning of the year we thought on how the people of Israel crossed the Gordan and entered the promised land. Our story this morning takes us on a few years to the time when they had taken the land. But it wasn' t an end, it was just a beginning. The Lord had brought them out of Egypt – or at least their fathers and mothers and the nation was now in the land. Maybe they thought it was over. For them, it was another new era. It was an end to the battles and a time to settle with all it' s dangers of adopting the customs and religions of the Canaanites. Somehow they didn' t need God (or so they thought). In fact, it seems from what Joshua says in this chapter we had read to us, that many had already started to worship the local Gods – the Baals of Amorites or Egyptian or Chaldean gods.

This seems to be a good time for us to be looking at this passage. Here we are. The battle to get the ceiling done is over. On what do we now fix our minds? The danger is that we will fix our minds on "foreign gods". That was the history of Israel, and if we are honest with ourselves the temptation to be distracted to other "gods" is high. What do I mean? Another god can be anything in your life that becomes more important than God and which you will therefore prioritize over Him. It can be people – husband, wife, children. It can be things – cars, money, homes. It can be your hobby, whatever that might be. It can be church! It can be the world and the values of the world. It could be yourself. There' s nothing wrong with anything of those – except when they become more important than God and His purposes.

We read a lot of this type of stuff in Scripture. Humans are easily prone to follow their own agenda and things not of God. It' s usually so subtle too. Something that may be useful to us may start to dominate. We are easily addicted to things – particularly things that are not of God. It' s a weakness that satan exploits. And we are all prone to a greater or lesser extent. It' s not just a case of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, pornography, gambling or caffeine. We can become addicted to almost anything – hobbies, computers, diy, homes, husbands, wives, gardening, shopping, spending money , not spending money or the acquisition of money. Listen to what Jesus says about it: *Luke 16:13 "No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money." 14 The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. 15 He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.*

What is highly valued among men is detestable in God' s sight. This applies to any material god we create. There' s no options here. If you have another god, then ditch it. You are serving God and there can be no room for another loyalty in your life.

What value do we put on those things that consume our time? Is it honouring to God – or not? It can be the same in our church life? Is our passion to honour God and to serve Him? What I have been learning most the last few weeks in my reading as a Pastor, is that so often evangelical Christians, people like us, take our focus of what we are supposed to be and are happy to make other things more important than the gospel. It' s subtle. The centrality of the gospel is replaced by a load of other teachings, which in themselves are quite laudable, but become another gospel when they replace the main mission of the church. These may be things like church buildings, denominations, versions of the Bible, practical aspects of church organisation, traditions. They can be laudable and

useful but once we make them priority in themselves, and they detract from our mission to bring Christ to those that don't know Him – then you have idols. What happens when the gospel gets changed to something else? *9 As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned!* We may not have turned the gospel into something else – but there is a danger that we can pervert it. And that makes God angry. Look at any church that isn't growing and has problems and you'll find idols somewhere and such churches don't bring blessing unless there is repentance.

So here we have the Israelites were hedging their bets and living double lives. They worshipped Gods but also worshipped with the locals. This was not acceptable. What was the response to this? Joshua's speech and actions tell us what God expects for us as we go into our new era. Let's have a look at them:

● throw away the other gods you have made for yourselves.

*"Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD.* Do we want to see the blessings of God in our lives and in our church? Then we must throw off the gods that the world offers us – money, things, people, "church-ianity" and even self. You cannot serve God and something else. It's a straight choice.

*As for me and my house,  
As for me and my family,  
As for me and my children  
We will serve the Lord!*

What about you? You can't serve God and something else. If we want to see blessing in our church, then we also need to examine ourselves and throw away those things which are nothing to do with the gospel – and serve the Lord. As you look at your life. Maybe you see yourself as falling short. This is given to you not to make you feel inadequate, but to realise what God wants of you and as we realise, we come in repentance and know the power of His Spirit to change our inadequacies into changed lives and priorities for ourselves. Our faith is about real change and it starts in your life and mine as we (by the power of His Spirit) throw away that which hinders our relationship with God.

● serving God is a serious business

*25 On that day Joshua made a covenant for the people, and there at Shechem he drew up for them decrees and laws. 26 And Joshua recorded these things in the Book of the Law of God. Then he took a large stone and set it up there under the oak near the holy place of the LORD. 27 "See!" he said to all the people. "This stone will be a witness against us. It has heard all the words the LORD has said to us. It will be a witness against you if you are untrue to your God."*

It might come easy off our tongues. We're Christians. Of course we will follow Him. We have chosen Him. What the people said was put down in writing on a stone. It would last a long time. And when the people invariably fell away, the stone would stand as a witness to the people of what had been said. And when they fell, they had no excuse!

This is the Master's work. This is God's church. Are we ready to serve Him and obey Him? We are starting a journey of discerning and following His will. This is a serious business. Human lives are at stake. Eternal matters are being dealt with. This isn't a game. People are dying without hope and without Christ. We have words of life. Are we committed to sharing that message? Or are we doing something else? Let's pray for a change of heart this morning and allow God to change us.

● serving God means obedience – that's the nature of repentance

*24 And the people said to Joshua, "We will serve the LORD our God and obey him."*

Let's understand. We have been rescued from so much in Christ. We have a Master and we are His servants. Jesus showed a passion for us in His death on the cross. As we come up to this Passiontide again. Surely what Jesus has done for us should fill our hearts with a passion for Him. Maybe for you it already does. These words in Joshua help us understand what that means. As a young man I had a passion for God. I have always loved what I have come into in

Christ and had a desire to serve the Lord. And that continues through the years I waited for Him to call me. Do you know what made the difference? Coming to realise that I was going to serve Him, then I needed to have His heart and mind if I was to follow Him. You see it was words. I wanted to follow, but I didn't have that desire for the lost and the desire to love and care for His people that He demands.

Jesus is the Saviour who says "Love one another as I have loved you". We are people who are called to obey. Obeying isn't just 10 commandments and law; it's about having His heart and mind and doing His will, which isn't general like law, but specific to us. The true mark of repentance is that we live with the mind of Christ being what controls our lives day by day.

Do you want to serve God? Do you want to be like Joshua who said *s for me and my household, we will serve the LORD* ? Then we need to come to His mercy seat this morning and accept our failure. We need to accept that there have been other gods in our lives and our households. Let's come to Him in penitence and ask His forgiveness. Let's come in repentance and ask His Spirit to move in our lives. Let's ask Him to reveal His mind and heart to us and to place that in us, that we may serve Him with the passion that He showed us.

*Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve ..... but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.*

#### Prayer

*Father,*

*As we come before you this morning,*

*We come knowing that we have made things into idols that we shouldn't have*

*We look at those idols – things, people, hobbies, the church, aspects of faith that are not the gospel, money, worldly ideals – and know they should never have had controls over our lives.*

*We also consider those aspects of our lives that may have control over us – addictions, compulsions, love of money – and ask that by your Spirit and in the name of Jesus that you will break them that we would have to freedom to serve you.*

*Help us again to put life in perspective. Thank you that you have placed into our lives the privilege of witnessing to your gospel in our lives, families and neighbourhoods. We pray that we might understand the seriousness of our position.*

*Father, give us strength in your Spirit to serve you in the way you want me to, with all my heart, so that Jesus will be glorified and the works that you want to do in Swaffham will be done and that men and women might come to know you as Saviour and Lord.*

*In Jesus' name*

*Amen*

