

“Picking Up Sticks in the Service of Jesus”

Nick Batzig

One of the perennial problems of the fallen human condition is that men and women love to serve when there is respect, reputation and remuneration involved, and not serve when it involves what they perceive to be a menial task done out of the sight of the prying and praising eyes of others. This is no less true of members and leaders in the church as it is among the people of the world. It was for this reason that Jesus told the parable of the dinner guests:

"When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher.' Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" ([Luke 14:8-11](#)).

Our Lord Jesus modeled what it meant to be a servant-leader when he stooped to wash the disciples feet. This was, of course, a foreshadowing of what he would do at the cross. The washing of the filthy feet of His disciples was a symbol of the washing of the filthy souls of His people. Jonathan Edwards explained this so well when he wrote:

"Christ's washing his disciples' feet; which action, as it was exceeding wonderful in itself, so it manifestly was symbolical, and represented something else far more important and more wonderful, even that greatest and most wonderful of all things that ever came to pass, which was accomplished the next day in his last sufferings. There were...symbolical representations given of that great event this evening; one in the passover, which Christ now partook of with his disciples; another in this remarkable action of his washing his disciples' feet. Washing the feet of guests was the office of servants, and one of their meanest offices. And therefore was fitly chosen by our Savior to represent that great abasement which he was to be the subject of in the form of a servant, in becoming obedient unto death, even that ignominious and accursed death of the cross, that he might cleanse the souls of his disciples from their guilt and spiritual pollution."1

However, the foot-washing in the Upper Room was also the example that Jesus left for His people to follow for millennia. The Apostle Paul certainly followed the example of his Master when he modeled this sort of Christian service throughout his ministry. In what is one of the most fascinating (and frequently overlooked) details in the book of Acts, Luke tells us that, while a prisoner on Malta, Paul picked up sticks to start a fire to keep his captors warm ([Acts 28:3](#)).

William Still, the profoundly influential Scottish pastor of the 20th Century, has a chapter on this passage of Scripture in his book *The World of Grace* titled, "Evangelism Through Service - Paul Gathering Sticks." In this book, Still drew out the significance of the service of the Apostle when he wrote: "This is the test. If you profess, prove that you possess Christ by being like Him who wasn't averse to washing dirty feet, other people's dirty feet; and, like Paul who gathered sticks--and I'm sure did even more menial tasks than that."2 When we consider this, we are faced with the following question: "Are we willing to pick up sticks to the benefit of others (even our enemies) in the service of Jesus?"

This question must be answered by both the members of the church. It must be answered among the membership of the church with regard to the service that it requisite for the church to function as the church. This takes the form of doing the seemingly less admirable acts of service that tend to get

overlooked--hanging the church banner, working in the nursery, making coffee, setting up chairs, preparing the Lord's Supper, setting the book table, etc.

This question must also be answered by the leadership of the church. Pastors, elders and deacons must always ask whether the service that they render is the service that disadvantages them to the advantage of the people for which God has called them to care. This will take many shapes and forms. In his 1999 article, "Draped in a Servants Towel Rather Than a Master's Robe," Joe Novenson made the following important observation about the lack of emphasis placed on servanthood in the Christian ministry:

"I own quite a few three ring binders from leadership conferences. I cannot recall, though, a single servanthood conference ever being offered as an option. I can understand, for within my own heart, I seem to not mind being above people in a pulpit or next to them in a pew, but I don't like being beneath them as a servant. Perhaps we've collapsed beneath cultural pressure."³

When it comes to leadership in a local church, this does not mean that the pastors and elders will cater to every whim and desire of the members. It will, however, mean learning to differentiate between servant-leadership and entitlement-compromise. More often than not, it will look like the metaphorical stooping to wash dirty feet and the metaphorical picking up sticks to start a fire in order to keep those who have not benefited you warm. It will mean doing things that most would think were beneath them.

The Christian life and ministry is one in which we take the lowest place in order to maximally benefit others. This is what Jesus did when He hung on the cross. This is what Paul did in all of his missionary endeavors--and in the menial labor of picking up sticks to start a fire. In following the example of Christ and the Apostle, we will find that God uses our humble servant-like labors as a platform for the Gospel.

-
1. Jonathan Edwards, an excerpt from the sermon, "Christ, the Example of Ministers."
 2. William Still, *The World of Grace* (Aberdeen: Gilcomston South Church) p. 48
 3. Joe Novenson, an excerpt from "Draped in a Servant's Towel Rather Than a Master's Robe" in *Reformed Quarterly* Volume 16, Issue 1 (Spring 1997).