

(The New Covenant Servant) 4. an Example for Others to Follow

by Zac Poonen

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being a servant of the new covenant, which involves going through trials and afflictions, being an example to the flock, and subduing our bodies to serve the Lord.

Scripture: Matthew 11:11, John 17:2, Romans 1:1, 1 Corinthians 11:1, 2 Corinthians 1:4, 2 Corinthians 6:3-11, Philippians 3:17, Hebrews 2:17, 1 Peter 2:21-22, 1 John 2:6

Topics: "Servanthood", "New Covenant Leadership"

Description

Zac Poonen emphasizes the transformative nature of the new covenant, highlighting that while John the Baptist was the greatest prophet of the old covenant, even the least in the new covenant can achieve greater heights. He explains that Jesus serves as our ultimate example of servanthood, calling us to lead others towards the Divine nature rather than merely ruling over them. Poonen stresses the importance of personal sanctification and the necessity for leaders to be examples in speech, love, faith, and purity, urging that true ministry comes from overcoming personal trials and leading others to do the same. He warns against the dangers of seeking human approval and emphasizes the need for humility, likening true leadership to that of a child. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the essence of servanthood as bondslaves of Christ, free from the desire for material gain or recognition.

Transcript

John the Baptist was the greatest prophet under the old covenant. But Jesus said that the least one in the new covenant would be able to rise to greater heights than John (Matthew 11:11). This is an amazing calling indeed - to be greater than John the Baptist.

Ministry under the new covenant is a vastly higher calling than ministry under the old covenant. There are many things that we can learn from the lives of old-covenant servants of God, like Moses, Elijah and John the Baptist. But while they served God, following commandments, today we are to serve God, following an Example.

Jesus is now our Example of what it means to be a servant of God. How did Jesus become our High Priest? Not through His miraculous ministry, but by His being "made in all things like unto us, His brethren" (Hebrews 2:17), and becoming an example for us.

Jesus said that the Father had given Him "authority over all mankind" (John 17:2). Why was that authority given? In the same verse Jesus tells us that it was in order "to give eternal life to those whom the Father gave Him". "Eternal life" does not mean a life that never ends, but "a life that had no beginning and has no end". In other words, it describes the life of God or the Divine nature.

The old covenant servants of God like Moses, Joshua, Samson, David etc., had authority to rule over Israel and to overcome their human enemies. But under the new covenant, God's servants are given authority to lead others to partake of the Divine nature (eternal life), and to enable them to overcome the lusts in their flesh.

Our authority in the church is to lead the brothers and sisters to become like Jesus Who manifested the Divine nature in every situation in His earthly life. We have no other authority than that. If we are not exercising our authority to lead others to partake of the Divine nature, we have to consider ourselves as failures.

Unfortunately many Christian leaders today are like old covenant servants of God, ruling over the people. Jesus and the apostles however were servants of all men.

Which covenant are we living under - the old or the new?

Jesus is called our Forerunner (Hebrews 6:20). He went the same way that we have to go, ahead of us. We are exhorted to "run the race looking unto JesusWho also endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:1, 2). He was "tempted in every point as we are, and did not sin" (Hebrews 4:15), so that we might "follow in His steps Who committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:21, 22).

Jesus faced all our temptations so that He could be an Example for us to follow. That is why His word is so powerful, when He says, "Follow Me". Now, as shepherds of God's flock, we also have to lead the flock along the same way. We must also be able to say to others as Paul said, "Be followers of me, just as I follow ChristFollow my example" (1 Corinthians 11:1; Philippians 3:17).

Many preachers say, "Don't follow me. Just follow Christ." That sounds such a humble statement, that we could be impressed. But it is unScriptural, for none of the apostles ever made such a statement. They always exhorted others to follow them as they followed Christ.

Jesus is the Chief Shepherd and we are under-shepherds of God's flock. Even so, Jesus is the Forerunner, and we are called to be mini-forerunners to others in the church. We have to go the same way as He went. Having become overcomers ourselves, we can exhort others "to overcome even as we also have overcome" (Revelation 3:21).

