

Somebody's Servant

The Gospel Truth -- Part II
Romans 1:1

Introduction

If you were asked today, to come to the microphone to introduce yourself and to tell not only your name, but something significant about yourself and your life, in fifteen words or less, what would you say? After thinking it through, you would have another problem. How do you state something significant about yourself, some accomplishment or award, and remain, or at least appear to remain, humble at the same time? You also might be torn between what you think of yourself and what others know about you. You would not want to get up and exaggerate about yourself and then hear someone in the audience burst into laughter. That is a dead give away. Another person's perspective of you may be vastly different from your own.

I thought it interesting that my youngest daughter drew a picture of our family, or at least in the way she sees us. There was a mom, a sister, two brothers, and me, the father. She drew me as a skinny, bald headed man, with just a little hair sticking out around the ears. I do not look anything like that! We tend to view ourselves differently than others see us.

How do you view yourself and what would you describe about yourself that you consider significant?

I read recently, that toward the end of his life, Albert Einstein, the famous and brilliant physicist, mathematician, and theorist, took down, from the wall of his home, a picture of Isaac Newton, the great scientist. He replaced it with a picture of Albert Schweitzer, the medical doctor who built a hospital in Africa for lepers. Einstein commented to a close friend, that he was way overdue in replacing the image of success with the image of service. Near the end of his life, Albert Einstein, winner of the Nobel

Prize, wanted to be known more for his service than for his success.

Centuries before Albert Einstein lived, another man made a similar, yet much more profound declaration. The apostle Paul had served the Lord for twenty years. He had ten more years before the curtain would close on his incredible life and his international ministry. The father of the Gentile church; the brilliant theologian; the master orator; the defender of Christianity would soon pass away from the scene. He was about to write the greatest theological treatise in the history of the church, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Open your Bible to Romans, chapter 1.

Three Key Concepts

Paul's letter to the Romans begins with an introduction of himself. It takes less than fifteen words and yet, you discover what Paul considered to be the most significant things in his life. The first fifteen words, in verse 1, of this great letter read,

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God

Three words have come to my mind and heart, as I have read, and re-read, and re-read Paul's introduction of himself. Three words that swirl around Paul's introduction; three concepts that could revolutionize every believer who grasps them and embraces them, as Paul evidently did.

The First Concept – Ownership!

1. The first word is, *ownership!*

Look again at verse 1a.

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus . . .

The most significant thing that Paul wanted everyone to know about his life, at the very beginning of his letter, was that he belonged to somebody else. The impact of Paul's choice of words, however, is lost on us unless we get a sense of the context of servants in the Roman Empire.

Servants during the days of Paul

Historians tell us that there were as many as 600,000 servants living in Rome during the time of Paul. One historian, by the name of Richard Alston, wrote a book entitled, *Aspects of Roman History, AD 14-117*. He wrote these simple, yet insightful words about what it meant to be a slave during the time of the apostle Paul.

Slaves were owned. They had no control over their labor or their bodies. They were property to be disposed of as their master pleased. Slaves could be bought and sold and subjected to almost unlimited violence. Slaves were treated as objects; they were not regarded as men or women, but as things devoid of souls; they were animals with voices. The Romans were unsentimental about slavery. Slaves were economic units and were accounted for as such.

Vedius Pollio ordered a slave to be thrown to his collection of carnivorous fish for breaking a glass. . . . when some slaves belonging to a particularly brutal master killed him, the Roman senate ruled that, as was their law, all the slaves of that household were to be killed. The chance of freedom was slim.

Slaves met even more brutal conditions in the mines where life expectancy must have been very short, though not as short as that for slaves condemned to the games. Being condemned to the mines or the games was recognized as a death sentence.

Slaves working as personal servants had an easier life. Trusted slaves were often paid, though their wages had no legal status; the owner could reclaim the money at any moment.

Bond-servant – a description of humility and submission to Jesus Christ

- Without a doubt, Paul's reference to himself as a "doulos," in the Greek, or a "bond-

servant," was a description of humility and submission to Jesus Christ.

Paul could have said many things about himself. He was a leading Pharisee, and as such, a diligent observer of the Law. He had been tutored by the great Gamaliel and was a member of Israel's supreme court, the Sanhedrin. He had already planted churches and won perhaps, thousands of converts to Christ. He was a brilliant theologian and had the miracle working power of an apostle. That power had allowed him to heal the lame and the blind. He had even raised someone from the dead, as a further attestation of his claim to be an apostle.

Of all the things he could have said, he first said, "I'm somebody's servant, and my Master's name is Jesus Christ."

Bond-servant – a designation for a relationship of honor

- The term "doulos," or "bond-servant," was not only a description of humility, it was also a designation for a place or a relationship of honor.

In the Old Testament, all slave owners were to release their servants every seventh year. The servant role, within Israel, was not an issue of race or class, but economics. Often a person would become an indentured servant in order to pay a debt. However, if, at the end of seven years, the servant wished to remain within the household of his master, his Israelite master would take him to a priest or judge where they would pierce that servant's ear. From that time on, he was known as a bond-servant, which meant that he could have been free, but he chose to remain as the servant of his kind master.

