

Principles of a Servant - The Good Shepherd

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Before any of us stood before a class, a youth group, a home, or a hospital bed as a servant, someone else stood first. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Master of all and the Maker of all, bent Himself down to the dust of this world and became a servant within it. He washed feet with His own hands. He healed with His own touch. He spoke with people the world had long stopped listening to. And when at last He laid down His life for His sheep, He was not departing from His ministry — He was completing it. To enter the life of service, then, is not to take up a new project. It is to take up an old pattern, the oldest pattern there is, and to let the Lord of the sheep re-shape us into a likeness of Himself. In this lesson we will sit with the parable of the Good Shepherd in the tenth chapter of St. John, and we will meet three figures who each want to be near the flock: the door, the thief, and the shepherd. Only one of the three loves the sheep. The work of becoming a servant is the work, over a lifetime, of becoming that one.

The Master Who Came to Serve

The Christian idea of service is not a piece of ethics borrowed from the world's good manners. It is a revelation. It is the shape our Lord took when He stepped out of glory into history, and it is the shape He has asked every one of His followers to take ever after. The clearest verse in the whole New Testament about what service means does not come from St. Paul and does not come from a Father. It comes from Christ Himself, speaking of Himself:

“Even as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28, NKJV)

Every word of that sentence repays attention. He came. He was not compelled, He was not summoned, He did not arrive by accident; He came, freely, in love, because love is what the Father is. He did not come to be served, though He was the only Person in the universe with any right to be. He came to serve, and the word He chose for what He was doing is the word that in the ancient world meant the work of a slave. And He came to give His life a ransom for many — not a token service, not a shift of charitable hours, but a pouring out of Himself to the very end. Everything we will learn about service in this curriculum is a commentary on that one sentence.

On the night before He died, Jesus dramatized the teaching so that no future servant could ever forget it. He rose from supper, laid aside His outer garments, wrapped Himself in a towel, filled a basin with water, and knelt before the men who had been arguing all week about which of them was greatest. One by one He washed their feet. And when He had finished, He turned to them and said:

“You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.” (John 13:13–15, NKJV)

St. Cyril of Alexandria, looking at that scene, warns us not to walk past it as though we had understood it already:

“For it is not the knowledge of virtue, but rather the practice of it, that the blessed saint sets before us.” – St. Cyril of Alexandria, on John 13

The servant is not a student of service in the abstract. The servant is a doer. It is possible to know every principle in this book by heart and yet never once kneel, towel in hand, before the actual feet of a tired person. That would be to treat service as an idea, when the Lord gave it to us as a practice. The question the night of the foot-washing puts to us is not, “Do we understand?” The question is, “Are we willing to do as He has done?”

The Parable of the Good Shepherd (John 10)

Of all the parables our Lord spoke, the parable of the Good Shepherd appears only in the Gospel of St. John, and it stands apart from the rest because the central figure is not a farmer or a king or a merchant — it is the Lord Himself, describing His own heart toward us. He paints the scene in a few unforgettable strokes: a sheepfold, a door, a watchful gatekeeper, a flock of sheep who know one voice and no other, and three figures who want to be near that flock. The parable opens like this:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the doorkeeper opens, and the sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice. Yet they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.” (John 10:1–5, NKJV)

The details are not decorations. The door, the gatekeeper, the voice, the name — each of them is going to matter. And the three figures who show up across the rest of the chapter — the thief who climbs in where the shepherd walks, the hireling who flees when the wolf comes, and the Good Shepherd who lays down His life — are the three possible shapes a servant’s life can take. Two of them describe ways that service can go wrong; one of them describes the Lord Himself, and the servant He is slowly forming us to become. Let us take them in turn.

Christ the Door

Before our Lord describes the thief or the hireling or even Himself as the shepherd, He describes Himself as the door. It is an arresting image. A shepherd stands at the entrance of the pen; He is the

entrance of the pen. In the world of the parable, the sheepfold of the Lord's people has exactly one way in and one way out, and that way has a face and a name:

"I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture." (John 10:9, NKJV)

This is not an incidental claim. It is the claim our Lord made of Himself once again in the Upper Room, a few nights before His death: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me" (John 14:6, NKJV). Christ is not a path among paths. He is the only entry, and the exclusivity of that claim is not a gate slammed in the face of the world — it is a gate held wide open in front of it. Everyone who enters by Him is saved. No one is sent away for being the wrong kind of sheep.

And yet the Fathers heard a second meaning in "the door" as well. For St. John Chrysostom, the door through which the shepherd enters — the door that keeps the thieves out — is the Word of God itself. Anyone who comes to teach God's flock without coming through the door of Holy Scripture, rightly interpreted in the Church, is already climbing the wall. The sheep, for their part, are to be so familiar with the voice of the Lord in the Scriptures that they can tell in an instant when a stranger is speaking. St. Augustine holds the two meanings together in a single sentence:

"Remember that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Door and the Shepherd. He presents Himself as the Door in order to be revealed. He is the Shepherd too, who allows us to enter through Him." – St. Augustine, on John 10

For the servant, the practical lesson is simple and hard. Our authority to lead anyone anywhere is borrowed, not owned. We enter through the door ourselves — through Christ, through the Scriptures, through the sacramental life of His Church — and we bring the flock in by the same door, and in no other way. A servant who teaches what he did not receive, who leads by his own opinion rather than by the voice of the Lord, has already climbed the wall. He may not notice. The sheep will.

The Thief and the Hireling

Two figures in the parable do not love the sheep. They look different from each other, and they fail in different ways, but they share a single disease: they are in it for themselves. The Lord introduces the first without mincing words:

"The thief does not come except to steal, and to kill, and to destroy. I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly." (John 10:10, NKJV)

The thief climbs in where the shepherd walks in. He enters by the window, the wall, the side gate — anywhere except the one door the Lord has appointed. His aim is the opposite of the shepherd's in every particular. The shepherd gives life; the thief takes it. The shepherd feeds; the thief plunders. The shepherd protects; the thief kills and destroys. In the ordinary life of the Church the thief rarely announces himself this baldly. He comes instead in the form of a teaching that flatters, a movement that excites, a voice that promises spiritual goods without the Lord's door — and he lives off the flock

while calling himself its friend. The Lord's warning against him is stark, and the way we are to recognize him is even starker: not by ever-cleverer argument, but by the voice we have grown so used to that the stranger's voice is immediately foreign.

The hireling is a subtler failure, and closer to home. He is not an enemy of the sheep. He simply does not love them. He has agreed to the job; he may be good at the job in easy weather; but his heart is fixed on what the job gives him rather than on the flock itself. St. John Chrysostom's summary of the difference cuts cleanly:

"In this the shepherd differs from the hireling: the one always looks to his own safety, caring not for the sheep; the other always seeks that of the sheep, neglecting his own."

– St. John Chrysostom, Homily on John 10

The hireling is found out when the wolf comes. As long as the sky is clear and the flock is quiet, he is indistinguishable from a true shepherd. But when the pressure arrives — when the defense of the truth costs something, when a wayward sheep needs to be gone after at personal cost, when a difficult conversation has to be had — he is gone. St. Gregory the Great notices that his flight is often not physical at all:

"He flees, not by change of place, but by withdrawing support. He flees, because he saw injustice and held his peace; he flies, because he conceals himself by silence." – St.

