

The True Servant and the Grace of God

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that true service to God is rooted in personal character and a deep understanding of His grace.

Scripture: 1 Kings 17:9, Isaiah 42:1, Isaiah 61:1, Romans 12:1, 2 Corinthians 12:9, Ephesians 1:10, Philippians 4:4, 1 Timothy 1:11-16, 1 Timothy 2:3-6, 2 Timothy 3:17

Topics: "Grace Of God", "Servanthood"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of being a true servant of God, rooted in the grace of God. He explains that the purpose of Christian service is to contribute to the fullness of Christ, and that every believer, regardless of their role, is called to minister to this end. The sermon highlights that true servanthood begins with the individual, who must embody Christ and glorify His grace personally. Sparks also discusses the essential qualities of a servant, including humility, assurance, and joy, all stemming from a deep understanding of God's grace. Ultimately, he calls believers to recognize their identity as servants who reflect the grace of God in their lives.

Transcript

"Behold, my servant, whom I uphold; my chosen, in whom my soul delighteth" (Isa. 42:1).

In our previous meditation, when we had seen the passing on into the Church of the great vocation, and were speaking about the electing of the Church in relation to the eternal purpose, we reminded you that, seeing that it is the Church as the Body of Christ that is the eternally predestined instrument for the fulfilment of the purpose of God (that very great purpose of God being brought through sovereign grace into that Church, that spiritual Body) we are therefore individually in the election to service. By our very calling, the great purpose becomes ours. In our very apprehending by Christ, the greatest purpose of all ages comes to rest upon us, we are found in it.

The Purpose to be Served

Two things remain to be said in that particular connection before we proceed with other matters. One is as to the purpose. What is the purpose of the ages? Well, it is made perfectly clear in revelation through Paul that the purpose is to sum up all things in Christ - the universal fulness of God's Son, first gathered into Him, and then mediated by Him through all ages to come. Into that we, by grace, are introduced. That is why we have been brought into the fellowship of God's Son. That is the meaning of our ever having been

saved, saved with a vast, timeless, universal purpose, and that becomes the service of our lives.

What Service Is

The second thing is just that. What is the work of the Lord? What is Christian service from God's standpoint? It is contributing to the fulness of Christ. It is in the measure of each several part ministering to that end, that all things shall be summed up in Christ, and that He shall be the fulness of all things. That great Divine goal has many ways and many means of attainment, and it is not a matter of whether you or I are serving the Lord in the same way as someone else. That is not the point at all. We standardise and departmentalise Christian work, and we think of the activities of ministers and missionaries and suchlike functions, and we call that the work of the Lord, we think of that when we speak of going into Christian service; but while I do not say that that is not the work of the Lord, it is a very narrow and a very artificial way of viewing things. The work of the Lord is, and can be, no more than contributing to the fulness of Christ and ministering of that fulness to Him and from Him. How you do it is a matter of Divine appointment, but that is the work of the Lord. So it is not necessarily a matter of whether I am in what is called the ministry, a missionary or a Christian worker, in this particular category or that, or whether I am serving the Lord in the way in which certain others are serving Him. That is quite a secondary matter. We would all like to be doing what certain people are doing, and doing it in the way they are doing it. You might aspire to be an apostle Paul - probably if you understood a little more you would not! But you see, whether Paul is doing it along his Divinely appointed line, in his Divinely appointed way - or Peter - or John - or this one or that one - the object comes first, the way afterward. The service of the Lord - whatever may be the means, the method - is ministering to the fulness of Christ, and ministering of that fulness, and you may be called upon to do that anywhere. It can be done just as much out of public view as in public view. Many who have ministered to the Lord and by whom He has been wonderfully ministered are those of whom the world has heard and read nothing. This, you see, is a 'Body' matter, and a body is not all hands, not all major members and faculties. A body is comprised of numerous, almost countless, functions, many of them remote and very hidden, but they all minister in a related way to the whole purpose for which the body exists, and that is a true picture of the service of God.

So think again. While we would not put you back from aspiring to the fullest place of service, nor say that you are wrong in desiring to be a missionary, to go forth into the world in a full-time spiritual capacity, remember that even before the Lord puts you into that specific work you are a minister all the same, for 'minister' is not a name, a title, a designation but a function; and the function is contributing something to the fulness of Christ, and ministering something of that fulness. So it comes back to us as a question - What am I ministering of Christ, what am I contributing to that ultimate fulness? If it be by leading the unsaved to Him, I am adding to Christ, so to speak. That is all it means, but that is what it means. I am building up Christ. If I am encouraging the saints, I am ministering to Christ and of Christ. That is "my servant... in whom my soul delighteth." In whom does God delight as His servant? Those who minister to His Son, and that is the beginning and the end, however that may be done by Divine appointment. Having said that, let us go on a little further with this matter of the servant.

