

**Psalm 123**  
**Being a Servant of God**  
**a series on discipleship**

**Michelle Drewitz**  
**September 16, 2018**

**Riverdale Baptist Church**  
**Whitehorse, Yukon**

And so we continue our series through the Songs of Ascent, a series on discipleship. Discipleship – it's a word that's frequently used in Western churches, in vision strategies and mission statements. It's a word that came up in the church health initiative – an expressed desire from you to be discipled, to grow in discipleship. But what is discipleship? Do we believe we attain the full measure of discipleship overnight or in a week or a month or even a year? Do we aspire to become disciples by showing up to a Bible study or weekly worship service and checking that off our weekly list? Or is discipleship more about a persistent, steady, consistent development of faith skills over a lifetime? Is it less about ticking off things to do and more about cultivating the skills and practices that grow our faith? Is it perhaps about learning what it means to be a child of God and taking steps/actions that move us ever closer to God?

We started the series by considering that the first step of discipleship, the first thing that leads us on the path of discipleship, is repentance. It's the call that says I'm tired with the lies of the world and I'm turning to the ways of peace. It's the step that doesn't just happen the moment we believe and accept Jesus Christ as Saviour. It's a step that keeps on happening every time we choose the ways of Jesus instead of the ways of the world. We must learn to develop the faith skill of repentance – we must learn to keep on turning to Jesus, to keep on saying yes to God.

Then we read Psalm 121 which talked about where to go when you are in trouble and what will happen. This is sometimes a difficult one to grasp. Turning to Jesus and saying yes to Jesus isn't a decision that results in a life that has no problems, no trials, no pain, no challenges. We are reminded, in every story of the Bible, that the Christian life is one that will have problems, will have trials, will have pain, will have challenges. No where in the Bible does God promise that

life will be easy. And when life gets hard and challenges arise, no where in the Bible does God promise that he will immediately fix it and make it better. God makes an even better promise to us. He promises that he will protect us from evil, he will protect our faith from being destroyed, he will protect us from the evil that threatens to separate us from God, he will protect us from believing that God stopped loving us and caring for us. The second skill of discipleship is learning to know, believe, trust that God will not let anything separate us from his love and care.

The third faith skill is worship. This is the skill in Psalm 122 that says we worship God because in worship we are united with one another. We worship God because he has commanded it. We worship God because we desire peace.

Today we turn to the fourth faith skill. This is the skill that helps us develop the proper posture towards God in life. This is the skill that develops purpose and meaning and direction in life. This is the skill that leads to freedom. It is the skill of servanthood, of being a servant. Now this Psalm is not telling us how to be a servant. It's not a command of what to do as a servant. This Psalm shows us what happens when a person of faith believes, trusts, loves, follows and belongs to God. In this Psalm, we don't read a manual for how to be a Christian. We see a snapshot of the Christian life in action.

And what we're seeing is servanthood. This skill of becoming a servant is one which sharply reminds us about the journey of pilgrimage. In pilgrimage, we learn where we are going, in what direction we are traveling. Discipleship is about moving to God. Being a servant of God shows us what happens when we move towards God.

The first thing that we learn about being a servant from this Psalm is about our relationship with God. Our relationship with God is different than our relationship with our brother or sister, our colleague or peer, our friend or spouse or neighbour, our child or grandchild. In general, our human relationships are equal: peer-to-peer. In some of our relationships, we are not equal: like a parent-child relationship or teacher-student relationship or employer-employee relationship. But our relationship with God is not like that of a peer or employee.

Verse 1 reads *I lift up my eyes to you, to you whose throne is in heaven*. In that simple sentence, we remember that God is over us. He is above us. So we develop a posture that looks up to him. We don't look at him, like we would with a friend or spouse. We don't look down to him, like we would to our child or grandchild. We look up to him.

Now the Bible often uses the phrase that God is in heaven, or God dwells on high. What does this mean? This isn't a description that is primarily about God dwelling in geography or space. After all, Biblical writers are not primarily writing to teach us about geography or astronomy. Biblical writers are theologians who tell us the story of God. The focus of the Bible is the relationship between God and humanity; between God and all of creation. The Bible isn't strictly about facts and knowledge but is concerned about bringing knowledge together with experience. So the Bible speaks of both our knowing that we are created and loved by God and our experience of being created and loved by God.

So when the Psalmist writes that God is on high, that God's throne is in heaven, the Psalmist is writing about both our knowing that God is above us and is writing about our experience of God

being above us. What do we learn about God knowing that he is above us? Well, firstly, we learn that God does not exist as a functional God on whom we call whenever we're in trouble and need help. He isn't below us, to be summoned in times of crisis. He isn't a genie who fulfills our every desire. He isn't an entertainment God who makes us happy when we're sad. God being above us means that he is not equal to us nor is he beneath us, someone to be commanded around. Instead, we read about a God who is the same God of creation and exile, the same God of the exodus and of Easter, the same God of Sinai and of Calvary, the same God of the flood and the loaves of bread. To know God, we look up to the heavens, where he sits on the throne.

