

Commitment in Service

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every servant begins, somewhere, with a first yes. Perhaps it was whispered at a retreat, perhaps offered in a quiet conversation with a father of confession, perhaps almost stumbled into when an older servant simply asked for help. The first yes is often easy. It is the second yes, and the hundredth, and the one offered on a tired Tuesday night in February when no one else is watching, that reveals what kind of servant we are becoming. Commitment, in the Christian life, is not a single decision; it is the thousand small decisions by which we keep showing up. Our Lord did not ask His disciples for a feeling about Him; He asked them to follow Him. And He warned, gently and more than once, that the servant who tries to keep one foot in the kingdom and the other outside of it will eventually be tired of both. In this lesson we will let Scripture and the Fathers teach us what commitment actually looks like in the life of a servant — what it costs, what it gives, and why the Lord Himself supplies it to every servant who is willing, daily, to be supplied.

The Shape of a Committed Life

When we hear the word commitment, we sometimes reach for something dramatic — a grand renunciation, a vow, a single moment of decisive rupture. Commitment in the Gospel does look like that sometimes, but most of the time it looks quieter and stranger. It looks like an ordinary servant who, year after year, simply will not walk away.

The best picture of commitment in the whole of Scripture may be the one St. Paul gives us near the end of his own life. He is in a Roman prison. He has been beaten, shipwrecked, misunderstood, imprisoned more than once, abandoned by friends, and is now awaiting execution by a distant emperor. Any observer would say his ministry has ended in failure. And from that cell, to a young disciple who may have been tempted to doubt whether all of this had been worth it, Paul writes a sentence that has steadied every committed servant ever since:

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing.” (2 Timothy 4:6–8, NKJV)

Poured out as a drink offering. That is the image a committed servant finally arrives at. Not a single heroic moment, but a whole life tipped over slowly onto the altar, until every drop has soaked into the ground. Paul did not quit when it got hard. He did not quit when it did not get easier. He kept showing

up, and at the end, he could say the three simple phrases that are the anatomy of a committed life: I fought, I finished, I kept.

Our Lord Himself, on the night before He laid down His life for us, reached for the same posture in His own prayer, speaking to His Father about the service the Father had given Him:

"I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do." (John 17:4, NKJV)

The Lord speaks these words before the Cross, not after it. He considers His work finished not when the tomb is emptied but when His will is fully surrendered. Commitment, in the pattern our Lord Himself set, is not measured by outcome. It is measured by surrender. The servant who has surrendered his will has, in the deepest sense, already finished the work, even if many years of faithful labor still lie ahead.

The Servant Who Tries to Serve Two Masters

Of all the dangers that erode commitment, none is older or more stubborn than the attempt to serve two masters. It is older than the Gospel itself — we see it in every covenant struggle in the Old Testament, and we see it in our own hearts on the drive home from a weekday liturgy. The Lord is not unkind about it. He speaks to it as a Father who knows we will try this, who has seen every generation of His children try this, and who refuses to let us pretend it will work:

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matthew 6:24, NKJV)

Notice how honest the Lord's language is. He does not say, "It is difficult to serve two masters." He says, "No one can." The attempt itself is not only unwise; it is impossible. The servant who tries it will not end up with divided loyalty — he will end up, sooner or later, choosing one and resenting the other. And almost always, when we try the experiment, the master who loses is the one who is not standing in front of us demanding. God, in His patience, rarely shouts. The other masters — comfort, approval, entertainment, career, the thousand small claims on our time — are always shouting. If we do not consciously choose the quiet master, the loud masters will consume us by default.

This was the great conflict that faced the early Christians, and it is the reason the Apostolic letters return to it so often. Many of the first disciples came from wealth or status. Some were women of rank; some were officials in the imperial service; some were merchants with long-running businesses. Walking with Christ cost them things the world considered non-negotiable. They made their choice anyway. St. Paul himself is perhaps the clearest example — a Pharisee of Pharisees, educated at the feet of Gamaliel, on track for a life of respected authority in Judaism, who traded the whole thing for the name of Christ:

"But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for

whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ.” (Philippians 3:7–8, NKJV)

The vocabulary is blunt on purpose. What he had once considered profit he now considered loss. What the world still prized he now treated as rubbish — not because those things were evil in themselves, but because he had found something worth infinitely more, and a man with infinite treasure does not carry costume jewelry around in his pocket any longer.

St. John Chrysostom, preaching on this passage to Christians in Antioch who still had one foot in the old Roman ways, pressed the image with characteristic warmth:

“The man who still clings to his former loves cannot run freely with Christ. He is like a runner carrying heavy baggage: the race is not lost for lack of feet, but for the refusal to set down the bag. Set it down, beloved, and you will see how fast the Christian soul can truly run.” — St. John Chrysostom, Homily 11 on Philippians

Set it down. That is the whole counsel. The committed servant is not the servant who sprints hardest. The committed servant is the one who has finally, lovingly, set the bag down.