The Secret of New-Covenant Ministry

Paul reveals the secret of his effective ministry in these words:

"God strengthens us in all our afflictions, so that we may be able to strengthen those who are in affliction WITH THE SAME STRENGTH WITH WHICH WE ARE STRENGTHENED BY GOD" (2 Corinthians 1:4).

Paul had to go through many afflictions in order to receive a spiritual education. Only thus could he pass on to others the strength that he himself had received when he went through trials. Without such an education, no one can be a servant of the new covenant.

There is a vast difference between an anointed Samson under the old covenant and an anointed Paul under the new covenant. Samson had the Spirit's power to overcome external lions. Paul however had the Spirit's power to overcome the lions that dwelt within his own flesh - which Samson could not overcome.

Under the old covenant, God's servants stood in God's presence, heard what God had to say, and then told others what they had heard. But that is not sufficient in the new covenant. Now, God's servants must go through trials and afflictions and experience God's grace helping them to overcome in all those trials, and then exhort others to follow their own example. That is how new covenant ministry is far higher than old covenant ministry - and it is far costlier too.

We cannot become servants of the new covenant by going to a Bible-school. No true apostle or prophet in the Bible ever came out of a Bible-school. We cannot study the Bible like we study chemistry, cooped up in a classroom. The Holy Spirit teaches us the meaning of the Scriptures in the midst of life's situations. That was how the apostles learnt it. And that is how God's servants learn it today as well. Only thus can we lead others to partake of eternal life. It is by following Jesus that we become servants of the new covenant.

Under the old covenant it was not possible for people to press on to perfection. But in the new covenant we can (See Hebrews 6:1 with 7:19).

But we cannot lead others to perfection if we are not pressing on to perfection ourselves. Only if we are "cleansing OURSELVES from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Corinthians 7:1), and "purifying OURSELVES even as Jesus is pure" (1 John 3:3) can we lead others also to such a life. There is no other way.

We have to be mini-forerunners for the others. That is why God takes us through varied and trying situations - more than all the other believers in our churches have to go through. For only thus can we be true shepherds to them. Otherwise we will be hirelings, seeking our own gain - either money or man's honour.

That does not mean that we have to face all the circumstances that others in our church face. That would be impossible. Jesus did not become our Forerunner by facing all our circumstances, but by being tempted with all the temptations that we face (Hebrews 4:15). Jesus did not have a drunken father or a nagging wife or disobedient children, as some of us may be having. Jesus did not have to wait in long queues outside government offices for a license as we have to wait today. Yet He was our Forerunner, because He faced all the temptations that we face today, in different circumstances in His day.

God has to take us through all the temptations that our brothers and sisters face. But in all those temptations, we must overcome, if we are to serve them, and lead them to partake of eternal life. That is how we become servants of the new covenant.

Peter writes to the elders "to be examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). And Paul writes to Timothy (in 1 Timothy 4:12) that he should be "an example to those who believe - in speech, love, faith and purity".

First of all, we must be examples in our speech. Our speech must always be gentle and gracious. We must be totally free from gossiping. If someone shares something with us in confidence, we must be able to keep the matter secret - even from our wives.

We must be examples in love. Others must see that no matter what they say or do to us, our love to them never changes.

We must be examples in faith. In all the trying circumstances that we face, people must see that we never get into a panic, but always have the perfect confidence that God is able to see us through.

We must be examples in purity. We cannot expect purity in the relationships between young brothers and sisters in our churches, if we ourselves are not first class examples in this area.

A Bondslave of Christ

Paul called himself a bondslave of Jesus Christ (Romans 1:1). That is what all the early apostles were. Jesus is looking today for bondslaves - not servants. There is a difference between a servant and a slave. A servant works for pay. A slave gets no salary. God has no servants under the new covenant, only bondslaves.

