

Stumbling Blocks of the Christian Servant

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Every servant, sooner or later, comes up against a stone in the road that the ordinary believer does not see. It is not that the servant is a greater sinner, and it is not that the servant is held to an impossible standard. It is simply that when a soul has been entrusted with the souls of others, the stones underfoot grow sharper, because a stumble on that road does not hurt the servant alone — it scatters the little flock that was walking behind. The Lord knows this about our calling, and He does not leave us alone with it. He has given us, through the Holy Spirit and St. Paul, a quiet and careful inventory of the specific stumbling blocks that lie in wait for those who would serve: the failure of patience, the fear of hardship, the wavering in spiritual battle, and the dimming of our own inner life. None of these is a new enemy; we have met them all in some form since our first communion. But in the life of a servant, each one takes on a sharper edge, and each one asks of us a steadier response. In this lesson we will walk through these stumbling blocks together — not to frighten ourselves, but to see them in the light before we meet them in the dark, and to let the Lord arm us now for the encounter we already know is coming.

Why the Servant's Stones Are Different

If we are honest, most of us first stepped into service with a quiet hope that it would be the part of our lives where we would be at our best. The thought is sweet, and the Lord does not scold us for it. But He gently lets us discover, in His own time, that service is not the staging ground of a finished holiness; it is the arena of a holiness still being forged. The stumbling blocks that meet us when we stand in front of the children, or open the Bible with an inquirer, or sit down with a suffering parishioner, are not the stumbling blocks of the general Christian life.

An ordinary believer who gives in to impatience at the grocery store goes home and asks the Lord's forgiveness; the damage is largely his own. A servant who gives in to impatience with a confused teenager or a grieving widow does not damage himself alone — he damages the small flock the Lord has handed him, and often the damage is quiet and long. This is why St. Paul sets the servant's expectation apart from the expectation of every other disciple:

"We give no offense in anything, that our ministry may not be blamed. But in all things we commend ourselves as ministers of God: in much patience, in tribulations, in needs, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in fastings; by purity, by knowledge, by longsuffering, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by

sincere love, by the word of truth, by the power of God, by the armor of righteousness on the right hand and on the left.” (2 Corinthians 6:3–7, NKJV)

It is a long sentence, and it is meant to be long. St. Paul is not composing a checklist; he is drawing a portrait. He wants every servant who reads this to see himself — and to see that the specific shape of the Christian servant's life is endurance. Not brilliance. Not charisma. Endurance. The stumbling blocks that lie in wait for us are not the spectacular ones that might fell a saint in a single night. They are the quiet, wearing ones that grind against the spirit of a servant month after month, year after year, until either the servant has been remade into the likeness of his Master, or the servant has slipped out the back door of his calling without anyone noticing he had gone.

Fr. Matthew the Poor, writing to a generation of Egyptian servants who knew his own long years of quiet labor, insisted that the servant must know his particular stones before he steps onto the road. We can do no less tonight. The four stones we will consider in what follows are the very four to which the Apostle keeps returning: the failure of our patience, the fear of harsh inevitabilities, the wavering in our spiritual battle, and the slow dimming of the servant's own inner life. Each of them is survivable. None of them is fatal to a servant who expects them, names them, and brings them to the Lord while they are still small.

The Failure of Patience

The very first word St. Paul reaches for, when he lists the marks of a true minister of God, is patience. "Much patience," he calls it, as though ordinary patience will not quite be enough. There is a reason he places it first. Of all the stones that lie along the servant's road, impatience is the one we are most likely to trip on before we realize we have lost our footing.

It is not hard to see why. Service is, by its nature, long-term investment in slow soil. We plant a seed in a twelve-year-old that may not bear fruit until he is thirty. We pray with a wandering friend for a decade before the phone call finally comes. We teach the same lesson on forgiveness to the same youth group, and we watch them repeat the same hurts the following week. In the middle of that long season, something very human rises in us: a quiet frustration, a private muttering, a thin resentment that begins to shade our prayers for the very people we were sent to love. This is the failure of patience, and every servant has felt it.