Desire and Determination

What, then, is commitment made of? If it is not a feeling, and it is not a single heroic decision, what is it? The Fathers and the ascetic tradition are remarkably clear on this: commitment is the union of two quieter things — desire and determination. Each is insufficient without the other. Together, they form the backbone of the committed life.

Desire is the first. A committed servant wants the Lord. He wants Him with real warmth — not a generic spirituality, not a nostalgic affection, but a desire for the Person of Christ Himself. Without this desire, commitment becomes grim duty, and grim duty cannot survive the second decade of a servant's life. This is why the Psalmist teaches us to pray, again and again, for the kindling of our own desire:

“As the deer pants for the water brooks, so pants my soul for You, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.” (Psalm 42:1–2, NKJV)

The image is tender and bodily. A deer that has been running hard in the summer heat does not merely prefer water; it needs water. Our prayer is that our souls would acquire that quality of thirst — that love for Christ would become not one of our interests but our deepest hunger. Where that thirst is alive, commitment takes care of itself. Where that thirst has gone quiet, no amount of grit will preserve us for long.

Determination is the second. Desire without determination is sentiment; it feels lovely on retreat and evaporates in the parking lot. Determination is the steady yes of the will, given every morning, that carries the desire through the dry stretches it cannot feel its way through. St. Paul, writing to the Hebrews about the servants of the old covenant who kept their faith through long adversity, gives the theology of determination in a single image:

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” (Hebrews 12:1–2, NKJV)

Endurance. That is the hard word in the sentence, and it is the word that separates the committed servant from the enthusiastic one. Endurance is not the absence of feeling; it is the faithfulness that is still walking on the mornings when feeling has not yet arrived. And the Apostle gives us the trick for keeping endurance alive — not by looking at ourselves, which always collapses us, but by looking at Jesus, the author and finisher of what He Himself is building in us.

St. Isaac the Syrian, writing to monks who had discovered that the first flame of zeal had cooled and now had to decide whether they would continue, left a sentence worth writing on the servant's heart:

“The true servant of God is not the one who is always fervent, for no man is always fervent. The true servant of God is the one who, in his fervor, does not grow proud, and in his dryness, does not stop walking.” — St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies LXV

In our fervor, not proud. In our dryness, not stopping. That is the double pattern of determination in the committed life. We all have our fervent seasons; we all have our dry ones. The question is not which season we are in tonight. The question is whether, in both seasons, we are still walking.

The Joy the World Does Not Know

There is a particular joy that belongs to the committed servant, and it is worth speaking about plainly, because the world does not know it and will not admit that it exists. The world is sure that the committed life must be narrow, joyless, and exhausting. It has never actually watched a committed servant up close.

The committed servant is, in fact, one of the most deeply joyful people any of us will ever meet. Not giddy, not untouched by sorrow, not pretending that the road is easy — but quietly, durably joyful, in a way that those around him can feel without being able to name. Where does the joy come from? Our Lord tells us, simply, in the farewell discourse — the last conversation He had with His disciples before the Cross:

“These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be full.” (John 15:11, NKJV)

His joy — His own joy — in us. That is the astonishing promise. Committed service is not the tax we pay for discipleship; it is the channel through which the Lord's own joy comes to rest in us. The world's joy is tied to favorable circumstances. Christ's joy is tied to nothing outside of Himself. That is why, in Acts, we find St. Paul and Silas singing hymns at midnight from a prison cell (Acts 16:25, NKJV). They were not performing piety. They were so full of the Lord's joy that it was simply coming out of them.

St. Luke, in his summary of the life of the very first committed community in Jerusalem, leaves us a single astonishing verse that tells us what committed service produces when a whole people gives itself to it together:

“So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people.” (Acts 2:46–47, NKJV)

Gladness and simplicity of heart. Those are not the words the world expects to hear attached to a life of daily self-offering. But they are the exact words Luke uses, because they are the exact state of a people who have discovered what our Lord told His disciples at the Last Supper: His joy, remaining in them, making their own joy full.

Our own Lord said something one more time in that same chapter — a sentence that, perhaps more than any other, captures why the committed life ends up being the most blessed:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35, NKJV, recording the words of the Lord Jesus)

St. Paul quotes this line to the elders of Ephesus at the end of his ministry among them. He does not offer it as a motivational saying. He offers it as a plain observation after decades of service: the giver is more blessed than the receiver. The truly committed servant is not making a sacrifice; he is accepting an inheritance. He is discovering, over the course of a long obedience, that the joy the world promised him and kept him running for all his early years was always thinner than the joy the Lord had quietly waiting for him the moment he finally set the bag down.