Jesus never offered any salary to those whom He called to be His apostles. If we are called to full-time Christian work, let us ensure that we never work for a salary, or else we will end up as servants of men. Let us not serve our churches, expecting people to give us gifts. If they choose to do so, without our expecting anything from them, that is all right. But we should never expect anything from anyone.

We must also make it a principle that we will never receive any money from those whose standard of living is lower than ours.

The highest way to serve the Lord in full-time work, however, is the way Paul served the Lord as an apostle - by having some secular employment, so that we are not dependent on anyone's gifts for our needs (1 Corinthians 9:14-18; 2 Corinthians 11:7-15; Acts 20:33, 34).

We cannot be servants of the new covenant, if we are working for pay. We must be bondslaves. If we feel that we have a right to comforts and conveniences, then we are paid servants, not bondslaves. A bondslave has no right to anything - not even to honour or reputation.

If God gives us a house to live in, we are thankful. But we will serve Him, even if we don't have a house to live in. The fact that He gives us the privilege to build the Body of Christ is more than enough for us when we are true bondslaves.

Romans 6:22 speaks of the past present and future of a true bondslave of God.

In the past - freed from conscious sin.

In the present - the fruit of progressive sanctification.

In the future - eternal life (the fullness of the Divine nature).

First of all, we must be freed from conscious sin. Many don't mourn for their secret failures and that is why they don't come to a life of victory over sin. We may imagine that impurity in our thought-life is not important, because others don't see that area of our lives. But it is there that God tests us to see whether we fear Him or not.

Secondly: Increasing sanctification will be the primary fruit that comes forth from our lives, if we are true bondslaves of God. Bringing others to Christ and building them up in the faith will be the secondary fruit. If we are really serving the Lord, our labour will certainly result in increasing godliness in our personal lives.

Sanctification is a process in which we get increasing light on the evil that dwells in our flesh, and in which, as we bear the dying of Jesus in our bodies, we partake more and more of the life of Jesus in area after area. If we are being sanctified, we will get light, for example, on the harshness of the tone of our voice when we speak to our family members, on our lack of love towards those we disagree with, on our seeking honour in our ministry, on our excessive talking and foolish jesting, and on the deadness of our preaching etc., etc.

And finally, the bondsman looks forward to partaking of God's nature (eternal life) in all its fullness. That is the goal towards which every true bondsman of God presses on.

As slaves of God, we may have to go through many trials, misunderstandings and false accusations, on earth. But it will be worth it all when we see Jesus, if we endure in love, until the end.

Paul reminds us that as servants of the new covenant, we

"must give no cause for offense in anything, in order that the ministry be not discredited. But in everything, commending ourselves as bondslaves of God - in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in labours, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in patience, in kindness, in genuine love, by glory and dishonour, by evil report and good report, regarded as deceivers and yet true, as unknown (to men) yet well-known (to God), as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things, with a heart that is opened wide to those whose hearts are narrow towards us" (2 Corinthians 6:3-11).

Subduing Our Bodies

In 1 Corinthians 9:27, Paul tells us one more secret of his life. He "treated his body roughly, training it TO DO WHAT IT SHOULD, AND NOT WHAT IT WANTS TO" (TLB). Otherwise he feared that after he had preached to others, he would be disqualified.

It is amazing to see that Paul had a fear that he might be disqualified even after all that he had done for the Lord.

There are healthy fears and there are unhealthy fears:

To fear that GOD MIGHT HURT US is an unhealthy fear. But to fear that WE MIGHT HURT GOD (by something we say or do) is a healthy fear.

In the same way, to fear that we might finally be disqualified, is a healthy fear that will keep us alert and "on our toes" at all times. It will enable us to subdue our bodies and make them our slaves.

God's Word tells us to "work out our own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12). That exhortation is especially necessary for preachers, because every preacher is in constant danger of becoming a hypocrite. He is in danger of preaching things that he has not yet practised. He is in danger of giving others an impression about himself that is not totally true, and he is in danger of spending more time preparing and perfecting his sermons than in perfecting his life!!