Gregory the Great, Homily 14 on the Gospels

This is the warning each of us should take most personally, because we are far more likely to become hirelings than thieves. The hireling does not wake up one morning and decide to abandon the sheep; he simply chooses comfort over love one small decision at a time, until the love that ought to have been his primary fuel is no longer there and he does not remember when it left. St. Paul diagnoses the condition in a single line that we should weigh against our own ministries honestly:

"For all seek their own, not the things which are of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:21, NKJV)

The question the hireling section of the parable puts to us is not, "Am I a bad person?" It is, "Who am I actually serving when I serve?" If the honest answer is our own comfort, our own reputation, our own sense of usefulness — the wolf has already arrived and we have not yet noticed.

The Marks of the Good Shepherd

Against the thief and the hireling the Lord draws His own portrait, and He uses the word "good" twice in a single breath — not because He is repeating Himself, but because He wants us to let the word sink in:

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep. But a hireling, he who is not the shepherd, one who does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them. The

hireling flees because he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep. I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own.” (John 10:11–14, NKJV)

The marks that follow from this self-description are the pattern for every Christian servant. The Good Shepherd knows His sheep by name — not as a roster, not as a program attendance list, but as persons whose particular weaknesses and histories and hopes He carries in His heart. He calls His sheep out one by one, and He leads them; He does not drive them from behind with a stick. He goes before them, which means He never asks of them a road He has not already walked Himself. He lays down His life for them. He gathers the weak ones and carries them. The prophet Isaiah had foreseen this tenderness seven hundred years in advance:

“He will feed His flock like a shepherd; He will gather the lambs with His arm, and carry them in His bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.” (Isaiah 40:11, NKJV)

Each of these marks is also a diagnostic for our own service. Do we know the people we serve — their names, their homes, the specific shape of what they are struggling with this season? Do we lead the people we serve or do we push them? Do we go before them in what we are asking of them, or are we giving out a Christian life we have not actually chosen to live? And, hardest of all: are we willing to pay the cost — in time, in sleep, in emotional energy, in reputation — that loving these particular sheep is going to ask? The Old Testament speaks very pointedly to shepherds who answered no to these questions. Through the prophet Ezekiel, the Lord indicts the false shepherds of Israel in words that ought to stop the breath of every servant who reads them:

“The weak you have not strengthened, nor have you healed those who were sick, nor bound up the broken, nor brought back what was driven away, nor sought what was lost; but with force and cruelty you have ruled them.” (Ezekiel 34:4, NKJV)

The contrast with the Good Shepherd is total, and it is meant to be. The Lord has not asked us to manage a flock; He has asked us to love one, in the exact way He loves it.

The Sheep and the Voice They Know

It would be a mistake to read John 10 only as a portrait of the shepherd, because the parable is also about the sheep. We are the sheep. Nothing in Scripture is more humbling about the human condition than the images God chose to describe it: we are clay, we are dust, we are grass that withers, and we are sheep. Sheep are not fierce and they are not clever. They wander. They cannot defend themselves. They panic in the dark. They depend on the voice of a shepherd for everything from where to feed to where to drink to when to rest. St. Peter, writing as one who had once scattered himself at the first sign of a wolf, sums up the whole Christian condition in a line:

“For you were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.” (1 Peter 2:25, NKJV)

The central discipline of the sheep is listening. The parable says it twice: the sheep hear His voice, and they do not hear the voice of strangers. How does that hearing grow? In the ordinary ways the Church has always taught — by daily Scripture, by the cycle of the Agpeya, by the Divine Liturgy, by Confession, by time with a father of confession, by the hymns of the Church that carry doctrine in their bones. The more the voice of the Lord fills our ears, the more foreign the voice of the stranger sounds when he calls. The servant who wants to lead others to the Shepherd's voice must first become a sheep who knows that voice himself. There is no shortcut past this.

Our Lord promises His sheep a specific kind of freedom — the freedom to go in and go out and find pasture. The servant who has learned to trust the Shepherd's voice is not a sheep in a cage; he is a sheep in a field. He is safe because the Shepherd is near, and he is free because the Shepherd is good. St. Gregory of Nyssa turns the whole picture back into a prayer the Church has prayed ever since:

“Show me the green pastures. Lead me to the still waters. Guide me to filling food. Call me by my name, so that I may hear your voice. I am your sheep: grant me eternal life.”

– St. Gregory of Nyssa, on the Song of Songs

Let that be our prayer, and let us carry it into the ministry we have been given. The servants the Lord is forming through this curriculum are sheep who have learned His voice and are beginning, by grace, to sound a little like Him when they call their own sheep by name. Let us go in and go out and find pasture — and let us bring with us every sheep we can, through the one Door, to the one Shepherd who has laid down His life so that there may be one flock and one Shepherd forever.

Review Questions

1. Christ calls Himself both the Door and the Good Shepherd in the same chapter (John 10). Why both? What does each image teach us about the servant's calling that the other image alone could not teach?
2. Most of us will not be tempted to become thieves. We will be tempted to become hirelings. In the life of a servant today — in a classroom, a youth meeting, a home visit, a hospital — what does “fleeing by withdrawing support” (St. Gregory the Great) actually look like, and how do we guard against it?
3. The Good Shepherd “calls His own sheep by name.” What does it practically mean to know the people we serve by name — not only their names, but their histories, their weaknesses, and their present season? Which of the people the Lord has given us have we not yet taken the trouble to know in this way?
4. St. John Chrysostom reads “the door” as the Word of God and the Scriptures, rightly interpreted in the Church. How well do we know the voice of the Lord in the Scriptures ourselves, and how is that knowledge shaping what we teach others?
5. Ezekiel's indictment of the false shepherds (Ezekiel 34:4) is painfully specific: the weak not strengthened, the sick not healed, the broken not bound up, the lost not sought. Reading that

list slowly and honestly, which of these corresponds to the work the Lord has placed in our hands right now, and what is one concrete thing we will do this week in response?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 20:28; John 10:1–16, 27–28; John 13:13–15; John 14:6; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:1–16; Psalm 23; Philippians 2:21; 1 Peter 2:25; Hebrews 13:20 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, on John 13.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of John, on John 10.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Tractates on the Gospel of John, Tractates 45–47.
- St. Gregory the Great, Homily 14 on the Gospels (on the Good Shepherd).
- St. Gregory of Nyssa, Homilies on the Song of Songs.
- St. Clement of Rome, First Epistle to the Corinthians, on workmen of Christ.
- Friday Theotokia and Psalm 23, as prayed in the Agpeya tradition.