The Beginning of Service the Servant Himself

"Behold, my servant." God calls attention to the servant in whom His soul delighteth. The beginning of all service in relation to God is the servant himself. What makes a servant of God? We think of a servant of God being made by academic training, Bible teaching, by this or that form of equipment, and we think when we have all that, when we have been through the course and have in our minds all that can be

imparted of that kind, we are the Lord's servants. But that is not the way the Lord looks at it at all.

In the first place, the Lord looks at the servant, and He is going to demand that He shall be able Himself to point to His servant and say, "Behold, my servant." I know that there is a right sense in which the instrument has to be out of view, but only in one sense; that is that he, in his own person, his own personal impression as a man, his own impact by nature, shall not be the registration made upon people; only in that sense he has to be out of view. There is another sense in which he has to be very much in view. If that were not true, all the autobiography in Paul's writings would be wrong in principle. Paul keeps himself, in a right sense, very much in view. He calls attention to himself very properly and very strongly and persistently. The Lord is going to require that He shall be able to say, "Behold, my servant," and the servant to whom He will call attention will be the servant who is the impression of Christ. Yes, Christ registered, Christ presenced, Christ apparent, in the servant. The beginning of all service, I repeat, is the servant himself. God is far more concerned with having His servants in a right state than He is with having them furnished with all kinds of academic qualifications and titles. It is the man, it is the woman, that God is concerned with.

If you turn to the letters of Timothy, you find there that beautiful designation of the servant of the Lord, "O man of God" (1 Tim. 6:2) Paul's appeal to Timothy is in those terms. And then, speaking of the study and knowledge of the Scriptures, he uses the same phrase again "that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17). But note the order - he says, "that the man of God may be... furnished completely," not, that there may be a complete furnishing to make a man of God; the man of God already exists. Now all his study with the Word is to make him who is the man of God an efficient workman. The man of God comes before all his study. He is that before he has a knowledge of the Scriptures.

You know that 'man of God' was the great designation given to some of the prophets of old. Elijah on one occasion, having been hidden by God at the brook Cherith, found the brook to dry up; and the word of the Lord came to him, saying, "Arise, get thee to Zarephath... behold, I have commanded a widow there to sustain thee" (1 Kings 17:9). Elijah went, and you remember how he found the food situation. She was gathering two sticks to bake her last cake for her son and herself, and then to die. But the barrel of meal did not fail: the Lord was faithful to His word. But then, after that, it came to pass that the woman's son fell sick, and so sore was the sickness that there was no breath left in him. The woman made her very pathetic appeal to the prophet. He took the child up to his own chamber, and called upon the Lord, and saw the child revive, and he presented him alive to the mother, who said, "Now I know that thou art a man of God, and that the word of the Lord in thy mouth is truth." What were the credentials of his ministry? that he had the secret of life triumphant over death. He had the word of life, and the word of life is not always the mere usage of Scripture. You can use the Scripture and it may have no effect at all, or you can use it and it may have a mighty effect. A great deal depends upon who uses the Scripture. It is the man of God who can use it in that way and be attested as the true servant of the Lord. It is the spiritual power of life that is in the man that makes him (to use Paul's words to Timothy) an approved servant of God. "O man of God."

"Behold, my servant." Do you grasp the point? It is with you and with me that the Lord is concerned; it is with what we are, it is with our personal knowledge of Himself. It is that we may have within us the secrets of the Lord, that it may be true of us as it was of the Lord Jesus and of others that the key to the situation spiritually is in our hands. We, as Elijah, hidden away in secret, have been in touch with God. There is a background. God had said to Elijah, "Hide thyself"; and he was a long time hidden before the word of the

Lord came, saying, "Go, show thyself...." Someone has remarked that for every servant of God there must be much more of the hidden life than of the public life. How true that is! The Lord will take pains to ensure that the secret history, the spiritual history, of every true servant of His is looked after. With all the eagerness to get out to do the work - and may it not abate! - with all our enthusiasm to be active, all our desire and craving to be serving, let us remember the first thing is the servant, not the service. The first thing, the beginning of all service, is the instrument. We see that the servant comes firstly into the Lord's view, that He may have one to whom He may draw attention in a right way and say, 'Look at that servant of Mine, and see My work, see My grace, see My power, see the traces of My hand.' When the Lord has brought us to the point where that is possible, then certain features will come out.