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 9:26 that he had a very definite aim in what he was doing. He didn't fight or run aimlessly. He ran towards a definite goal. He fired at a definite target.

I remember the days when we cadets were being taught to shoot with rifles in the military academy. We had to lie down on the ground, a few feet apart from each other, with rifles in our hands. Each of us had a target-board some yards in front of us, marked with a number of concentric circles, with a point in the centre called the "bull's eye".

When we first began shooting, our aim was highly inaccurate. Some of us would be hitting the next person's target, and not our own!! After a while, we learnt to hit our own targets.

That's how it often is with many Christians too. They hit other people's targets and not their own. They are busybodies in other people's matters. But if they work out their own salvation, they will gradually learn to hit their own target and finally hit the bull's eye. Then their aim would have become perfect. Paul's aim was perfect. He didn't judge others. He judged himself and subdued his own body. And so he fought a good fight and finished his course (2 Timothy 4:7).

Our eyes and our tongue are the two members of our body that we need to discipline the most.

We invite unbelievers to give their hearts to Christ. But the Lord asks us to give Him our bodies (Romans 12:1) - and He asks especially for our eyes and our tongues. If we don't give Him these, all the time, we cannot expect to be bondslaves or spokesmen of Christ, or to stand approved by God in the final day.

If we don't keep our eyes under control - at home, in the bus, on the road and in our place of work - we will find that even if we preach like angels, we will be disqualified by God in the final day. Many servants of God through the centuries have fallen because they were not careful with their eyes. They allowed their eyes to wander and look at pretty girls, and soon one thing led to another, and they fell into sin. It is not enough to say that we don't lust after women. The Bible warns us not even to admire a woman's BEAUTY, lest it bring us to spiritual poverty (Proverbs 6:25, 26). How careful we must be then.

We have to be careful in the same way with our tongues. God will not use the tongue of a man to preach His Word, if that man allows his tongue to be used by Satan at other times. The Lord told Jeremiah,

"If you separate the precious from the worthless (in your conversation), then You will become My spokesman" (Jeremiah 15:19).

We must never speak anything that does not come from a heart of goodness. That's not easy to do, because we are so weak in this area. We have to be ruthless if we are to discipline our tongues.

I am sure there must have been many young people in our land whom God had called in past days to His service, whom He had planned to make His prophets in India. But they did not become prophets, because they were not careful to discipline their eyes and their tongues. They did not subdue their bodies.

We are called members of the Body of Christ, because that expresses an intimate, inward relationship with Christ the Head, just like our bodily members have with our brains in our physical bodies.

Jesus was faithful to keep every part of His body available exclusively for His Father (His Head). It is written in Romans 15:4 that He never pleased Himself. He never sought His own pleasure in the way he used His eyes or His tongue. He did not look at what He wanted to. Nor did He speak what he wanted to.

He always sought to do what pleased His Father. Thus He presented His body without any blemish to His Father and became the perfect spokesman of His Father to the world (Hebrews 9:14). That is how we are to live too, as members of His spiritual Body now.

To be a wholehearted disciple of Jesus is to have a burning desire to present ourselves to God without any blemish.

If we want to build the church as the Body of Christ, we must gather together all those who are eager to present their bodies to God thus, and who are really keen to make their bodies their slaves.

Each time we miss the bull's eye, we must mourn for our failure. We must mourn when our eyes are not absolutely pure. We must mourn when our tongues have spoken something that was not spoken in absolute goodness.

In Romans 7:23 Paul honestly admitted that he kept on seeing (present tense) a law in his bodily members (which was contrary to the law of Christ), that made him a prisoner to the law of sin. If Paul had referred to this in the past tense, as something he had once seen, it would have been a different matter. But he saw it and kept on seeing it day by day. In other words, he kept on getting light on the fact that nothing good dwelt in his flesh. And he kept on cleansing himself from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God. Thus he kept his body subdued and remained faithful to God until the end of his life. That is why he was not disqualified, but finished his course with joy, unlike many preachers in our day.

