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SERVICE AND GOOD WORKS – THE WOMAN WHO BROKE THE ALABASTER VIAL (1)

Life that is pleasing to God

The subject of service and good works is a major issue in Christian living. All believers want to serve the Lord effectively and live a life that counts, a life that is truly pleasing to God, and one that bears fruit in every good work. This is in line with Paul's prayer for the Colossians.

Colossians 1:9-10

9 For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,
10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;

Paul prayed that the Christians in Colossae might walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in all respects and bearing fruit in every good work (v. 10). To do that, the believers need to be "filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (v. 9). It is not enough for us to want to serve the Lord. We should also know how to go about it.

Let us turn to Paul's teaching in Ephesians 2:8-10.

Ephesians 2:8-10

8 For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;
9 not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.
10 For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

Here, Paul tells us that our salvation is related to our being God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works". God's intention for us is that we manifest good works in our lives. These good works are what God had "prepared beforehand", which means the good works in our lives should not be according to our own thinking, but as God has purposed. We should therefore seek to understand what God has in mind for us.

In his letter to Titus, Paul also dwells on the subject of good deeds.

Titus 2:11-14

11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men,
12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age,
13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,
14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

Here, Paul says that Christ gave Himself for us so that He might “redeem us from every lawless deed” and “purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds” (v. 14). In other words, one main purpose for God redeeming us is that we may be “zealous for good deeds”.

What then should be our approach regarding the issue of service and good works? How do we evaluate whether a Christian is doing well in this area?

As in other areas in the Christian life, in the area of service for God, appearance can differ much from reality. Someone who appears to be doing well in serving the Lord and doing many good works may in reality be faring poorly in the sight of God. On the other hand, someone who appears to be not serving the Lord well and not accomplishing much may in fact be contributing something significant in the eyes of the Lord.

In this message, we will reflect on an incident recorded in Mark 14:3-9 that sheds light on this subject and the issues involved, and has much to teach us.

The woman who broke the alabaster vial

Mark 14:3-9

3 While He was in Bethany at the home of Simon the leper, and reclining at the table, there came a woman with an alabaster vial of very costly perfume of pure nard; and she broke the vial and poured it over His head.

4 But some were indignantly remarking to one another, “Why has this perfume been wasted?”

5 “For this perfume might have been sold for over three hundred denarii, and the money given to the poor.” And they were scolding her.

6 But Jesus said, “Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me.

7 “For you always have the poor with you, and whenever you wish you can do good to them; but you do not always have Me.

8 “She has done what she could; she has anointed My body beforehand for the burial.

9 “Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her.”

True service of significance may not be obvious

The woman broke the alabaster vial of very costly perfume and poured it over the Lord’s head. What she did may not appear good and right. It may seem such a waste. That was how it appeared to some of the people present, and they were indignant over what she had done (v. 4).

A similar incident is recorded in Matthew 26. It could very well be the same incident. Here, we are told it was the disciples who were indignant (Matt. 26:8).

The disciples did not appreciate the woman’s act. In fact, they felt it was wrong or foolish of her to waste such costly perfume. To them, it could have been sold for over 300 denarii and the money given to the poor, and they scolded her for what she did (Mark 14:5). It was a lot of money. One denarius was equivalent to a day’s wage and over 300 denarii could be about one year’s wages. They thought it could have been used to accomplish much more than just pouring it on the Lord Jesus in this way.

Verdict and commendation by the Lord Jesus

What was the response of the Lord Jesus? It was totally different from the others. He intervened with these words: “Let her alone; why do you bother her? She has done a good deed to Me” (Mark 14:6). The Lord Jesus not only disagreed with them, He actually commended the woman highly for her deed.

Why did the Lord Jesus commend her and her deed so highly? What was the significance of her action?

The Lord Jesus said she had done “a good deed to Me”. A good deed can also be translated as good work. This was indeed a good deed, a direct service to the Lord. The woman was serving the Lord in a way that was deeply appreciated by Him.

When the Lord Jesus is about to say something important, He often prefaces it by saying: “Truly I say to you”. With regards to this incident, He said something rather unusual and remarkable: “Truly I say to you, wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world, what this woman has done will also be spoken of in memory of her” (Mark 14:9).

“Wherever the gospel is preached in the whole world” indicates the extent of the positive impact of what the woman had done with reference to space and time. “What this woman has done” refers to her good deed and “will also be spoken of in

memory of her” is a reference to the person. Both the person and her deed were highlighted by the Lord Jesus.