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes

What Is Expected of a Servant

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Having seen in the previous lesson who our Master is — the Good Shepherd who laid down His life for the sheep — we now turn to the question His example presses upon us: what does He expect of the ones He has called to serve with Him? The New Testament is not shy about answering. In the Pastoral Epistles especially, the Holy Spirit through St. Paul sketches for us a portrait of the Christian servant: a person grounded in the Scriptures, taught by heavenly wisdom, upright in conduct, clear in speech, steady in zeal, and always aiming not at a crowd of hearers but at a chain of disciples. None of these expectations is a standard to be reached by ourselves; each of them is a work of grace that the Lord is willing to perform in any servant who asks for it. In this lesson we will walk through six of these expectations in turn, so that when we stand before the children, the youth, or the inquirer, we will know what kind of people the Lord is quietly making us into as we serve.

Called by the Servant-King

The first expectation the Lord places on every servant is the one He placed on Himself. He does not begin by handing us a list of duties; He begins by handing us His own life as the pattern. Two of His disciples had approached Him through their mother, asking for thrones at His right and left hand. The other ten were indignant. And into that argument about greatness, the Lord spoke the sentence that has defined Christian service ever since:

“You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25–28, NKJV)

The vocabulary is striking. The Lord does not forbid greatness among His disciples; He redirects it. He does not tell them to be small. He tells them that the road to true greatness runs in the opposite direction from the one the world has been pointing them down. And then He points to Himself as proof. He is the Son of Man. He is greater than any of them will ever be. And He has spent His whole ministry on the underside of human life, where the tired and the sick and the ashamed have gathered, because that is where service goes.

If that is what Christ Himself embraced, what should we expect of ourselves? St. Paul answers for us, writing to his young disciple St. Timothy who was entering the work of the service:

“Let no one despise your youth, but be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come, give attention to reading, to exhortation,

to doctrine. Do not neglect the gift that is in you, which was given to you by prophecy with the laying on of the hands of the eldership.” (1 Timothy 4:12–14, NKJV)

Every phrase of that charge deserves a slow reading, because each phrase is a facet of the single jewel called the servant’s life. An example in word — our speech is to teach even when we are not teaching. An example in conduct — our lives are to match what our mouths say. An example in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity — these are not character traits optional to ministry; they are the minimum soil in which ministry can grow. Then come the disciplines: reading, exhortation, doctrine. And behind all of it is the reminder that the gift we carry was given through the laying on of hands, through the Church, by the Spirit — it is not ours to squander. The servant’s life begins here: called by the Servant-King, charged with His example, entrusted with His gift.

Grounded in the Word

If we are to speak for the Lord, we had better first let the Lord speak to us. The first expectation after calling is Scripture. A servant who does not know the Word of God well has almost nothing of eternal value to give, no matter how naturally gifted he may be as a speaker or how charming she may be with the children. The treasury we dispense must first fill our own hearts:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Colossians 3:16, NKJV)

Note the words St. Paul chose. He did not say, let the word of Christ visit you occasionally. He said dwell — take up residence, settle in, become a permanent household member of the heart. And not only dwell, but dwell richly, as a houseguest who has unpacked every suitcase. That kind of indwelling is what qualifies us to teach one another at all, because the teaching that follows (“teaching and admonishing one another”) is the overflow of a heart that is already full. An empty heart has nothing to overflow.

Scripture is not merely our favorite source; it is our only God-breathed source, and therefore it sits in a category of its own among all the books a servant will ever read:

“All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16–17, NKJV)

The four purposes St. Paul names — doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction — are almost a description of the work of service itself. Doctrine teaches what is true; reproof names what has gone wrong; correction sets it right; instruction trains in the way of righteousness. The servant who knows the Scriptures has all four of these in his hand every time he opens the Bible. The servant who does not is working with a toolbox that is mostly empty.

But knowing the Word is not a task that ends when we graduate from Sunday School or seminary. It is a lifelong pursuit that even the greatest of the apostles refused to lay down. In the last letter St. Paul

ever wrote, from a Roman prison, awaiting the executioner's sword, he made a final request of St. Timothy:

"Bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas when you come — and the books, especially the parchments." (2 Timothy 4:13, NKJV)

Let us feel the weight of that sentence. Paul has preached for more than thirty years. He has been caught up to the third heaven and heard words unlawful to utter. He has written most of the letters that now form half the New Testament. He is, in the most literal sense, a man whose own words are Scripture. And with weeks to live, he asks for books. The Fathers noticed and would not let us forget. St. John Chrysostom returns to this habit of the servant over and over in his preaching:

"When you immerse your mind and heart in spiritual books, you will always be filled, for spiritual reading gives you a foundation in God." – St. John Chrysostom, Third Homily on Lazarus

And Theophan the Recluse, summarizing centuries of monastic wisdom, refuses to let us treat reading as a luxury for those who have time:

"One must read, for this is an ascetical activity." – Theophan the Recluse, The Path to Salvation

Ascetical — that is, a discipline, an exercise, a labor of the soul. Reading Scripture and the Fathers is not recreation for the servant; it is training. The servant who does not read grows thin, and a thin servant cannot feed anyone. Before we expect to feed others, let us be sure we have been fed.

Taught by the Spirit

Reading, however, is not yet enough. There are professors of theology in every great university who can parse the Greek of the New Testament better than most of us will ever read English, and who nevertheless do not believe one word of what the text says. Information is not the same as wisdom, and wisdom is not the same as heavenly wisdom. The servant needs the third of those, and only the third will do.

St. Paul draws the line sharply between a wisdom that is of this world and a wisdom that is given from above:

"Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things that have been freely given to us by God. These things we also speak, not in words which man's wisdom teaches but which the Holy Spirit teaches, comparing spiritual things with spiritual." (1 Corinthians 2:12–13, NKJV)

Earthly wisdom is real; we are not called to despise it. A servant who prepares a lesson on a historical book of the Old Testament and neglects to learn what little archaeology can tell us about its world has cheated the children. But earthly wisdom cannot, by itself, reach the places in a hearer's soul that only God has ever seen. It can describe the outside of a lamp; it cannot light it. For that, we need the

wisdom the Holy Spirit teaches — the habit of comparing spiritual things with spiritual, of letting Scripture interpret Scripture, of letting the mind of Christ (which we have, by grace) shape the mind we bring to our preparation.

This is why St. Paul refuses to separate preaching from wisdom. The Gospel he preached was not merely news; it was news handled wisely, so that it could do its saving work in every hearer:

“Him we preach, warning every man and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” (Colossians 1:28, NKJV)

Notice the three “every man”s. Wisdom is not a gift for our own private satisfaction; wisdom is what makes it possible to address every man, which is to say, each particular person with a particular story and a particular wound. The servant who has only one style of speaking has wisdom for one kind of hearer. The servant whom the Spirit has trained begins to find that the right word for the child, the right word for the teenager, the right word for the grieving parent, and the right word for the visiting unbeliever are not the same word — and that this is not a problem but a grace.

And since wisdom always travels with faith and truth, the servant must hold both. St. Paul describes his own ministry in precisely these terms: “a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth” (1 Timothy 2:7, NKJV). Faith keeps us warm; truth keeps us accurate. The Lord has joined them, and we dare not put them asunder. The servant’s lesson is to be reviewed for sound doctrine before it is carried into the classroom, because the same St. Paul who described his teaching as full of faith also warned his disciple against a ministry that has drifted from the truth:

“As I urged you when I went into Macedonia — remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine.” (1 Timothy 1:3, NKJV)

A loving servant with a false doctrine will harm the flock more than a crude servant with a true one. The expectation, then, is that we will work to be both: warm in faith and clear in truth, both taught by the Spirit.