We should not be surprised by it, and we should not despair when it comes. The Lord Himself sighed over Jerusalem. St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians who had caused him more grief than perhaps any other community he served, confessed openly that he had been pressed to the edge of his strength:

“For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead.” (2 Corinthians 1:8–9, NKJV)

Notice what St. Paul does with his own exhaustion. He does not hide it, and he does not glorify it. He turns it into a lesson about the architecture of patience. Patience, in the servant's life, is not the fruit of

a naturally calm temperament. It is the fruit of a soul that has been pressed past its own strength and has learned, in that pressing, to lean fully on the One who raises the dead. The servant who has never come to the end of his own patience has not yet begun to learn the patience of Christ.

St. John Chrysostom, writing to weary presbyters in Antioch who felt their congregations slipping through their hands, spoke to this stumbling block with the voice of one who had himself been worn down by it:

“Nothing so becomes a priest as patience. And nothing is so essential to those who have souls committed to their charge. For the physician is not always able to cure in one day; neither does the husbandman gather his fruit as soon as he has sown the seed. Such is also the care of souls: it demands long patience.” — St. John Chrysostom, On the Priesthood VI.4

Long patience. The phrase should be written somewhere on the servant's wall. When we feel our patience wavering — in the middle of a Sunday school lesson that is not landing, in the third year of a pastoral conversation that keeps returning to the same knot, in the thousandth small inconvenience of a living parish — let us remember that the Lord has not asked of us a quick patience, a brilliant patience, a patience that draws admiration from anyone watching. He has asked of us a long one. And He supplies it to every servant who will wait for it with Him.

The Fear of Harsh Inevitabilities

The second stone on the servant's road is quieter than the first, and harder to see until we are already tripping over it. St. Paul gathers it under the words "tribulations, needs, distresses." These are not persecutions in any dramatic sense. They are the ordinary hardships of a life spent pouring oneself out — a body that aches from too many late nights, a checkbook strained by a family's needs the servant cannot ignore, a sudden illness in a loved one, the long grey patch of a service that no longer thrills the heart the way it once did.

We call them inevitabilities because they come to every servant. Not one of us escapes them. The question is never whether they will come, but what we will do with our hearts when they arrive. And the great temptation, in the moment, is to quietly conclude that something has gone wrong in our calling — that a true servant of God would not be suffering like this, that the Lord must be displeased, that perhaps our service was never really His to begin with. It is a whisper, and it comes reliably. Every servant should be warned of it before it comes, because the whisper sounds, at first, exactly like the voice of our own conscience.

Scripture will have none of it. St. Paul, writing to Timothy from a prison cell, treated these very inevitabilities as the ordinary currency of the servant's life:

“Now godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.” (1 Timothy 6:6–8, NKJV)

Godliness with contentment. The servant who has learned that small phrase has already disarmed half of his hardships. What the world treats as deprivation — a missing comfort, a delayed plan, an unexpected expense — the servant can treat as the very soil in which the root of his godliness finally grows deep enough to hold him in the next wind. And there will be a next wind.

St. Macarius the Great, writing out of the Egyptian desert where deprivation was not a theory but the ordinary condition of his days, saw this truth from the inside:

“Until a man is broken through temptations and sorrow, he does not acknowledge his own infirmity or humble himself before God. But when he has been broken, he runs at last to God and finds that God was waiting for him all along.” — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies XV

There is a tenderness in that sentence. Our hardships are not the sign that the Lord has walked away from us; they are often the sign that He is walking toward us, and that He is bringing us home by the one road that will actually get us there. The servant who accepts his inevitabilities with a quiet heart — a smile, if he can manage it, and a Our Father, if he cannot — is letting the Lord do in him the very work the Lord sent him into service to do. The hardship, meanwhile, turns out in hindsight to have been a much smaller thing than it seemed in the moment. It is often the hollow reed the enemy wanted us to mistake for an iron bar.