Beware of viewing service from the visible, temporal perspective

Some believers, like Judas, may be insincere and have wrong motives in what they may say about service for God. In John’s account of this incident, we are told that Judas intended to betray the Lord, that he used to pilfer from the money box, and that he was not really concerned about the poor.

John 12:4-6

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said,

5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?”

6 Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

On the other hand, there were others, like the other disciples, who were sincere in that they were genuinely concerned about the seeming waste of such a huge sum of money, which could have been given to the poor.

Why were the views and comments of the disciples so different from those of the Lord Jesus? Why were they defective? How can we avoid making the same mistakes?

The basic problem is that these disciples perceived the incident primarily from the material, physical, utilitarian approach. To them, the costly perfume that was poured out did not accomplish anything whereas helping the poor or feeding the hungry would be for a good cause. The people, including the disciples, were focusing on the outward and the obvious.

There was failure to view and appreciate the value and meaning of things from God's point of view and what it meant to God. They failed to appreciate what was taking place in the spiritual realm and the significance of things from the perspective of God's kingdom. Expressions of worship of God, of gratitude and devotion to Him are never wasted, nor do they accomplish nothing.

In spite of what has been recorded in the Scriptures for our learning, many believers still approach the issue of Christian service and accomplishments in a similar way. They fail to properly appreciate the issues, just like the people in this incident. They do not pay sufficient attention to the striking comments of the Lord Jesus and fail to learn well what He desires to teach us.

There is a place to take into consideration how money and other resources can be helpful to the poor. Likewise, we can take into consideration what can be counted

and measured when evaluating how a work is going on. However, such considerations do not form the total picture. Much that is very precious to God and highly significant in God's kingdom cannot be easily counted or measured.

There is a tendency for people to think they are accomplishing much only when their actions can be measured. For example, a Christian may feel uneasy and have doubts that he is faring well because he has not accomplished much that can be counted or measured. Another who has brought many people to know the Lord may feel satisfied that he has achieved much and is doing well.

It is important to make our lives count and not waste our time, energy and resources. But it is incorrect to think that to be an effective servant of God, we must accomplish many things that are obvious and visible, which can be counted and measured.

Spiritual service from God's perspective

We should learn to appreciate the meaning and value of things from God's perspective. We should learn to perceive their true significance in His kingdom. The Scriptures has much to teach us in this area.

The disciples did not properly appreciate the woman's deed from a spiritual perspective and did not realise that what she had done meant much to the Lord. Although it might have appeared to the disciples and many others to be a waste, it wasn't so. The Lord deeply appreciated her for her genuine expression of gratitude, devotion and worship.

Service to God and contribution to the fulfilment of God's purposes cannot be measured in quantifiable terms. If a deed is valuable and significant in God's sight, it will have the stamp of eternal significance. It will not be superficial or temporary in nature. A powerful testimony shines forth when our lives reflect the positive qualities of a moral being and how God intends men to be and to live. It would contribute to the fulfilment of God's purposes.

Learning from Mary

In John's account of this same incident, this woman was identified as Mary.

John 12:1-11

1 Jesus, therefore, six days before the Passover, came to Bethany where Lazarus was, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

2 So they made Him a supper there, and Martha was serving; but Lazarus was one of those reclining at the table with Him.

3 Mary then took a pound of very costly perfume of pure nard, and anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped His feet with her hair; and the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

4 But Judas Iscariot, one of His disciples, who was intending to betray Him, said,

5 “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor people?”

6 Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.

7 Therefore Jesus said, “Let her alone, so that she may keep it for the day of My burial.

8 “For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have Me.”

9 The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus’ sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead.

10 But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also;

11 because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus.

In this account, the Lord Jesus visited Bethany, where Lazarus lived with his sisters, Martha and Mary. Martha was serving while Lazarus reclined at the table with the Lord. And Mary was anointing the Lord with the costly perfume of pure nard.

It is helpful for us to ponder about the life of Mary. There are significant things we can learn from her. Although she may not appear to have accomplished much, in reality she did contribute significantly in the spiritual realm, and the Lord Jesus deeply appreciated and highly commended her.

In Luke 10:38-42, we see her seated at the Lord’s feet, listening to His word. Martha, on the other hand, was distracted with preparations. In exasperation, Martha said to the Lord: “Lord, do You not care that my sister has left me to do all the serving alone?”