Imagine if we looked at God, if God was equal with us. Or if we looked down to God. Imagine if God was at my beck and call, to do what I wanted when I wanted how I wanted and why I wanted. Do each of us really want a God who fulfills my desires? What happens when my desires are in conflict with your desires? Do we want a God that we can figure out much like we can put a puzzle together or learn how to use a tool? Do we want a God that rouses awake and springs to action when we're too tired to do something ourselves? Do we want a God that steps in as the expert when we're simply ill-equipped to handle a problem? Do we want a God who is the friend we ask to hang around with when there's no one better or nothing better to do?

I don't want a God like that because then God wouldn't be God at all. If God simply sat around waiting for my every demand, God wouldn't be God at all. I want God to be mysterious and unknown. I don't want a God I can completely figure out and package and contain. I want a God I can look up to; one that I cannot completely grasp and understand. I want a God who knows more about the ins and outs about me than I know myself. I want a God who comprehends the

complexities of all my relationships and friendships, a God who can see the big picture of Whitehorse, Canada, and the world. It means that I want a God that I look up to. I don't want to figure out God, the way I figure out a music instrument or app on my phone.

The first thing we learn about being a servant is that there is a posture of servanthood. If we do not have the correct posture then we will experience problems. The correct posture of the Christian is one that looks up to God. It is one that does not try to package God or put Him in a box.

The second thing we learn about being a servant has to do with expectations. Our posture directly impacts our expectations. If you were to describe God, the God who reigns on high, the God who sits on the throne, the God who dwells in the heavens, what would you say? How would your description of God reveal your expectations of God? You see, many people think that God is a police officer who is waiting for us to make a mistake and throw us in jail. It's like the cops I often see in Riverdale hanging out at FH waiting for the vehicle that's speeding through the school zone. The intent of the police officer for that hour is to find ways people are doing wrong. It's the police officer's job to point out the mistake and punish the wrong. But God isn't like a police officer who is searching (almost hoping) for us to make a mistake.

God isn't like the school principal who roams the halls looking for the kid who skipped class or is smoking weed. God isn't like the parent whose hawk eyes look for the child's mistake to correct. If we think about God in this way, then we expect God to be primarily concerned about punishment, about identifying our failure and mistakes, the ways we mess up and screw up,

about wrath and anger, about discipline. Our description or understanding of God directly impacts our expectations of God.

Instead, God is better described as a potter. God is the artist. God is the one who takes us – the clay – forms us and reforms us until we are shaped into the redeemed person; until we become the person who is mature and ready for life in the Kingdom of God. I'm reminded of an experience I had this summer. My cousin and I decided to try glass blowing for the first time. Eager to learn some new skills and have some fun, we went to Lumel Studios. I decided to make a flower that could go in one of my potted plants. After choosing my colours and melting them into the fluid glass, I sat down and was given some instruments to shape and form the glass. It had to constantly be turned, like honey, otherwise the hot stuff would drip. I pinched and squeezed and turned and pulled and pushed to produce this final product. In that experience, I was forming, shaping, reforming, creating, recreating something into what it is intended to be. That is the same way God responds towards us – He takes us and shapes us, forms and creates us into the redeemed person ready for His Kingdom. But we need a certain posture towards God in order to be shaped, to be formed, to be created. That posture is one of service, that looks up.

You see the Christian belief and conviction is this: that God intends good for us. He intends that we experience the goodness of life. And we believe that God's good for us comes about by shaping and forming us to be the redeemed people. Like the glass which I stretched and poked and pulled, God's good for us requires that we are stretched, poked and pulled in some directions.

Although we can't fully know God, we do know things about him. This is where the Psalmist's knowledge of God blends with the experience of God. It is where what we know matches our experience of who God is. We approach God with certain expectations based on Scripture, based on what we know he has done for us in Jesus Christ. Since God is the potter, primarily concerned about forming and shaping us into the redeemed people, then what we expect from God is mercy, abundant mercy. This is repeated three times in the Psalm: in verses 2 and 3. The Hebrew word for mercy means to show favour, to be compassionate, to be gracious. The expectation of the servant of God is that God will demonstrate mercy.

In light of God's desire for good for us, when we cry out to God for mercy, we're not crying out for God to do something that he doesn't want to do. We are crying out for God to do what we know he loves and wants to do for us. He wants to show us his mercy. We are expressing our desire to receive God's gift of grace to us. We are revealing our longing to experience what God does for us in Jesus Christ.

The cry of the servant is 'mercy'. We pray for mercy. We pray mercy instead of praying that God would give us what we want. We pray mercy instead of praying that God would reward us for our righteous behaviour so others think we are better than them. We pray mercy instead of praying that God would punish us for our sin and guilt to make us feel better. We pray mercy instead of praying that God would be nice to us because we're good people. We pray for his mercy, his compassion, his grace so that we may live in the embrace of his mercy.