Exodus, chapter 21, verses 5 and 6, reveals,

. . . if the slave plainly says, "I love my master . . . I will not go out as a free man," then his master shall bring him to a [judge] . . . and pierce his ear . . . and he shall serve him permanently.

When the slave went out in public, no matter where he went, his ear proclaimed his love for his master. He also served as a testimony to the kind, generous, gracious character of his master.

I found it interesting to discover that it was not uncommon for men, in Paul's day, to refer to themselves as servants of the emperor. A Greek inscription, found where Paul once lived and served, contained the words, "Agathopus, servant of the Lord

Emperor.” It would be a great statement of loyalty and deference to the emperor, to call yourself his servant.

The Lord God of Israel used that phrase to honor some of his followers. In:

- Genesis 26:24, God referred to Abraham as, “. . . My servant Abraham.”
- Numbers 12:7, the Lord said, “. . . My servant Moses, . . . is faithful in all My household”.
- Joshua 24:29, the Bible speaks of Joshua as, “. . . the son of Nun, the servant of the Lord . . .”.
- II Samuel 7:5, the Lord said, “Go and say to My servant David . . .”Are you the one who should build Me a house to dwell in?”
- Isaiah 20:3, the Lord referred to Isaiah as, “. . . My servant Isaiah . . .”.

The readers of this letter, called Romans, would have picked up on this designation as one of honor, as well as one of humility.

Paul was saying, “I have no rights of my own, I am owned property; I have no will of my own, I am subject to do my Master’s bidding.”

And, while others were impressed to be named a loyal servant of the Roman Emperor, Paul was impressed to be the loyal property of Jesus Christ. It is the issue of ownership!

Ladies and gentlemen, if you can settle, once and for all, the issue of ownership, you will settle every other issue in life.

Let me go back to what Alston revealed about first century slavery. He wrote:

- “Slaves were owned.” – Does Christ really own your life?
- “[Slaves] had no control over their labor . . .” – Does Christ really control your career?
- “[Slaves] had no control over their . . . bodies.” – Does God own your body or do you do whatever you want with it?
- “[Slaves] were property to be disposed of as their master pleased.” – Does God really have the right to dispose of your life as He pleases, or must He give a reason or an explanation when He does something with your life?

It is possible for us to be God’s children, but I wonder, “How many of His children are truly His servants?”

When I was growing up, there were chores that my three brothers and I had to do. We were the four sons of my father, there was no doubt about that, we were his children, but we did not like being his servants.

Now, I am making my children do those same chores. They have to take turns doing dishes. I do want to say, however, that “doing dishes” for them is not what “doing dishes” was for me. For my brothers and I, to do the dishes meant that we filled a plastic bucket with warm water in the sink, then put in soap and got the water bubbly, then took a dishcloth and literally, washed the dishes. Next, we turned on the hot water and rinsed them, and then handed them to the brother who had been snapping you on the leg with the drying cloth, to immediately dry them and put them away. That is doing the dishes. Today, doing the dishes is putting them in the dishwasher. And they still want an allowance! For what?!

They say, “Aw, Dad, tell us about how it was when you had to walk to school in the snow, barefoot, and shoot a rabbit along the way for lunch.”

When my parents were here for the last missions’ conference, my father was talking with my kids about his childhood on the farm. I could not help but laugh and say, under my breath, “Get ‘em, Dad.”

He, in fact, did walk about two miles to his school in Minnesota – even in the winter. When the snow was really high, he told my children, his father would give him a ride to school on the tractor. That, however, was only when the weather was really bad. His school was a one-room schoolhouse, heated by a wood burning stove, for grades 1 through 8. When he got to school, he also told my kids, he would take a raw potato out of his coat pocket and put it on top of the wood burning stove to cook throughout the morning. He had a little pat of butter in his coat pocket that he put on the cooked potato, and that was his lunch.

My kids just sat there looking at him, probably wondering, “Were you in the civil war too?”

We know that we have it easier than someone else. Your parents or grandparents may have immigrated to this country. Your grandparents or great grandparents may have been slaves. But, just because someone had to do that work, or live that hard life, or endure that struggle because that was

their lot in life, did not mean they had to have a good attitude.

You can be somebody's servant and, at the same time, have an apathetic, dispassionate, or even bitter spirit. You will not read any of that in Paul's letter. He is so excited about being the disposable property of God that he puts that first in his letter, even in the very first verse. It is as if he says, "Hey, everybody, I'm somebody's servant, and that Somebody is Jesus Christ. And, I get to do His chores."

So, it should come as no surprise then, that following Paul's description of who he was, you discover what his "chore" was for God.

The Second Concept – Assignment!

2. The second word that comes from this text, is the word, *assignment!*

The text, in Romans, chapter 1, verse 1, reads,
Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle . . .

His calling

His calling was that of an apostle, or "apostolos," in the Greek, meaning, "someone sent out, commissioned for a task".