The Marks of a True Servant

(a) Glorifying in the Grace of God

The first feature of the God-approved servant, the true servant of God, is his glorying in the gospel of the grace of God on personal grounds. It is not, after all, such a far cry from Isa. 42:1 - "Behold, my servant" - to Isa. 61:1 - "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" - to proclaim the year of grace. Glorying in the gospel of the grace of God - yes, on personal grounds.

Let us look at the letters to Timothy and Titus. These are the letters of service, the letters of one great servant of God to another servant of God, one great man of God to another man of God.

"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus according to the commandment of God our Saviour, and Christ Jesus our hope" (1Tim. 1:1). That phrase "God our Saviour" is peculiar to these pastoral letters; you find it nowhere else, and in these letters it occurs seven times. Do you not think it is significant that, not to an unsaved person and not to a newly converted person, but to a servant of the Lord fairly fully fledged (for, as you notice in the next verses, the Apostle is saying that he left Timothy at Ephesus to look after things; he was in pastoral responsibility, and the Ephesian responsibility turned out to be no small thing; and similarly in the case of Titus), Paul, now well-advanced in life and service, writes to Timothy and to Titus in places of responsibility, in this way - "God our Saviour," repeated seven times. That word Saviour was not a word used by Paul with some extraordinary new meaning in it. It was one of the common words of everyday life among the Greeks at that time. It was the word on the lips of the soldier who had come back from battle and had been delivered from being killed, and he said he had known salvation. It was the word of the sailor who had been rescued from the deep when his ship had gone down, and he said he had been saved. It was the word of the physician who had brought someone back from a desperate illness, and he called it their salvation. A common word - the common language which everybody knew and understood; he was not embellishing this with something profound, he was right there in the simplicities - God Who has saved us, our Saviour; the common salvation.

"And Christ Jesus our hope." Well, that is a beginning word for believers, for the drowning sailor, for the soldier besieged or encompassed, for the invalid gripped by the deadly fever - hope for them all. It is very beautiful, as you follow through this letter, to see how much Paul dwells in that realm.

"...according to the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust. I thank him that enabled me, even Christ Jesus our Lord, for that he counted me faithful, appointing me to his service; though I was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: howbeit I obtained mercy, because I

did it ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord abounded exceedingly with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. Faithful is the saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief: howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me as chief might Christ Jesus show forth all his longsuffering, for an ensample of them that should thereafter believe on him unto eternal life" (1 Tim. 1:11-16).

"This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour; who would have all men to be saved, and come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, one mediator also between God and men, himself man, Christ Jesus who gave himself a ransom for all; the testimony to be borne in its own times" (1 Tim. 2:3-6).

That is all glorifying in the gospel of the grace of God - and very late on in Paul's life. My point, while being perhaps very simple, is a very important one - that nothing is to cast any shadow over our glorying in the grace of God; and there are quite a lot of things that do that, I find. A lot of people become taken up with what is called advanced truth, and they become heavy, almost morose, they are burdened about this great teaching, and lose all their glorying in the grace of God. Nothing should ever be allowed to bring a shadow on this glorying in the grace of God on the part of a servant of God. Paul maintained that glorying right to the very end, and here he is saying to Timothy, by example as well as by precept, 'However many worries there are at Ephesus, however many the problems in the churches, however much you may be aspiring to a higher life, however much you may feel your own unworthiness and weakness, never lose your glorying in the gospel of grace.' That is really the import of it all - to bring Timothy back to this. 'There are many things in yourself and in men's attitudes toward you (they will despise your youth), in your sufferings physically (your oft infirmity), there are plenty of things to bring a cloud over your life, but never allow anything to eclipse or becloud the great wonder of the grace of God in salvation.' Perhaps some of us need to recover a little more of that.

Christ was a very great teacher, but He was also a great preacher of the grace of God, and here it is declared - He took up the very words from Isa. 61 and applied them to Himself at Nazareth, declaring that the very purpose of His coming and of the anointing of the Spirit was to preach the gospel, the good news, to proclaim the year of grace. Paul was a great teacher; next to the Lord Himself, there has been no greater in the dispensation; but with all that he knew, all that he was, all his profound understanding of spiritual things, he maintained to the end his glorying in the simple basic reality of the grace of God in salvation. I believe - and I am saying a very serious and responsible thing when I say it - that the Lord will allow anything rather than that we should get away from grace. I am going to say something now that I think may be very terrible in your hearing; if we have got away from grace the Lord may even allow a fall, and maybe a terrible fall, into sin in order to bring us back in a personal way, so that on personal grounds the supreme note in our lives should be the grace of God. I say, He will allow anything rather than that we should get off the ground of the grace of God. That is one thing He does demand, and will have - a true, adequate, apprehension and acknowledgment of the grace of God. We have no other ground on which to stand, from which to move. It is all the infinite grace of God, the mystery of His grace to us.