As servants of God, when we look up to the heavens and cry mercy, we are asking God to come down to earth, to enter into our lives, to enter into our humanity, to accomplish his redemption and to make us into people ready for his kingdom.

When we have a posture of service to God, we are not blindly moving in the general direction towards God. We are moving to the God who is merciful, who is compassionate, who is slow to anger and abounding in love. We are not serving God afraid of making the wrong decision, worried that we're going to do something wrong or make the wrong choice, afraid that God will lash out on us. No, when we serve God, it comes with a specific expectation. We expect mercy from God. We expect that God will be compassionate, gracious, and show us his favour.

Now we know that when the Bible was written, the experience of being a servant was not pleasurable. It was miserable because of the institutionalization of slavery. Though slavery is not institutionalized today in Canada, we need not look far to see evidence of slavery today. There is slavery in sex trafficking. There is slavery in alcoholism or the belief that success is found in climbing the corporate ladder. There is slavery to our smart phones. There is slavery wherever there is oppression.

So at the end of the Psalm, we hear the Psalmist's cry of oppression. It is the same cry we hear today: it is the cry for freedom, for deliverance, for mercy. We hear the cry for freedom from the alcoholic, from the father who works 12 hours a day, from the student who can't get to sleep without their phone in their bed, from the young adult who has amassed an enormous debt from mismanaging their finances, from the mother who is a slave to the clock ticking. Though the

master is different from the days of the Psalmist, we are a culture that is still enslaved to something or someone – to time, to money, to technology, to sex, to alcohol.

Here's the key to a life that is not oppressed, according to the Bible. The Christian knows that the goal is not to find freedom from oppression but to find the right master, to find the merciful master, and to learn to be a servant to the one who is merciful. Our relationships – with people or things – will eventually limit our freedom if God is not part of it. Thus, the Christian wants to live under God, we want to serve God because that will lead us to true freedom. So service to God becomes a need in our own life. This isn't just something that's good or desirable. It becomes a need in our own life so that we can experience true freedom.

What is freedom? Freedom is not about being able to push one's own agenda, or pick and choose whatever you want, do whatever you want to do. True freedom comes when we live for the sake of God and our neighbour. True freedom happens when we serve a merciful master.

Paul the Apostle writes in his letter to the Romans about what being servants of God looks like. Chapters 12 through 16 are devoted to helping the Christian church, the people of God understand what practical, everyday service to God looks like. Romans 12 opens up with an image of service to God in the everyday, ordinary moments of life. There's two key phrases in the verse that are often missed, or at least the meaning is often overlooked in our English translations. Here is how the verse reads in our English translations: *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God this is your spiritual act of worship.*

The first key phrase that is often overlooked is found at the very beginning. The verse starts off like this: *Therefore I exhort you, brothers, through the compassions of God to offer yourselves as living sacrifices.* The Greek word for compassion can also be translated as grace, favor, or mercy. The motivation for service is connected to that last bit – through the mercies of God. Thus our service to God, our being servants of God doesn't come from a place of demand or coercion. Our motivation to be a servant of God is because of God's compassion and mercy.

The second key phrase is found at the end. Now our English translations typically read *this is your spiritual act of worship.* But the Greek wording is *logiken latreian* and is more accurately translated *which is the reasonable service of you.* The Greek word *logiken* comes from the root word *logos* which means word, speech, utterance, analogy. We get words like logic or logical from this. In Romans, *logiken* refers to reasonable, rational, logical, what is logical to God. The Greek word *latreian* is translated as service, service unto God and the community. It also refers to worship. We get the English word liturgy from the Greek word *latreian*. In the context of the whole verse, it means that we offer service to God that makes sense, which is rational, reasonable, logical. Our worship to God is logical, is reasonable, is rational. Reasonable service to God begins in worship and then becomes actions which serve and help others. But it all starts with a posture, an attitude of service to God. Once we learn how to serve God, we are available and ready and able to be useful to others in acts of service.

Thus, another reading of this verse, based on the Greek, would be: *Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, through the compassions of God to present your bodies a living sacrifice*

*holy and well-pleasing to God which is the reasonable service of you.* It is by God's gift of mercy to us that we can serve God and others in a way that is reasonable, which makes sense.

You'll note that Psalm 123 contains nothing about serving others. The focus is about our service to God. It is understood that if we learn how to develop a posture and attitude of service to God, then serving others will naturally develop as well. The rest of Romans, after telling us about service that is reasonable to God, explores in great detail how we serve God by serving others. We read about showing love, hospitality, compassion, caring for the sick, helping and healing.

So let us remember the words of Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Saviour, our King, the one who became a servant, whose service to God and others was embedded in his act of mercy on the night of his arrest when he washed his disciples feet. After that, he said *Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me 'teacher' and 'lord', and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.*