Martha was displeased with Mary’s conduct and appealed to the Lord: “Tell her to help me”. But the Lord spoke up for Mary. He said: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her”. The Lord commended Mary, who had chosen the right thing, which was, to sit at the Lord’s feet and listen to His words. That was the important thing to do at that point in time.

These accounts in the gospels of John and Luke help us to appreciate that Mary was a spiritually perceptive person. She knew the importance of paying close attention to what the Lord Jesus was speaking. So she sat at the feet of the Lord Jesus listening. The Lord Jesus appreciated it and commended her for having done the right thing.

Likewise, in the incident about the costly perfume, she did something that others could not appreciate. Her deep love and devotion to the Lord led her to break the vial

and pour out what was very precious to her. It was not an act of fleeting significance because it was not merely an outward act. The pouring out of the perfume was an expression of her love and devotion to the Lord. It was an act of service and worship unto the Lord. Her act had great impact and made an indelible imprint in the spiritual realm and in God's kingdom. It is a testimony to what it means to love the Lord. That is why the Lord Jesus highlighted what she had done and highly commended her.

Be alert to wrong emphasis and approach to service

Many Christians seek to serve God, but at times, their contributions have little substance and are of temporary and momentary significance. They may embark on big projects, but there is little impact on the spiritual realm. What counts in the end is what will endure, what is valuable in the sight of God, and what will have an impact on God's kingdom.

Apart from having little positive impact on the spiritual realm, a wrong emphasis and approach to Christian service can also result in undesirable consequences. Where there is a strong emphasis on activities and visible results, believers may end up being very busy with many activities, including what they are not ready for. Where there is insufficient attention paid to the development of deep inward qualities, the believers may not grow well. Such believers are very vulnerable to the attacks of the evil one. They may face significant problems in their personal lives and in the lives of those they are seeking to help. Their conduct and ways may also hinder the Lord's work.

What if there is no costly perfume to pour?

Some may say: I do not have any costly perfume or anything so precious to offer to the Lord. What if Mary did not have the costly perfume to pour out? That would not matter. What mattered was the meaning within her heart. What counted was her deep love and devotion to the Lord. It was the quality and meaning within her heart that gave value to her outward act of pouring the costly perfume. This was what the Lord appreciated. Even if she did not have the costly perfume to pour out, she could express her devotion to the Lord in other ways. In like manner, we too can express our love and devotion to the Lord in many ways.

Act of pouring costly perfume may not be appreciated by the Lord

On the other hand, if a person does the same act to draw attention to himself, his act would have no value in the eyes of the Lord. Philanthropists who give not out of love for people, but out of a desire to project themselves, will be doing so with the wrong attitude and motive. Their acts would not have much value before God. The Lord Jesus warns us against practising our righteousness before men to be noticed by them (Matt. 6:1). Our outward acts would have no value in the eyes of the Lord if they do not flow forth from a heart of love and devotion to the Lord.

Our lives a living sacrifice

Actually what God desires of us is not merely specific expressions of love and devotion, but our whole life offered up to Him as a living sacrifice. In the first eleven chapters of Romans, Paul shared about what God has done for us, what He intends for our lives and the provisions that He has made for us. Then Paul urges us to offer up our lives as a living sacrifice unto God.

Romans 12:1

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

True service is always an expression of worship unto God. And such a life of true service can be expressed in different ways. Such outward expressions are important. They help us to understand whether the inward reality is present and the degree to which it is present.

We say that we love the Lord deeply and wholeheartedly, but we often live in ways that are inconsistent with our profession of love and devotion to God. When we meet with difficulties, instead of going through them faithfully, joyfully and without murmuring, we may want to run away from them or we may just grit our teeth and try to endure the difficulties, bemoaning our lot. How we face these difficulties is important. We need to ask whether the whole spirit in which we go through them qualify as an act of worship unto God.

If we want to understand whether we truly love the Lord, we can ask ourselves: Am I prepared to live out my profession of faith and love for the Lord when it costs me much, including financially, materially, forgoing the comforts of life and going through all kinds of trials, pain and difficulties? Am I manifesting a deep love for God and devotion to Him in every aspect of my life? If we are, then every act and every moment of our lives will have much value and meaning to God even if we are not accomplishing many things outwardly. Our lives will have significance in God's kingdom because God will lead and enable us. He will have the freedom to reveal much to us. He will entrust us with responsibilities and tasks which He knows we will be able to fulfil.