The Cost, and Who Pays It

None of this, of course, means that commitment is cheap. Our Lord never pretended it was. In fact, He made a point, repeatedly, of warning would-be disciples to count the cost before they said yes, precisely because He wanted us to say yes with our eyes open:

“For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it — lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish’?” (Luke 14:28–30, NKJV)

He does not say this to discourage the builder. He says it to make sure the builder has chosen a tower he will finish. The mockery the Lord warns against is not the world's contempt; it is the grief of a servant who walked away before the work was done. Better to be a humble builder of a small, finished tower than an ambitious builder of an abandoned one.

So yes, there is a cost. We will miss certain Saturday mornings. We will decline certain promotions. We will have conversations with friends who do not understand why we are so committed to a parish that, from the outside, seems to give us little in return. We will pass on certain entertainments, certain

conveniences, certain seasons of rest. These are real losses. We should not pretend they are not. But here is the quiet secret the committed servant eventually learns: the Lord Himself is the one who pays the cost. Not us.

St. Paul says this with beautiful precision when he tries to account for the energy he somehow keeps finding for ministry, long after his own strength should have been spent:

"To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily."
(Colossians 1:29, NKJV)

Read the sentence slowly. I labor — yes, the servant really does labor. It is real work, with real sweat. And yet: according to His working which works in me mightily. The labor is not ours alone. The Lord is the one working mightily in us. The cost of our commitment is not drawn from our own account; it is drawn from His infinite one. We are more like the jar than the wine. We are not meant to supply what is poured out; we are meant to be clean, open, and present so that what He pours out can reach the people who need it.

Fr. Matthew the Poor, writing to a generation of Egyptian servants whom he had watched weary themselves by trying to fund their commitments from their own depleted hearts, put it as plainly as a pastor could:

"The servant who believes that he himself supplies his own service will collapse beneath it within a few short years. The servant who has learned that his service is supplied entirely by Christ can serve, without collapse, for the rest of his life. The whole art of Christian commitment is to become, truly, the second kind of servant." — Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time

The whole art. May the Lord teach it to us tonight.

A Prayer for the Daily Yes

Commitment, in the end, is not a vow we make once and keep in a drawer. It is a small yes renewed each morning, most often under our breath, before our feet have even hit the floor. Let us not despise its smallness. A lifetime of these small yeses is what produced every committed servant the Church has ever canonized. The Lord is not asking us to commit to fifty years tonight. He is asking us to commit to tomorrow morning's prayers, and to the next phone call, and to the Sunday school class the week after next. The rest will be given as it is needed.

So let us pray, tonight, the prayer every committed servant eventually learns to pray. Let it be a short one, and let it fit easily on our lips. "Lord, I am Yours. What would You have me do today, and who would You have me love?" That prayer, offered with a quiet heart at the beginning of an ordinary morning, is the whole of commitment distilled into two sentences. The Lord will answer it. He always does.

May He who called us to this service, and who has kept us in it until now, supply the daily yes we cannot supply by ourselves. May He kindle in our hearts, when the desire has gone quiet, a fresh thirst

for Himself. May He steady our determination, when the road has grown long, with the cloud of witnesses who walked it before us. And may He, on the day when the work is finally finished, find us still pouring, still running, still keeping — so that with St. Paul we may say, without pride but with quiet joy, "I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith."

Review Questions

1. St. Paul describes the committed life as being "poured out as a drink offering" (2 Timothy 4:6, NKJV). What does this image tell us about the shape of Christian commitment — and how is it different from the world's pictures of success in ministry?
2. Our Lord says plainly, "No one can serve two masters" (Matthew 6:24, NKJV). What are the other masters that quietly compete with Christ for our loyalty in the current season of our life, and what is one small yes to Him we can offer this week that will silence one of them?
3. St. Isaac the Syrian says the true servant is the one who in his fervor does not grow proud, and in his dryness does not stop walking. Which of those two failures are we more at risk for in the current season — pride in fervor, or stopping in dryness? What does faithfulness look like specifically for us right now?
4. The early Jerusalem community ate their food "with gladness and simplicity of heart" (Acts 2:46, NKJV). Where, in our own committed service, have we experienced this particular joy the world does not know? How do we guard it when the road becomes difficult?
5. St. Paul says, "I labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily" (Colossians 1:29, NKJV). In what area of our service have we been trying to supply the energy from ourselves? What would it look like, this week, to ask the Lord to supply it instead?

Books & References

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4:6–8; John 17:4; Matthew 6:24; Philippians 3:7–8; Psalm 42:1–2; Hebrews 12:1–2; John 15:11; Acts 2:46–47; Acts 20:35; Luke 14:28–30; Colossians 1:29 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, Homily 11 on Philippians.
- St. Isaac the Syrian, Ascetical Homilies, especially Homily LXV (on fervor and dryness).
- St. Augustine, Confessions (on the long yes given daily to God).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time (on the Christian servant's reliance on Christ).

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

Lesson Notes