Wavering in the Spiritual Battle

The third stumbling block is the one that catches the servant most unprepared, because it does not look, at first, like a stumbling block at all. It looks like weariness. It looks like distraction. It looks like a normal low patch. In truth, it is the long, grinding pressure of spiritual battle on a soul that has not yet learned that it is actually in one.

The burden of Christian service is not the burden of sharing a few comforting words on a Sunday morning. It is the burden of standing in front of souls that the enemy also wants, and refusing to step aside. When we teach a class, visit a hospital, counsel a struggling friend, or pray with a child before bed, we are not simply engaging in a kind activity; we are walking onto a field that the devil has every interest in contesting. He is not neutral about the service. And because he is not neutral about the service, he is not neutral about the servant.

This is not a word meant to frighten anyone. It is a word meant to save us from the quiet collapse of pretending the battle is not real. When we feel the strange drag of heaviness after a good liturgy, the sudden burst of anger the day before a youth retreat, the unaccountable dryness that settles over a morning prayer we used to love — we are not imagining things, and we are not simply tired. We are in a contest. And contests have only two postures: standing, or sitting down.

“Finally, my brethren, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers,

against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places.” (Ephesians 6:10–12, NKJV)

St. Paul does not describe the armor as optional equipment for the advanced disciple. He describes it as the basic uniform of anyone who will remain standing. The belt of truth, the breastplate of righteousness, the feet shod with the gospel of peace, the shield of faith that quenches the flaming arrows, the helmet of salvation, the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God — these are the ordinary furniture of the servant's week. The servant who will not read the Scriptures, will not pray the Agpeya, will not confess when his conscience pricks him, will not receive the Body and Blood of Christ at every opportunity, is a soldier who has decided to walk onto the field without his helmet. He will not last the afternoon, and he should not be surprised when the afternoon goes badly.

The good news, the very good news, is that the armor has already been provided. It is not something we must manufacture out of our own diligence. It is something we must simply put on. And St. Paul ends the armor passage not with the clank of steel but with the quietest of verbs — the posture that holds the whole thing together:

“Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.” (Ephesians 6:18, NKJV)

Watchfulness. Not panic, not self-reliance, not anxious scanning of the horizon — watchfulness, which is the long, peaceful attention of a soul that knows Whose army it belongs to. The wavering in our spiritual battle begins the moment we stop being watchful. And it is healed the moment we return.

The Dimming of the Inner Life

The fourth stone is the most dangerous of the four, because it rarely announces itself. It simply settles in. We wake one morning and notice that the prayer rule we used to love has become a chore. The Scriptures do not speak to us the way they used to. The Eucharist, if we are not careful, can begin to feel like a duty we perform for others rather than a mystery we receive for ourselves. We are still serving — perhaps we are serving more than ever — but something underneath has grown quiet.

This is the slow dimming of the servant's inner life, and every one of us is susceptible to it. We are susceptible precisely because we are busy. A servant who is not careful will mistake the noise of his ministry for the life of his soul. He will stop praying for himself because he is so often praying for others. He will stop being fed because he has become so focused on feeding. And one day he will open his Bible to prepare a lesson, and notice, with a small cold feeling in his chest, that he has not read it for himself — just for himself, without preparation, without assignment — for a very long time.

This is why St. Paul, whose own ministry exhausts us just to read about it, was so careful to command Timothy to guard his own interior life before he guarded anyone else's:

“Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you.” (1 Timothy 4:16, NKJV)

Yourself first. Not out of selfishness, but out of the plain truth that a servant cannot give what he does not possess. The lamp that lights other lamps must itself be lit. And the fuel for the lamp is not more activity; it is the quiet, personal, unhurried communion with the Lord that we so often sacrifice first when our schedules tighten.