Godliness - The True and the False

Under the old covenant, people were exhorted to meditate on "the LAW of the Lord" (Psalms 1:2). But under the new covenant, we are exhorted meditate on "the GLORY of the Lord" (2 Corinthians 3:18).

If we look only at the letter of God's Word, we will become Pharisees, and we will build a church of Pharisees. But if we look at the glory of the life of Jesus, as we see it in the Word, we will be transformed increasingly into His likeness.

The secret of living a godly life (the Holy Spirit tells us in 1 Timothy 3:16), lies in seeing the example of Jesus, Who lived on earth with all the limitations of the flesh, and Who had no more resources than we can have - the power of the Holy Spirit, and Who yet lived in perfect purity in His spirit. If He could live like that, so can we.

"The one who says he abides in Him, ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked." (1 John 2:6).

We cannot blame the flesh any more for our sinning. For there was One Who walked this earth in the flesh and Who did not sin. He overcame through the power of God's grace - and so can we.

The measure in which we ourselves follow Jesus in an overcoming life will determine the measure in which we can lead our fellow-believers also to walk as Jesus walked.

Immediately after speaking about the secret of godliness (in 1 Timothy 3:16), the Holy Spirit warns us about deceiving spirits who will come in the last days seeking to turn believers away from this way of godliness to a counterfeit way of becoming holy.

"The Spirit explicitly says that in the latter times, some will fall away from this faith, paying attention to deceitful spirits" (1 Timothy 4:1).

The primary mark of all deceiving spirits is that they "do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (2 John 7). They will not acknowledge that Jesus overcame all sin in the flesh.

Through listening to such deceiving spirits, believers will finally be led to believe "doctrines of demons" (1 Timothy 4:2). Two examples of doctrines of demons are mentioned there: forbidding marriage and forbidding the eating of certain foods.

Celibacy and fasting have always been regarded among heathen religions as ways to become holy. But these demonic doctrines will find their way even into Christianity in the last days. We see that being fulfilled in our day. There are Christian groups today that teach that we can become more holy if we remain unmarried or if we fast regularly. Are these doctrines of demons? Yes. Because they turn our attention away from the secret of godliness to asceticism. Instead of following Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit, we then begin to seek after godliness through monastic self-discipline.

There is nothing wrong with remaining unmarried or with fasting. But when these are promoted as the secret of godliness, then the error is serious. In fact any doctrine that leads people away from "Christ manifest in the flesh as the secret of godliness" - is a doctrine of a demon. True holiness is attained, not by yoga or meditation or self-discipline, but by the power of the Holy Spirit.

In Colossians 2:20-23, Paul says that ascetic practices may have some external value, but they will not lead us to the Divine nature being manifest in our flesh. Only the Holy Spirit can produce that.

In the church, we must set people free from religious asceticism. Otherwise we will be proclaiming only a Christianized version of yoga.

The Devil is forever seeking to lead believers either to the one extreme of materialism, or to the opposite extreme of asceticism.

Materialism is not so dangerous, because it is obviously worldly even to a carnal believer. But asceticism is more dangerous, because it appears to be leading to godliness. Both these are cliffs that stand opposite to each other. But both lead to the bottom. Irreligious lovers of money and religious, self-disciplined Pharisees are both headed for hell. And as servants of God we must not forget that.

The Big and the Great in the World's Eyes

In building the church, we must remember that

"everything that is big in the eyes of men is an abomination in God's sight" (Luke 16:15).

We must never therefore bring human greatness into the church. When we preach God's Word, we must not seek to impress people with our cleverness or our knowledge or our polished language. That would be demonstrating our soul-power in the church.