The Life That Matches the Word

It is possible to know the Scriptures, to have heavenly wisdom, and still to disqualify oneself from the service — by a life that does not match what the mouth is saying. The fourth expectation, therefore, is integrity, which is simply the old word for the condition in which one’s inner life and outer life are the same shape. St. Paul puts the danger plainly to the church at Rome:

“You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonor God through breaking the law?” (Romans 2:21–23, NKJV)

The servant is not called to be sinless — no servant ever has been, and no servant ever will be this side of the resurrection — but the servant is called to be struggling, in actual practice, against the very sins

he is teaching others to struggle against. The lesson on prayer is hollow if the one giving it does not pray. The lesson on forgiveness is hollow if the one giving it refuses to forgive. The lesson on purity is hollow if the one giving it lives a double life. The children are not deceived for long; sooner or later the word and the life will be laid side by side, and the hearer will believe the life. This is the meaning of St. Paul's other charge to Timothy:

"If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed." (1 Timothy 4:6, NKJV)

The little phrase "which you have carefully followed" is the whole point. The good minister is the one whose teaching is a report from his own road. He does not hand out maps of a country he has never visited. And lest we be tempted to shrug this off, St. James closes the door on every easy escape:

"My brethren, let not many of you become teachers, knowing that we shall receive a stricter judgment." (James 3:1, NKJV)

Stricter. Not lighter. The servant stands in the place of the Master before the children, and the Master will ask what the servant did with that place. This is not a reason to run from the service — the Lord has called us, and we do not turn Him down — but it is a reason to enter the service with our eyes open and with a continual prayer on our lips that the life the Lord sees would match the life the children see. Integrity is not an achievement; it is a daily labor of keeping the two in alignment.

Persuasion, Parable, and the Reach of the Teacher

Next to integrity stands a quieter virtue that we sometimes forget to name: the labor of making ourselves understood. The Lord Himself took this labor seriously. He did not address the crowds in the technical idiom of the scribes. He spoke of sowers and seeds, of a lost coin and a lost sheep and a lost son, of a wedding feast and a pearl of great price. The Fathers read this as a deliberate pedagogical choice. St. Paul, who had every Pharisaic credential, made the same choice in his own ministry and was clear about why:

"Yet in the church I would rather speak five words with my understanding, that I may teach others also, than ten thousand words in a tongue." (1 Corinthians 14:19, NKJV)

Five intelligible words outweigh ten thousand unintelligible ones. That is the servant's arithmetic. A lesson overflowing with theological vocabulary that the children cannot carry home is a lesson that has not yet been taught. The servant's work is not finished when the words leave our mouths; it is finished when the words land in the hearer's heart. St. Gregory the Great, in the Pastoral Rule which shaped Christian ministry for a thousand years, made this principle the axis of an entire book:

"The same exhortation does not suit all, inasmuch as neither are all bound together by similarity of character. For the things that profit some often hurt others." – St. Gregory the Great, Pastoral Rule, Book III, Prologue

He then spends the rest of the book sketching forty pairs of contrasting hearers — the timid and the bold, the patient and the impatient, the joyful and the sad, the married and the celibate — and asking the shepherd to speak differently to each. That is persuasion in the patristic sense: not manipulation, not salesmanship, but the servant's care to bring the same eternal truth to this particular soul in a form it can receive. Applications, illustrations, stories, questions — these are not frills on top of a lesson; they are the bridges by which the lesson crosses from the servant to the hearer.

The Lord Himself has told us that, when we teach in this way, we do not teach alone and we do not teach small:

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.” (John 14:12, NKJV)

Let us not miss what is promised there. The lowliest servant, faithfully teaching one Sunday School class in an unknown parish, stands on the same promise the apostles stood on. The Lord has not reserved “greater works” for saints in stained-glass windows. He has reserved them for anyone who believes. The labor of persuasion, the labor of finding the word that fits this hearer, is work the Lord Himself is pleased to multiply.

Zeal, Patience, and Disciples

The final expectation gathers up the first five and sends them forward in time. The servant is called not to a sprint but to a long obedience, and the fruit of that long obedience is not a crowd but a chain of disciples. Near the end of the letter in which he asked for the books, St. Paul gives St. Timothy what may be the clearest charge on zeal anywhere in the New Testament:

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:2, NKJV)

In season, when the class is full and attentive and the lesson lands. Out of season, when only three children have come, when the sermon seems to have gone nowhere, when the ones we have served longest are the ones who have wounded us most. Preach the word. Convince, when reason will receive it. Rebuke, when rebuke will save a soul. Exhort, when the hearer needs heart. And do all of it with longsuffering — a word that literally means long-tempered, slow to give up on a person — and with teaching, that is, never weaponizing the service into a personal vendetta, always returning the hearer to the truth.

This is why attitude matters as much as aptitude. The servant with every gift but a brittle spirit will not last. The servant with modest gifts and a supple spirit will bear fruit for decades. St. Paul even envisions the community around the servant sharing in his labor, so that zeal is not left solitary:

“Let him who is taught the word share in all good things with him who teaches.” (Galatians 6:6, NKJV)

And at the end of the long obedience stands the true goal of the service, which our Lord named in His last commandment before He ascended:

“Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”
(Matthew 28:19–20, NKJV)

The Lord did not say, make hearers. He did not say, make students. He said, make disciples. A disciple is a hearer who has become a follower, and a follower who is becoming, by grace, a teacher in turn. This is why St. Paul, at the very end of his life, measures his ministry not by how many times he preached but by how many links the chain of discipleship has grown:

“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” (2 Timothy 2:2, NKJV)

There are four generations in that single verse: Paul, Timothy, the faithful men, and the others also. The servant’s life is not a candle burning alone; it is a candle lighting other candles, and those candles lighting still others, until at last the room the Lord has asked us to fill is fully lit. May the Lord who called us find us, at the end, with our hands full of the disciples He has given us through our long labor — and may He count us among the good and faithful servants who have entered into the joy of their Lord.

Review Questions

1. In Matthew 20:25–28 the Lord does not forbid greatness among His disciples; He redefines it. In the service we have been given, what would it look like for us to pursue greatness on the Lord’s terms rather than on the world’s terms — and where in our ministry have we been tempted to confuse the two?
2. St. Paul, writing his last letter from a Roman prison, asked St. Timothy to bring him the books (2 Timothy 4:13). St. John Chrysostom and Theophan the Recluse both call spiritual reading an ascetical discipline. Honestly examining our own week, how much of our time goes to feeding our own soul before we attempt to feed others, and what one change could we make this month?
3. The servant needs earthly learning, heavenly wisdom, faith, and truth — all four (1 Corinthians 2:12–13; Colossians 1:28; 1 Timothy 2:7; 1 Timothy 1:3). Of these four, which is our strongest? Which is our weakest? And what would it mean for the weakest one to be strengthened in us this year?
4. Romans 2:21–23 and James 3:1 together describe the weight of integrity that the servant bears. Are there any lessons we teach regularly whose subject we ourselves are not currently struggling to live? What would it look like to bring our life back into alignment with that teaching — not by lowering the teaching, but by lifting the life?

