

An Imperfect Servant

Mark 10:42-45

[42] And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. [43] But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, [44] and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. [45] For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Every worship service in this building centers of the person of Jesus Christ, and well it should. He is the Lord of the Church. He is its one foundation. His birth is the focus of the season we will soon enter. His resurrection gives us a reason to get up tomorrow. Everything we do and say, both here, and when we leave here, centers on Him and His love for us.

But every once in a while, we take a day to hold up a mirror. And when we do, we see the power of Jesus Christ reflected through a special person. Martin Luther was one of those special people. We don't worship him. We don't pray through him. But we do praise and thank God for what God accomplished through this imperfect servant.

Luther's parents were poor peasants who worked hard for a living. They were strict with their children. They taught young Martin to pray to the saints, to do good works, and to revere the Pope and the Church. When he was just 5 years old, Martin began to study Latin, and at 13 he went off to a special religious school. He began to study law when he was just 18. I don't know why anyone would want to do anything as silly as studying law, especially at 18, but one day, he was caught in a violent storm and knocked to the ground by a lightning bolt. He prayed to St. Anne, and promised to become a monk if he were to be rescued that day. He was, and so he did.

He earned a master's degree and a doctor of theology degree, and rose rapidly within the Catholic Church structure. But all the while, his innards were churning. He looked for freedom, and found none. He sought peace with God by doing

good works, doing everything from fasting to punishing his body. He was at the edge of despair, thoroughly convinced that everything he was doing was getting him nowhere. Luther had personal fear, and quite a struggle, as he searched for the freedom of faith that we so easily take for granted.

Martin was caught up in what we call legalism. He was all concerned with what HE had to do for God. He came to discover from God's Word that his salvation is not earned by works, but rather is a gift from God. THAT was the REAL lightning bolt experience that would change his life, and the lives of countless others.

Martin Luther was not made of stone. In fact, he was a rather spirited person whose emotions often ran high, especially for a German! People usually knew EXACTLY what Luther thought. He was not afraid to tell you how HE thought, and if YOU were either uninformed or downright wrong. But Luther remained ready to offer his life in service to God and in service to the Lord's church. He understood that greatness involves service.

It's true. Greatness involves being a servant. That is not the way of the world. We hear a lot about how power SHOULD be used, and how it should NOT be used. For worldly people, greatness involves the exercise of power. But on occasion, even in the eyes of the world, someone will be singled out, not for their use of power, but for being a servant to others. The Nobel Peace prizes are often awarded to powerless people who have been involved in a cause that has generated international attention. Mother Theresa was one, Malala Yousafzai, with her recovery from being shot in the head and speaking out for the education of girls, was another.

When a person has the attitude of a servant, it frees that person from a kind of slavery. People who have a lust for power and control find they are corrupted and enslaved by the search. It is said the power corrupts, and that absolute power corrupts absolutely. The worst villains and criminals will stop at nothing to extend that economic or physical power.

When a person has the attitude of a servant, he or she looks at life in a way differently from those who want to dominate and control. Servants understand what is important to God, and what is important in our lives. In the Lord Jesus Christ, we can be freed from the destructive drives that ruin lives and destroy happiness – the kind of happiness that people are desperately searching for.

It's tempting to hold up Martin Luther as an example of the kind of person we should imitate. If we did that, Luther himself would think that he had failed at everything he had worked so long for. He was not trying to call attention to himself. He didn't want people to look to him. He wanted people to look to Christ. When we need to look for a servant model, we have one the highest example in Jesus.

Our Lord Jesus Christ was, in reality, the strangest person to live like a servant. After all, he was King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Still is! He had every right to demand subjection and obedience from all people. And still could! He could have called on the angels to correct any of the sins and mess-ups created by his followers. Still could! But he leaves things in the hands of His people, who are invited and encouraged and empowered to live as servants, rather than lords.

Our Lord Jesus lived a life of service. He didn't enter his public ministry until he was 30 years old. What do you think he did for 30 years? Do you think he hung around the house, saving himself for something important to come along later in his life? No, he was in the synagogue weekly, and in the temple on special occasions. If there were jobs to do there, if there was a list to sign up on, do you think Jesus neglected to do them because they were beneath him? When the neighbors needed someone to watch their kids when they needed to step out, don't you think Jesus was the perfect person to ask? He loved children and they loved him. Jesus had no false pride that prevented him from serving others. Jesus did not spend a life of taking. He spent a life of giving and serving. He did it quietly, effectively, humbly, and graciously.

When God's right time came, Christ our Lord willingly became a substitute for us by sacrificing

his life for yours. He was willing to do everything necessary to die for your sins, and for the sins of the whole world.

So instead of asking "How can we climb the ladder of success?" God's people ask, "How can we serve others? How can we minister to one another?"

When we are self-seeking and self-serving, we separate ourselves from others. God the Holy Spirit moves us to think about the humility of our Lord, who didn't consider his being God an excuse to have other people serve him. He had genuine compassion for people, and still does today. He has paid the ransom for the sin that would bind us, and Jesus urges us to accept the price he has paid. As we do that, we become His faithful servants and stewards, serving those around us. This freeing truth becomes the central truth of our lives.

In 1546, Luther traveled to Eisleben, to serve as a mediator in a dispute. The most famous person in the Western world was often called upon to serve as a mediator and problem solver, even with small groups and individuals. There, in Eisleben, the same small town where he was born, he died of a stroke at age 63. His body was buried in the castle church in Wittenberg – the church, where he had posted his 95 discussion statements (theses or "propositions) almost 30 years before.

Martin Luther was an imperfect model of a servant. He was a sinner who offered himself in service to his God and His Lord, Jesus Christ. Today we thank God for servants, such as Martin Luther, who were willing to serve, rather than being served. Our prayer is that God would make of us THAT kind of servant. Our prayer is that God, the Holy Spirit would convince us of the truth, and then look to Christ Jesus, the perfect servant, for what we cannot earn for ourselves – the forgiveness of sins, new life now, and eternal salvation. Amen.

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