His credibility

His credibility for ministry, as one who would lay the foundation of the church, was his apostleship. If he had not been a true apostle, then the church would have had no reason to listen to him, and he would have had no right to speak with authority on behalf of Christ.

It was no small matter that Paul mentions his apostleship. In fact, that subject was an ongoing debate within the early church. The question was, "Was Paul really an apostle?!"

There were two qualifications for an apostle:

- First, he must have been a disciple who personally saw the resurrected Lord.

That is why the dispute arose, of course. Paul had come to faith in Christ twenty five years after the Lord ascended to the Father – but Paul had seen Christ. If you remember, it occurred on the Damascus road, as Paul tells us in Acts, chapter 26. So, Paul boldly defends his calling as an apostle. In I Corinthians, chapter 9, verse 1, he says,

Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? . . .

Later, in chapter 15, he states that he was visited by the resurrected Lord. Verses 7 through 10a read,
then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, and am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am . . .

- The second qualification for an apostle is that he must have been a disciple who was personally chosen by the Lord.

That is the significance behind Paul's declaration in Galatians, chapter 1, verse 1a, when he wrote,

Paul, an apostle (not sent from men nor through the agency of man, but through Jesus Christ . . .

In other words, Paul is saying, "I didn't become an apostle because I decided to become one, nor because men thought I should be one, but because I have seen the risen Lord and the risen Lord personally commissioned me to establish the church through the gospel of God."

So, Paul claims ownership by Jesus Christ and an assignment from Jesus Christ.

The Third Concept – Passion!

3. The third word is *passion!*

Paul continues with his introduction, in Romans, chapter 1, verse 1.

Paul, a bond-servant of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God.

"Set apart," can be translated, "marked off or separated unto". I have no doubt that this phrase, from the Greek word, "aphorizo," sent a message to the reader about Paul's new passion.

Paul had been a Pharisee of the Pharisees. In other words, he had been separated from anything and everything that would defile or corrupt a strict orthodox Jew. All that Paul could see was the Law of Moses, and he diligently separated himself from anything and anyone who would distract him from his passion to observe that Law.

Now, however, by faith in his resurrected Messiah, Paul was separated unto the gospel. The grace of God's gospel was now his passion.

The word he used in this verse, “aphorizo,” means, “off horizoned”. In other words, there is now something else that dominates the horizon of Paul’s vision. And, what dominated the vision and heart of the apostle Paul was the grace and gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul had had religion and was summa cum laude as a student of the Law, but it had not satisfied him. His passion was now the gospel of God that totally satisfied him.

You could say that Paul was a man who never fully recovered from his conversion to Christ. My friends, Paul had discovered that enslavement to Jesus Christ was, and still is for us today, true liberating freedom.

Have you ever thought about the fact that you also, are somebody’s slave? You may be a slave to:

- the opinions of man.

Paul wrote, in Galatians, chapter 1, verse 10,

For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.

In other words, you are either interested in seeking the pleasure of people or the pleasure of God.

- money or mammon (material gain).

Jesus Christ said, in Matthew, chapter 6, verse 24,

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and [mammon].

- possessions, career, achievement, or popularity.
- immorality, pornography, or lust.

... whose god is their appetite ...

as Philippians, chapter 3, verse 19 says.

- television.

You bow down to it three or four hours a day.

- past failure or a fear of the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, I submit to you that you are somebody’s servant. The question is, “Whose?”

The answer to that is in the answer to this, “What would you like to be known for? If you could choose one word that you would like to be used to introduce you to the world, what would it be?”

There was once a man who awakened one morning to read his own obituary in the newspaper. It gave a review of his life. The editor had believed a rumor that this famous man had died and had actually published his obituary. The headline read, “Father of Dynamite Dies”.

The man read the accompanying article that told of his discoveries with nitro-glycerin and of his patents, in both England and America, for dynamite. Then this phrase caught his eye, “He will be remembered for creating the potential for mass destruction.”

That so pained this man, that he immediately established a trust, from his own wealth, that created, what would become, the Nobel Prize. This prize was to be awarded for chemistry, science, literature and, most notably, for the development and advancement of world peace.

It worked. Today, when you hear the man’s name, Alfred Nobel, you do not think of dynamite and mass destruction, you think of the Nobel Peace Prize.

What if you were to wake up tomorrow morning and read your obituary? What would it say about you? Just who were you? What would people remember most about you?

The secret to Paul’s life is discovered in the order by which he described himself. He was a servant before he was an apostle.

Paul said, in the very first verse of this wonderful, powerful, Christ honoring letter, “I am somebody’s servant, and that Somebody is Jesus Christ. And, I am now passionate about my calling; totally dedicated to delivering the gospel.”

May we be more like him – known, above everything else, as Somebody’s servant. And, as people who have found true freedom by becoming enslaved to that Someone, let us be passionate about advancing the cause of His liberating gospel to the rest of the world. Yes, we are Somebody’s servants – we are servants of the living God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/1/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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