(b) Humility

Such an apprehension produces humility, and of all the graces flowing from grace, humility is the greatest. The opposite of humility is the greatest evil - that is, pride. There never was a greater sin than pride. It brought Satan from his high estate, and the angels that fell with him, and it brought the whole race crashing down in the awful fall. It necessitated God's Son taking the lowest place, suffering, dying - pride

brought all that tragedy about. Humility is of great price in the sight of God, and it is a right apprehension of the grace of God that produces humility.

(c) Assurance

Grace produces assurance, and what is the use of any servant going out to serve the Lord who has not assurance? The enemy tries to destroy our testimony by robbing us of our assurance. He has destroyed many a ministry in that way. If we really apprehend grace, it brings great assurance. Thank God for His grace, grace which chose when I did not choose, grace which has kept when many times I would have given up; grace that has done so much gives me assurance that it will complete the work. Grace started and grace will finish, and that brings confidence. Get off the ground of grace and you will be off the ground of assurance.

(d) Joy

And a sufficient apprehension of the grace of God brings joy, it must bring joy. If we get away from the ground of works - that miserable ground of what we are, what we can or cannot do - on to the ground of His infinite, redeeming, keeping, perfecting grace, we are bound to get on to the ground of joy. You cannot explain the joy of Paul to the end on any other ground at all. You take the sum of all his sufferings and trials and disappointments and problems; those who owed everything to him spiritually at length turning away from him, the very churches for which he had hazarded his life having no more room for him, close friends of missionary travels forsaking him; and yet full of joy, and to the very end of his life exhorting the saints to rejoice in the Lord. Why? It can only be because he has such a tremendous hold on sovereign grace. Grace will accomplish the work, grace will perfect what grace began.

The True Servant's Theme and Testimony - Grace

Arthur Porritt, the biographer of Dr. Jowett, has a notable chapter entitled "His Gospel," in which he seeks to analyse the message of the great preacher. "The supreme note of his preaching," he says, "was the proclamation of the all-sufficiency of Redeeming Grace in its relationship to the worst... The eternal love of God was his basal doctrine of Christianity, and he proclaimed the illimitable love of God with unwearied insistence.... To the literature of Redeeming Grace, Jowett made a rich contribution by his sermons and books. It was the 'big theme' to which, above all others, he returned again and again, as if, of all truth, it was the one facet that entranced him.... To Jowett, Redeeming Grace was the fulcrum of the evangelical message. 'With all my heart,' he said, 'do I believe that this Gospel of Redeeming Grace is the cardinal necessity of our time.' 'I cannot do anything better than magnify the grace of God.' 'One could preach twenty sermons on it.' Grace was Jowett's sovereign word. He was always probing its depths to discover some new aspect of its unsearchable riches. Each discovery he heralded with satisfaction."

Here is a specimen of his preaching of Grace - "There is no word," he once declared, "I have wrestled so much with as grace. It is just like expressing a great American forest by a word. No phrase can express the meaning of grace. Grace is more than mercy. It is more than tender mercy. It is more than a multitude of tender mercies. Grace is more than love. It is more than innocent love. Grace is holy love, but it is holy love in spontaneous movement going out in eager quest toward the unholy and the unlovely that by the ministry of its own sacrifice it might redeem the unholy and the unlovely into its own strength and beauty. The grace of God is holy love on the move to thee and me, and the like of thee and me. It is God unmerited, undeserved, going out towards the children of men, that He might win them into the glory and brightness of His own likeness."

Dr. Jowett, wherever he went, drew the multitudes. My point for the moment is this - if that was so, and that was his theme, it shows what people need, it shows to what the heart responds. There is nothing that can take the place of the gospel of the grace of God. If you think that when you get into 'Ephesian' realms you get on to some higher ground, look into the Ephesian letter and underline the word 'grace,' and you will find "Ephesians" is full of grace. You cannot get away from it, however high and far you go. Rather it is the other way. The greater the revelation and the more the wonder and the vastness of Divine purpose comes to your heart, the more you go down and worship for the grace of God. No teaching ought ever to carry us away from the grace of God.

But I did say this - the true servant glories in the grace of God on personal grounds; not as a subject, not as a theme, however entrancing and wonderful; not as something in the Bible, not as something that has worked miracles in lives in India and in China and in London; but as something by which he himself is living today. That is where Paul was constantly coming in with his personal pronoun. "I obtained mercy..."; "unto me... was this grace given." It is right back there on personal grounds, and the Lord will keep it there. Oh, do not go out with a theme; go out as a man, a woman, who embodies the grace of God, and is never, never tired of extolling that grace. It is the hall-mark of a true servant of God.

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