Nurturing a heart of love and devotion to God

To serve the Lord well, we need Him to guide us and equip us and to reveal to us His ways. We must seek to nurture our lives and our love and devotion to God. This is not primarily an emotional response, but a posture of a settled heart which will then be manifested in every aspect of our lives. The Lord Jesus taught this truth in Mark 12:30-31.

Mark 12:30-31

30 and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.'

31 "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these."

What does the Lord require of us? What is most important to Him? Are the many things that we do important in His sight?

When asked in verse 28 what commandment is the foremost of all, the Lord Jesus answered: "The foremost is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength'" (vs. 29-30).

The foremost is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. This must come first before all else. Loving our neighbour goes together with our love for God. Together, they sum up the essence of what God requires of us and what He intends to teach us in the Scriptures.

Commitment to God and truth

God is the God of truth. If we say we love God and are committed to Him, then we will also love the truth and be committed to the truth. How much do we really love the Lord and how much do we really love the truth? This is a question that we need to ask ourselves. This question is important not just for our lives now on earth, it continues to be important in eternity.

Any deficiency in this area of our lives will taint the meaning and quality of all that we do and say. Let us seek the Lord to properly resolve the deficiencies within us. Let us continually seek to deepen in our knowledge of the Lord and the truth, and consistently live a life of commitment to God and to the truth. If we do, then every moment of our lives and all that we do will be precious and meaningful in the eyes of God.

Offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe**Hebrews 12:28-29**

26 And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven."

27 This expression, "Yet once more," denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, so that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.

28 Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;

29 for our God is a consuming fire.

In verses 28 and 29, we are told to “offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire”. This tells us that we cannot treat the issue of service lightly or carelessly. It has to be an acceptable service, one performed with reverence and awe. When God shakes the heaven and the earth, it is the fruits of such service that will abide. Not everything we accomplish on earth will endure. Only what abides in God's kingdom, which cannot be shaken, will endure.

The word translated as “service” in verse 28 can also be translated as “worship”. That is how it is translated in Philippians 3:3.

Philippians 3:2-3

2 Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision;

3 for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh,

The phrase “who worship in the Spirit of God” can also be read as “who serve in the Spirit of God”. It is service carried out as an act of worship. This is the kind of service acceptable to God. True believers must not live like the people the apostle Paul termed as dogs, evil workers, and those of the false circumcision. We must learn to serve and worship “in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh”.

Concluding remarks

Most Christians desire to live a life that counts, a life pleasing to God and bearing fruit in every good work. To be truly effective in service, we need to seek God's guidance and wisdom. It is important to be clear about the right approach and emphasis in true service.

We can learn much from the incident of the woman who broke the alabaster vial of very costly perfume and poured it on the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus highly commended the woman for what she did. He said she had done a good deed to Him and wherever the gospel is preached, what this woman had done would be spoken of in memory of her. What touched the Lord deeply was the woman's genuine expression of deep love and devotion to Him. Though the woman's action may not appear to accomplish much in the eyes of others, it has enduring impact and significance in God's kingdom.

In contrast, the disciples did not understand the woman's action. They viewed her action primarily from the outward, the obvious and the utilitarian approach. They failed to appreciate the value and meaning of things from God's perspective. Such lack of understanding is still very much reflected in the way Christians today view and approach service to God.

Many actions and activities of believers have momentary or fleeting significance. The focus is too much on the outward and what can be counted and measured, without sufficient emphasis on inward development and reality. Without the inward reality, the outward act will have little meaning in the eyes of the Lord.

Though inward reality is the main factor, outward acts are not irrelevant. They help us to understand the reality of our profession of love for the Lord. When a situation arises that is costly, would we continue to serve Him joyfully as an act of worship?

If every aspect of our life consistently manifests our love and devotion to God, then every act and every moment of our lives will be precious to God and will have deep meaning and significance. We will then bear much fruit in every good work. The Lord would also have the freedom to reveal to us, lead us, enable us and entrust us with responsibilities and tasks to fulfil. Such a life will make a significant contribution to the Lord's kingdom. This is what we must focus on in our desire to serve the Lord well. This is in line with the Lord Jesus' emphasis on what is of utmost importance to God, which is to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

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