Our values in the church are the exact opposite of the values that worldly people have. Worldly people place a lot of value on money, whereas we place no value on it. Worldly people honour those who are great and influential in the world, but we don't care for them at all. On the other hand, we value those who are humble and God-fearing. The world places a great value on being intelligent, whereas we care nothing

for a man's cleverness. The world and the church are not just slightly different. They are facing in opposite directions.

To show off our cleverness or our greatness in the church is an abomination to God. It is the equivalent of offering a pig to God on the altar in the Old Testament. We must live in a healthy fear of bringing our human abominations into the service of God.

Being Like a Little Child

In Isaiah 11:6, we are told that during the 1000-year reign of Jesus on earth, when He returns, everything will be peaceful. There will be no wild animals, and life on earth will be simply wonderful.

But we have a foretaste of that life in the church already - because the kingdom of God has already come in the church. "Wolves" are already lying down with "lambs", "leopards" and "goats" are at peace, and "cattle" are safe amidst the "lions" - in the fellowship of the church. In the world, people with such diverse personalities as these, cannot get along with each other. But in the church, they die to their Self-life, and live in glorious peace with each other.

And in this kingdom, Isaiah says that "a little child will be the leader" (Isaiah 11:6). Thus we see who is really fit to lead a church - the one who is most like a little child.

The real leader in a church is the one who is guileless and humble like a little child. It is easy to fellowship with such a brother. People develop confidence in such a brother - who is himself, who is not trying to impress others with his personality or his gifts, and who is not trying to imitate some other more mature brother.

In many Christian groups, leadership is given to those who are smart, talented and humorous, and who are good musicians and organizers. But in the new-covenant church, God appoints those who are like little children - for they are the greatest ones in His kingdom.

If the "wolves" in a church are tearing up the "lambs", then the kingdom of God has not yet come to that church. And that must be because the leader is not like a child!! So it is the leaders who should judge themselves when things go wrong in a church.

Jesus told His disciples in Matthew 18:4 to humble themselves like little children, for a child is the greatest in the kingdom of God.

Now we know that the greatest person in God's kingdom is Jesus Himself. So that must mean that Jesus humbled himself at all times like a little child.

There we have an example for all Christian leaders to follow.

We read on one occasion that Jesus healed multitudes of sick people, but told the people not to tell anyone about it. He didn't want any publicity for Himself. That was in order to fulfil a Scripture that said that He "would not make his voice heard in the streets" (He would not advertise Himself) (Matthew 12:15-20).

That Scripture begins with these words "Behold my Child...." (Matthew 12:18 - margin). God is saying there, "Look carefully at My Child - the One who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven - He heals the sick and then disappears as though He has done nothing."

In the church, the one with this spirit is the real leader.

A little child realises that he is a nobody, and that he knows almost nothing. And it is the realization that we are nobodies and that we know almost nothing of spiritual matters, that will keep us as little children always. It is only such a person whom God can attest as His representative in the church.

Jesus gave us only two examples to learn humility from: Himself and little children. In the gospels, we can see how Jesus lived, and learn humility from His example. Around us, we can see little babies, and learn humility from them.

What are the thoughts that go through a little baby's mind when it is lying in its cradle? Does he think how smart he is or how much others appreciate him etc. No. He has no such thoughts at all. He has no self consciousness whatsoever. He is just himself - natural, with no pretence or artificiality. That is our example.

Are we bothered with thoughts about what others think about us or our ministry? Then we are not like little children. We must battle these high thoughts until we are converted and become like little children. Only then will we be fully qualified to lead God's people.

Then we will be happy with any small corner on this earth that God places us in, to do His work. And we won't have any ambition to become great in the eyes of men. We will be happy to fulfil the task that God has entrusted us with in Christ's Body. And we won't be jealous of anyone else's ministry either.

Praise God that we can experience as well as proclaim such a wonderful gospel - that we can unlearn all our corrupt "grown-up ways" and become like little children once again.

Thus we shall become true servants of the new covenant.

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