5. The Lord's final commandment is to make disciples, not merely hearers (Matthew 28:19–20; 2 Timothy 2:2). Of the ones we are serving right now, who is the Lord beginning to shape into a future servant — and what step is ours to take this season to invest in that person specifically, so that the chain of discipleship continues through us?

Books & References

Scripture: Matthew 20:25–28; Matthew 28:18–20; John 14:12; Romans 2:21–23; 1 Corinthians 2:12–13; 1 Corinthians 14:19; Galatians 6:6; Colossians 1:28; Colossians 3:16; 1 Timothy 1:3; 1 Timothy 2:7; 1 Timothy 4:6, 12–14; 2 Timothy 2:1–2; 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Timothy 4:2, 13; James 3:1 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Third Homily on Lazarus.
- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Second Timothy, on 2 Timothy 4.
- St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule (Regula Pastoralis), especially Book III on the diversity of hearers.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, On Christian Doctrine, Book IV (on the teacher's eloquence in service of the truth).
- Theophan the Recluse, The Path to Salvation, on reading as an ascetical activity.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on humility and knowledge.
- Feed My Sheep (parish edition), chapters on the spirituality and preparation of the servant.

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes

Love in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Everything we have learned so far about the servant — the Good Shepherd pattern, the expectations of Scripture and wisdom and integrity — rests upon one foundation, and without that foundation every other stone we lay will slide. St. Paul called that foundation love, and he devoted the thirteenth chapter of his first letter to the Corinthians to describing it in words the Church has never gotten over. In this lesson we will walk through that chapter with him, and we will let him ask us the question he asked them: not “What gifts do we have?” but “Have we love?” For if we serve without love, St. Paul says we are nothing — even with tongues of angels in our mouths and all the faith that can move mountains in our hearts. And if we serve with love, even the smallest ministry is a participation in what the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit have been doing from before the foundation of the world.

The Question the Service Puts to Us

Before we open 1 Corinthians 13, we should notice the question the New Testament keeps pressing on anyone who would serve. It is not, “Are we qualified?” and it is not, “Are we talented?” It is, “Can we love someone who is not our flesh and blood?” St. John, in his first epistle, refuses to let a disciple of Christ escape that question:

“For this is the message that you heard from the beginning, that we should love one another... He who does not love his brother abides in death.” (1 John 3:11, 14, NKJV)

The language is stark. Not hindered, not weakened, not diminished — abides in death. For St. John there is no middle country between love and death, because love is the life of God and those who refuse it refuse Him. And when St. John fills out what this love actually looks like, he does not reach for emotions. He reaches for the cross:

“By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him? My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” (1 John 3:16–18, NKJV)

The Greek word behind “love” in these verses is the word the whole New Testament reserves for the highest love there is: *agapé*. It is not romantic feeling, not friendly affection, not natural kinship. It is the love that the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father, the love the Trinity has poured out upon a world that did not deserve it. The Fathers summarize its character in four marks: it is unconditional, it is sacrificial, it is willful, and it is limitless. That is the love to which every servant is called.

And when our Lord redefines who counts as a “brother” for whom this love is owed, He does not draw the circle narrowly:

“For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother and sister and mother.”
(Matthew 12:50, NKJV)

The servant, then, is not merely asked to love the family members easy to love. The servant is asked to love every child of God the Lord entrusts to the service, and to do it in deed and in truth — not in warm feelings unaccompanied by action, but in action that may cost us something.

Ruth and the Shape of Love-in-Deed

Because love in deed is so easy to describe and so hard to recognize, the Lord has given us a short book at the hinge of the Old Testament almost entirely to show us what it looks like. Naomi has lost her husband and both her sons. She is old, she is a widow, she is emptied out. She sets her face back toward Bethlehem and tells her two daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ houses. Orpah, after some tears, does exactly that; it is the rational choice. But Ruth — a Moabite, a foreigner, a woman with every reason to go home to her own people — says this:

“Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you; for wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me.” (Ruth 1:16–17, NKJV)

Notice that Ruth does not call this love. She does not have to. She lives it. She binds her future to Naomi’s; she leaves her country; she adopts Naomi’s God as her own. And the Lord honors her loyalty so fully that He threads her into the genealogy of His own Son: a Moabite widow becomes the great-grandmother of David, and through David, of Christ. Love in deed has this way of working forward through generations the lover cannot see.

The lesson for the servant is plain. We cannot love from a safe distance, and we cannot love abstractly. St. Augustine captured the principle in a single line that the Church has been quoting for sixteen centuries:

“Love cannot be idle; it is the most restless of all things.” – St. Augustine of Hippo,
Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Homily 7

If the service has gone cold, if the preparation has become mechanical, if the children’s faces have blurred into an undifferentiated crowd, the diagnosis is almost always the same: love has gone to sleep. Love cannot be idle. Wake it, and the whole ministry wakes with it.

Gifts Without Love: What 1 Corinthians 13 Strips Away

Now we are ready for 1 Corinthians 13, and for the shock St. Paul wants to deliver to the Corinthian church — and to us. The Corinthians were richly gifted. They had tongues, they had prophecy, they had

knowledge, they had faith. They were, by almost any measure we now use to evaluate a ministry, a successful church. And in the middle of his first letter to them, St. Paul stops the music and says this:

“Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, but have not love, it profits me nothing.” (1 Corinthians 13:1–3, NKJV)

Let us not soften what he has said. Three times in three verses the same structure falls: a magnificent gift — and nothing. Eloquence without love is noise. Knowledge without love is zero. Even the martyr’s fire, without love, profits the martyr nothing. Gifts by themselves do not sanctify. Gifts by themselves do not save. St. Paul even warns, in his second letter to the same church, that gifts can be distributed on the other side of the battle line altogether: “even Satan transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness” (2 Corinthians 11:14–15, NKJV). The presence of a gift is no proof that the Giver is present. Only love bears that witness.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this very chapter, will not let his congregation escape the implication:

“Though one work ten thousand miracles, if he have not love, he shall profit nothing. For neither is there any gift so great as love; nor any, again, which abideth when love is not.” – St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, Homily 32

This is the hinge on which the whole lesson turns. The work the Lord is doing in the servant is not, first of all, the multiplication of gifts. It is the formation of a loving heart. Gifts without that heart are a chandelier with no current running through it — all glass and brass, no light.