St. Theophan the Recluse, a nineteenth-century bishop who had spent his own early years as a seminary rector before withdrawing for long seasons of prayer, wrote to a layman who had asked him how one keeps the inner life alive in the middle of a busy service. His answer is short enough to memorize and direct enough to cut clean:

“The principal thing is to stand before God with the mind in the heart, and to go on standing before Him unceasingly day and night until the end of life. If the servant keeps this standing, his service will be alive, and his soul will not wither.” — St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer*

Standing before God with the mind in the heart. That is the whole prescription for the servant's inner life, and it is the whole cure for the slow dimming we are describing. When we feel the flame flickering — when prayer has become mechanical, when the Scriptures have grown dry, when the liturgy has begun to feel like a performance rather than a feast — we are not being called to quit the service. We are being called back to our own altar. An hour of silent prayer, an honest confession, a morning given back entirely to the Lord without the intrusion of our ministry's demands, will often restore more than months of strained effort.

The Four Stones Together

Taken in a single frame, these four stumbling blocks are not a terrifying list. They are a familiar one. Every servant we have ever admired has walked past all four of them, and not one of them walked past them without stumbling at least once. The saints are not the servants who never tripped. The saints are the servants who refused to stop walking when they did.

And here, finally, is the comfort in this lesson. Each of these four stones is answered by a single corresponding grace that the Lord Himself supplies. To the failure of our patience, He supplies His own long-suffering, if we will ask for it daily. To the fear of harsh inevitabilities, He supplies the contentment of godliness, if we will receive it with a quiet heart. To the wavering in spiritual battle, He supplies the whole armor of God, if we will put it on each morning. To the dimming of our inner life, He supplies Himself — in the Scriptures, in the Mysteries, in the silence before the icon, if we will come.

The stumbling blocks, then, turn out to be less our enemies than our teachers. Each of them forces the servant, if he will let it, to go where he would not otherwise have gone: into the deeper patience of Christ, the deeper contentment of the apostles, the deeper warfare of the martyrs, the deeper prayer of the desert fathers. The servant who walks his full road will find that the very stones that bruised his feet have become the steps by which he climbed closer to his Lord.

Let us, then, not flinch when we see them in the path. Let us name them plainly and bring them to the Lord while they are still small. Let us ask Him, tonight, for the long patience He has never withheld

from a servant who asked. Let us ask Him for the quiet contentment that turns deprivation into gift. Let us ask Him to clothe us afresh in the armor He has already forged. And let us ask Him, above all, to keep the lamp of our own inner life burning — for it is only from that lamp that the lamps of those we serve will ever be lit.

Review Questions

1. Why does the servant's stumbling look different from the stumbling of the ordinary believer? What specific consequence of a servant's fall does St. Paul warn against in 2 Corinthians 6:3, and how does that warning shape the way we examine our own service this week?
2. St. Paul begins his portrait of the true minister of God with "much patience." Where, specifically, are we most tempted to lose patience in our own service — with a particular age group, a particular task, a particular outcome that is slow in coming — and what long-patience of Christ might we ask for by name this week?
3. The fear of harsh inevitabilities whispers that something has gone wrong in our calling. Can we recall a past hardship in our own service that, in hindsight, turned out to be the very thing God used to deepen us? What would godliness with contentment look like in the current hardship we are carrying?
4. St. Paul treats the armor of God as ordinary weekly furniture, not occasional equipment. Which piece of the armor — Scripture, prayer, faith, salvation, truth — have we neglected most in the last month, and what is one concrete discipline we can return to this week to take it up again?
5. The dimming of the inner life is the quietest of the four stumbling blocks. What is the state of our own personal time with the Lord — not the time we spend preparing for others, but the time we spend simply standing before Him? What small step can we take this week to rekindle it?

Books & References

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:3–7; 2 Corinthians 1:8–9; 1 Timothy 6:6–8; Ephesians 6:10–18; 1 Timothy 4:16 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. John Chrysostom, *On the Priesthood*, Book VI.
- St. Macarius the Great, *Spiritual Homilies*, especially Homily XV.
- St. Theophan the Recluse, *The Art of Prayer* (compilation of his letters to inquirers).
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, *Words for Our Time* (selected pastoral writings on the servant's life).
- Metropolitan Youssef of the Southern United States, *Between Icon and Offense* (on contemporary stumbling blocks in service).

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

Lesson Notes