The First Love: Loving God Before We Serve

If love is the one indispensable thing, where is it to be found? Not in ourselves, first. We do not generate agapé out of our own natural kindness, because our natural kindness has limits and agapé does not. Love begins in God, and it reaches us because He reached us first:

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” (John 3:16, NKJV)

That sentence is not decoration. It is the source code of Christian service. The Father loved; the Father gave; the Son came. Our ministry is a downstream current of that original giving. This is why the Lord, when He restored St. Peter to the service after the three denials, did not begin by asking, “Have you prepared?” or “Are you ready?” He began with a single question, asked three times beside the Sea of Tiberias:

“So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep.”” (John 21:15–17, NKJV)

The Fathers have long drawn attention to a detail hidden in the Greek. The first two times the Lord asks, He uses the verb *agapáo* — do you love Me with sacrificial, limitless love? Peter, still chastened by his denials, cannot claim so much; he answers with the gentler verb *philéo* — Lord, You know I have affection for You. The third time, the Lord descends to Peter’s own word: do you at least have affection for Me? And Peter is grieved, because the Master has reached the floor of his capacity. Yet the Lord does not wait until Peter’s love has grown to *agapé* before He entrusts him with the sheep. Three times over, the answer is the same: Feed My lambs. Tend My sheep. Feed My sheep. The Lord accepts the love the servant can give, and He uses the service itself to grow the servant into the higher love He has prepared for him.

There is great comfort in that scene. The Lord does not demand perfect love before He gives us perfect work. He calls us at whatever register our hearts can presently sustain, and He teaches us, through the actual labor of feeding His lambs, to love Him and them with a fuller love. The precondition of service is not that we love God perfectly. The precondition is that we turn our face toward Him and begin.

Love as a Choice, Love as a Road

Because love does not begin at its full height, the servant has to understand it as both a choice and a road. It is a choice because it begins with an act of the will; it is a road because that act has to be renewed every day, and because along the way love is shaped by the Holy Spirit into something the servant could not have produced on the first day.

Our Lord made love a commandment at the Last Supper, which tells us immediately that love is something we can choose to obey:

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34–35, NKJV)

A commandment is not addressed to feelings. Feelings cannot be commanded; they can only be noticed. A commandment is addressed to the will. Our Lord is telling His disciples that love, for them, is a decision to be made and re-made — a decision to wash one another’s feet when they would rather argue about greatness, a decision to forgive when the tongue is sharp, a decision to stay at the side of a tired person when every other instinct is pulling toward the door.

And what does that decision, made day by day, actually look like? St. Paul draws the portrait — perhaps the most famous portrait in the whole Bible:

“Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” (1 Corinthians 13:4–7, NKJV)

Every line of that paragraph is a picture of Christ, and every line is also an examen for the servant. Suffering long: do we still have patience for the child who disrupts every class? Kind: are we gentle at the end of a long day or only at the beginning? Not envious: can we rejoice when a younger servant teaches better than we do? Not parading itself, not puffed up: is our service quiet enough for God to see? Not seeking its own: whose kingdom are we actually building? Bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things: have we given up on anyone the Lord has not yet given up on?

This is why the Fathers call love a road and not a single moment. It is not reached all at once. St. John Cassian, gathering the wisdom of the desert in his Conferences, fixes the servant’s eye on this gradual ascent:

“Whatever can help to guide us to this scope, namely, purity of heart, we must follow with all our might; but whatever hinders us from it, we must shun as a dangerous and hurtful thing. For it is for this that we do and endure all things.” – St. John Cassian, Conferences I (Abba Moses), ch. 5

Purity of heart is the name Cassian gives to the ground in which love finally grows, and he insists that the whole of the Christian life — reading, fasting, prayer, silence, service — exists to clear that ground of weeds. Love is not a feeling we either have or do not have; love is the high country the servant climbs toward, one chosen step at a time, while the Holy Spirit cuts the path and makes the slope bearable.

The One Thing That Does Not Pass Away

St. Paul ends the thirteenth chapter with a verdict that the servant should carry into every lesson prepared and every visit paid:

“Love never fails. But whether there are prophecies, they will fail; whether there are tongues, they will cease; whether there is knowledge, it will vanish away... And now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” (1 Corinthians 13:8, 13, NKJV)

The Corinthians treasured the spectacular gifts — tongues and prophecy and healing. St. Paul tells them, without contempt, that those gifts have an expiration date. They belong to this age, the age of the partial and the fragmentary, the age in which we know in part and prophesy in part. When the Lord comes and all things are made new, most of what we now take pride in will simply no longer be needed. There will be no more tongues because there will be no more language barrier between the

saints. There will be no more prophecy because all things will be open and seen. There will be no more teaching as we now know it, because “they shall all be taught by God” (John 6:45, NKJV).

But love — love does not expire, because love is what God is. St. John, the apostle of love, says so plainly: “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him” (1 John 4:16, NKJV). Love is not one of God’s many activities; love is His life, the eternal self-giving of the Father to the Son, of the Son to the Father, of both in the Holy Spirit. Everything we do that is done in love is therefore a participation, however small, in the inner life of the Trinity. That is why love alone crosses the bridge into eternity. The rest of what we carry will be left at the riverbank.

Let this be the lens through which we measure our service. Not: how many children came this year? Not: how many lessons did we teach? Not: how many compliments did we collect? But: did the children encounter the love of Christ through us? Did the lesson carry love in every line? Did our life bear witness, in deed and in truth, that we abide in the Love that laid down its life for us?

If the answer is yes — however haltingly, however imperfectly — then the service has done what the Lord asked it to do. And the love we have tried, with trembling, to give, will outlast us and outlast the children we served and outlast even the building in which we served them. It will enter the Kingdom with us, because it is the one thing in us that already belongs there. May the Lord, who is love, fill us with Himself, so that the service we have been given may be full of Him — and may we, with Ruth and Peter and Paul and all the servants who have gone before us, abide in that love forever.

Review Questions

1. 1 John 3:16–18 tells us not to love “in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.” Reading slowly over the last month of our service, where has our love been mostly in word, and where has it crossed into deed? What is one concrete deed the Lord is nudging us to do this week for someone we have been loving only from a distance?
2. St. Paul’s three “I am nothing” sentences (1 Corinthians 13:1–3) assume that even great gifts, exercised without love, are worthless. Which of our own gifts is most at risk of being exercised without love — our teaching, our knowledge, our organizational ability, our visibility? What would it look like to bring that gift back under love’s rule?
3. By the Sea of Tiberias the Lord accepted the love Peter could give at that moment, even though it was not yet agapé, and He still entrusted him with the sheep (John 21:15–17). Is there a way in which we have been refusing to serve because we fear our love for the Lord is not yet “enough”? What might it mean to begin feeding His lambs at the register of love we have today?
4. Walk slowly through 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 as a mirror for our service. Which line most exposes us (patience, kindness, not envying, not seeking our own, bearing and believing and hoping all things, enduring)? What would it cost us, this year, to let the Lord heal that line in us?
5. St. John Cassian calls purity of heart the ground in which love grows, and calls every practice of the Christian life a tool for clearing that ground. Which passion in our own heart most often

“chokes” our love for the people we serve, and what discipline is the Lord asking us to take up — or put down — to give love room to grow?

Books & References

Scripture: Ruth 1:16–17; Matthew 12:46–50; John 3:16; John 13:34–35; John 21:15–17; 1 Corinthians 13 (entire chapter); 2 Corinthians 11:14–15; 1 John 3:11–18; 1 John 4:7–21 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on First Corinthians, Homilies 32–34 (on 1 Corinthians 13).
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John, especially Homily 7 (“Love, and do what you will”).
- St. John Cassian, Conferences I (Abba Moses), on the scope and end of the monastic life as purity of heart.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on the merciful heart.
- St. Maximus the Confessor, Four Hundred Chapters on Love.
- H.G. Bishop Youssef, Patristic Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (on 1 Cor. 13).
- Feed My Sheep (parish edition), chapter on the love of the servant.

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes

Responsibilities in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

We have looked at the shepherd-heart our Lord modeled for us, at the long list of expectations the New Testament lays upon the servant, and at the love without which none of those expectations can be met. It remains for us to walk the road on which all of this is tested, which is the road of daily responsibility. Responsibility is not a temperament. Some of us were born neat and others disorderly, some eager and others cautious, but the sense of duty that keeps a servant showing up for the children week after week for ten years is not inherited — it is formed. In this lesson we will watch the Scripture teach us what responsibility looks like in a servant: not as a single virtue, but as a whole posture of the soul that the Holy Spirit shapes in us over a lifetime. We will see it in Adam and in David, in the Samaritan and in Nehemiah, in the Prodigal on the road home and in our Lord Himself on the hillside surrounded by five thousand hungry people. In each place the same truth stands: responsibility is what love looks like when it has work to do.

Responsibility as a Choice: The Two Postures of Adam

Responsibility is not something we catch; it is something we choose. And because it is chosen, every one of us is capable of it on our best days and capable of evading it on our worst. Scripture makes this plain in its very first chapters, where the same man, Adam, is shown to us twice — once in responsibility and once in flight from it.

In the garden, when the Lord brought the woman to him, Adam's response was not a shrug. It was poetry and covenant:

"This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man." (Genesis 2:23, NKJV)

That is what responsibility sounds like when it is whole. She is mine; I am hers; we are one flesh; I will stand for her and she for me. Not a word is wasted on what she owes him; his opening sentence is what he owes her. Responsibility always begins, in its healthy form, with the question, What belongs to me to care for?

But only a chapter later the same man, having sinned, meets his Creator in the cool of the day and gives an answer whose grammar tells the whole story:

"The woman whom You gave to be with me, she gave me of the tree, and I ate."
(Genesis 3:12, NKJV)

"The woman whom You gave." Three separate arrows of blame in a single sentence: at the woman, at the Lord, at the circumstances. The man who a chapter earlier sang of his covenant bride as bone of

his bones now stands at a safe distance from her and from his Creator, and points. Nothing has changed about Adam's capacity; what has changed is his nearness to God. Responsibility is the natural speech of a soul in communion with its Maker, and blame is the natural speech of a soul in hiding. The servant's first task, every morning, is to decide which of those two postures the day will be lived in.

Rooted in Godliness: The Two Davids

If Adam shows us the two postures side by side in a single life, David shows us the same truth stretched across a lifetime. When David was a boy with a sling and the Lord's name on his lips, his sense of responsibility for his father's sheep was total. He tells Saul exactly how total when the giant is mocking Israel in the valley of Elah:

"Your servant used to keep his father's sheep, and when a lion or a bear came and took a lamb out of the flock, I went out after it and struck it, and delivered the lamb from its mouth; and when it arose against me, I caught it by its beard, and struck and killed it. Your servant has killed both lion and bear..." (1 Samuel 17:34–36, NKJV)

That is responsibility grown into courage. A single lamb in the jaws of a predator is enough to send him into the fight, because the flock is his to guard. No one would have blamed the boy for letting one lamb go. He blamed himself, and went.

The same David, years later, saunters onto his palace roof one evening when the kings are out at war, sees what he should not be looking at, sends for her, takes her, and when the inconvenient pregnancy threatens to surface, arranges her husband's death in battle (2 Samuel 11). It is the same man. What changed was not his personality. What changed was his nearness to God. A soul close to the Lord reaches out to protect; a soul at a distance reaches out to consume. St. John Chrysostom, commenting on this terrible collapse, refuses to separate David's ethics from his prayer life:

"When the soul neglects prayer, even the most righteous will fall; and when the soul keeps watch with God, even the weakest will stand." – St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, XIV

The servant, then, cannot treat responsibility as a skill to be drilled into the will. It has to be watered by the life of prayer, the life of the sacraments, the life of the Scriptures. Cut off from those streams, even a faithful servant will, in time, begin to act like the later David. Fed by those streams, even a shy servant will, in time, begin to act like the younger one.

It Does Not Wait for an Invitation

Responsibility as the Lord shapes it in us does not wait to be asked. A servant whose sense of duty kicks in only after being directly instructed has not yet received the full gift. True responsibility sees the need first, and moves.

Our Lord told the story most clearly in the parable of the Good Samaritan. A priest passed by on the other side. A Levite passed by on the other side. And then:

“But a certain Samaritan, as he journeyed, came where he was. And when he saw him, he had compassion. So he went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; and he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him.”
(Luke 10:33–34, NKJV)

No one gave the Samaritan an assignment. No one stopped him on the Jericho road and said, You are in charge of this man. He saw. He had compassion. He went. The whole parable is an argument that neighborliness is not determined by the roster but by the sight. The Fathers heard the parable and saw in the Samaritan the face of Christ Himself, who found humanity bleeding on the road of this world and stopped and bound up our wounds; and they urged every Christian to read the parable as a calling. St. Cyril of Alexandria put it this way:

“The Samaritan did what neither priest nor Levite did, and showed thereby that the law of love is higher than the letter of office. Whoever has eyes to see a wounded brother has already been made his neighbor.” – St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, Homily 68

Scripture doubles the lesson for us by giving us Nehemiah, a lay servant with no priestly title, no prophetic office, no political rank above cupbearer in a foreign court. When a brother arrives from Judah and reports that the walls of Jerusalem are broken and the gates are burned, Nehemiah’s first response is this:

“So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” (Nehemiah 1:4, NKJV)

No one had asked Nehemiah to take this on. The king had not sent him. The priests had not summoned him. But a servant whose heart is open to God takes responsibility for what breaks God’s heart. The rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem begins not with a royal decree but with a layman weeping in Susa. And this is the pattern the servant is called to carry into the parish: when we see something in our ministry that has gone soft — a class that has lost its heart, a family that has dropped away, a visitation that has been neglected — the servant does not shrug and say, “That is the coordinator’s problem.” The servant prays, and weeps, and then acts, within the structures the Church has set, to see it mended. Responsibility does not wait to be asked; it goes looking.

It Takes Ownership

Alongside initiative stands an ugly cousin of it: the temptation, when things have gone wrong, to blame anyone other than ourselves. Responsibility closes that door. It owns what belongs to it, apologizes where apology is due, repents where repentance is due, and gets on with the work.

No parable shows this more tenderly than the one the Church calls the Prodigal. A young son takes his inheritance, spends it, hits the bottom of a foreign field feeding pigs, and finally — in the famous verse — comes to himself:

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants.”’” (Luke 15:17–19, NKJV)

Notice what the son does not say. He does not say, the friends I fell in with ruined me. He does not say, the famine in this country made me desperate. He does not say, my father should have warned me. He says, I have sinned. I am no longer worthy. I will arise. That is the whole of responsibility compressed into three verbs: I have; I am; I will. The servant who can say those three sentences with honesty about his own life is almost already home.

St. Augustine, preaching on this parable again and again, refused to let his hearers miss the miracle buried in the middle of it:

“He came to himself. In his distant country he had been outside himself; in his repentance he came home to himself before he came home to his father.” – St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermon 112A (on Luke 15)

The lesson for the servant is piercing. We will make mistakes in the service. We will misjudge a child, we will prepare badly one week, we will speak too sharply in a meeting, we will drop the ball on a visit we promised to make. The question is not whether this will happen; the question is what we do when it does. The servant without ownership will find a reason. The servant with ownership will come to himself, and arise, and go back to the Father, and also — this matters — to the brother who was wronged, and will begin again. St. James promises us that when this movement is honest, the Lord meets it: “Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much” (James 5:16, NKJV).

It Reaches Beyond the Task

Responsibility in service has a way of quietly expanding if the servant lets it. A lesson to prepare becomes a life to know. A class to teach becomes a family to pray for. A task becomes a person. Our Lord Himself is the supreme teacher of this expansion, and one scene in particular shows it to us.

The crowds had followed Him into a wilderness place. The hour grew late. The disciples — reasonably, one might say — suggested He send them away so they could go and buy food in the villages. But our Lord looked at the crowd and saw more than a congregation:

“And Jesus, when He came out, saw a great multitude and was moved with compassion for them, because they were like sheep not having a shepherd. So He began to teach them many things... Then He said to them, “You give them something to eat.”” (Mark 6:34, 37, NKJV)

Notice the movement. He taught them, because they were hungry for the Word. But He also fed them, because they were hungry for bread. And on other days He healed them, because they were sick, and

forgave them, because they were burdened with guilt, and touched them, because they were lonely. The Master of every servant did not limit His responsibility to a single dimension of the people He had come to save. He took the whole person seriously. St. Gregory the Great, writing for every future pastor, made this the heart of the matter:

“He who has undertaken the care of souls must not think that by one kind of care he can discharge his whole office. The shepherd owes bread to the hungry, correction to the erring, encouragement to the faint-hearted, and a listening ear to the grieving — and to know which is owed to whom is itself a great part of the work.” – St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule, Book III, Prologue (paraphrased)

For us this means that our service is not discharged the moment the Sunday class ends. It is discharged slowly, across visits and phone calls and remembered birthdays and quiet follow-ups when a child is suddenly absent. Twenty years from now, the children we teach today will not remember the outline of most of our lessons. They will remember whether we knew their names. They will remember whether we called when a grandparent died. They will remember whether we noticed, on a bad Wednesday, that something was wrong and sat down with them for ten minutes. The content of the lesson is important. The relationship carries the lesson. Let us not serve one without serving the other.

This also means that when we encounter things we cannot fix — a home in crisis, a marriage in trouble, a child in danger — responsibility does not require us to do what is not ours to do. It requires us to pray, and to bring the concern faithfully to Abouna or to the proper coordinator, so that the shepherds of the flock can do what the Lord has appointed them to do. Responsibility is not the arrogance of thinking everything is ours to solve; responsibility is the humility of refusing to pretend that anything the Lord has put in front of us is someone else’s problem.

It Does Not Bow to Feelings or Circumstances

Finally, responsibility outlasts moods. If our service were governed by how we happened to feel on Saturday night, none of us would teach very long. A parent does not wake up on Tuesday and decide not to be a parent that day because the mood is not right. A priest does not cancel the liturgy because he is tired. In the same way, a servant who has accepted the call to feed the Lord’s lambs does not arrive or not arrive based on the weather of his heart. The work is too important, and the Lord to whom it is rendered is too faithful, for that kind of flickering.

St. Paul gave his young disciple St. Timothy the clearest possible charge on this:

“Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching.” (2 Timothy 4:2, NKJV)

In season, when everything is going well. Out of season, when the class is small and the preparation felt dry and the week has been hard. Longsuffering — a word that means, literally, long-tempered, slow to give up on people or on the work itself. The Lord did not promise us that the service would always feel rewarding; He promised us that the service would always matter.

And lest we treat this lightly, He Himself drew the line between the two kinds of servants, in a parable we should never forget:

“His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’”
(Matthew 25:21, NKJV)

The adjective is not successful. It is not talented. It is not popular. It is faithful. Faithfulness is what responsibility looks like when it has lasted. And the reward the Lord has in mind is not a badge or a thank-you; it is entry into His own joy. The servant who has learned to show up in season and out of season, who has taken ownership of mistakes, who has not waited for invitations, who has reached past the task to the person, who is daily renewing the choice Adam’s first word made and David’s later life unmade — that servant is being trained, over decades of small faithful acts, to hear those words. May the Lord who called us keep us faithful to the end, and may we find, when we arrive, that the children we served so imperfectly have arrived with us, and that the joy of the Lord is large enough for us all.

Review Questions

1. Genesis 2:23 and Genesis 3:12 show us the same Adam speaking twice — once as a covenant partner and once as a blame-shifter. In our own service this month, where have we sounded more like the second Adam than the first, and what would it look like to return, before the Lord, to the first posture?
2. The younger David risked his life for a single lamb; the older David, at a distance from God, consumed another man’s wife and life. The difference was not talent but nearness to God. Reading that honestly, how is the strength of our responsibility in the service connected to the depth of our prayer life? Which comes first for us, and which may need to?
3. The Samaritan saw and went. Nehemiah heard and wept and fasted and prayed and then moved. What is one need in our service right now that we have noticed but have been waiting for someone else to address? What would it look like to begin, this week, to take responsibility for it (within the structures of the Church and in communication with Abouna where appropriate)?
4. The Prodigal’s return begins with three short sentences — “I have sinned. I am no longer worthy. I will arise” (Luke 15:18–19). Is there a specific failure in our service for which we have not yet said those three sentences — either to the Lord, or to a person we wronged? What would it take, this season, to speak them?
5. Twenty years from now, the children we teach will not remember the outline of most of our lessons, but they will remember whether we knew their names, whether we called, whether we visited. Of the children the Lord has put before us, whose name have we been calling only in the classroom, and whose life has the Lord been quietly inviting us to enter more fully?

Books & References

Scripture: Genesis 2:18–25; Genesis 3:8–13; 1 Samuel 17:34–37; 2 Samuel 11–12; Nehemiah 1–2; Luke 10:25–37; Luke 15:11–24; Mark 6:30–44; Matthew 25:14–30; 2 Timothy 4:1–5; James 5:13–16 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Statues, especially Homily XIV (on watchfulness and prayer).
- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of Luke, homily on the Good Samaritan.
- St. Augustine of Hippo, Sermons on Luke 15 (especially on the Prodigal Son).
- St. Gregory the Great, The Pastoral Rule, Book III, on the diversity of hearers and the shepherd's varied care.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, on the merciful heart.
- Life of St. Pope Kyrillos VI, on the responsibility of the shepherd for the flock.
- Feed My Sheep (parish edition), chapter on the faithfulness of the servant.

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes