
"Serving the God Who Cannot Be Served"
(Acts 17:24-31)
Pastor Peter Yi
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²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you."

²⁴ "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'

"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

Christians serve. Christians have this tendency to go to very difficult places and do things that many others would not do. Christians go right into the heart of an Ebola virus epidemic to set up clinics and hospitals. They place their own lives at risk to help others.

Well, everyone serves, you might say. And for the most part that's probably true. But Christians in particular are known by their service. This part of Christians is often overlooked, especially in light of all the focus on what Christians are against. Serving is part of our identity. Over and over throughout the New Testament Christians identify themselves as servants, a word that is often translated slave. We are slaves of God, slaves of Christ, we are servants of men. The teaching of the Bible is that all people are a kind of slave. We are either slaves to sin or we are a slave to God. And perhaps more than anyone else, the Christian understands this and confesses this to be true. So one of the reasons why Christians serve is because God, when he saved us, turned us from one kind of slave, where we are truly in bondage and are hearts and minds and bodies are held captive, where we have no power to free ourselves, and God set us free and made us into another kind of slave, the kind of slave we were always meant to be. We were meant to be servants of God. That's one of the reasons why Christians serve, because it's a part of our new identity.

There's another reason why we serve? We serve because we were served. The very foundation or premise of the Christian religion is that there is a God who serves His people. Jesus, who is God, who created all things—the Bible says all things were created by Him and FOR Him—and yet, this Jesus entered the world as an infant...why? To serve. He came not in riches but in poverty...why? To serve. He ministered mostly to the poor, but also to the rich...why? To serve. He fed the hungry, he healed the sick, he set free the demon possessed, he taught the ignorant, and finally he died the traitor's death...why? To serve. With his own mouth Jesus said, (Mark 10:45) "45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

The sole purpose for Jesus entering the world of men was to serve us. How? By giving us his very life as a ransom, a payment. How? By giving up his own body, his own life, to die the sinner's death, by being crucified on a Roman cross.

The day before Jesus died, he did something remarkable, unthinkable. You remember the story. What Jesus wanted to do more than anything, the day before his death, was to be with his twelve followers, his best friends, his closest companions. He reserved a room, he had the food prepared, and he feasted one last time with his disciples. Well, upon entering the dining room, one would have expected a servant to approach them, to take their things, to have them sit in a chair and wash their dirty feet. But instead, Jesus takes upon himself that role. Let's read the account from John 13:

³ Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; ⁴ so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. ⁵ After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (**John 13:3-5**)

The text explains very clearly why he did this humble act of service. From where did Jesus get the ability to serve in such a lowly way? He knew who he was. He knew who he was in relation to God. He knew the power that was given to him. He had all power. He possessed all authority. He knew why he had come to earth and he knew to whom he was returning. He had come from God, and he was returning back to Him. He knew his identity. And from that unshakable identity, he didn't say, "Now line up, get that basin of water, grab that towel and start washing my feet." No, his solid and unshakeable identity allowed him to serve.

But did you know that his foot washing wasn't just about foot washing? Even his foot washing was pointing to his ultimate act of service, his death on the cross. As Jesus prepared to wash his disciples' feet they were horrified. They were probably very ashamed as well, as we don't see any account of them offering to wash their master's feet. And Peter, the leader of the disciples, says, "You shall never wash my feet!" Now listen to the next part. Listen to what Jesus says to Peter. "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me."

What does Jesus mean by that? Does he really mean that unless Peter allows Jesus to wash his feet that he has no connection, no relationship with Jesus? I don't think so. What was this foot washing, this act of service pointing toward? Was it not pointing toward the ultimate act of service? Was it not pointing toward the act of service that will join Peter to Jesus forever and ever? The footwashing was pointing to the cross. Jesus was saying, "Peter, unless you allow the Son of God to serve you, by dying on the cross and in doing so, earning for you, your salvation, you have no part of me." And it's true for everyone here as well. Have you allowed Jesus to serve you? Or are you in one way or another saying, like Peter, "You shall never wash my feet." If you are trying to gain Christ's favor by serving him, instead of allowing him to serve you, you are not a Christian. That's the wonderful mystery of Christianity. God serves man before any man serves God.

All that to say, this is why Christians serve -- because we were served by Christ himself. This is made plainly clear when we read down a few more verses in John 13:15. Jesus says,

¹⁵ I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. (**John 13:15**)

There it is. We serve because we were served. We serve because Christ has become for us the example of how to serve.

There's another reason why we serve. We serve because we are commanded to serve. Listen to what the Apostle Paul says in Galatians 5:13:

You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. (**Galatians 5:13**)

It's an imperative. It's a command. God is our master, Christ is our Lord. We are his servants. We are commanded to imitate God. God serves so we serve. Christ serves so we serve. So explicitly we are commanded to serve one another humbly in love.

So, we have all these reasons for why we serve. We serve because it's a part of our new identity as Christians. We are by definition servants. We serve because we've been served by Jesus himself. He became our example. And we serve because we Christians have been commanded to serve.

How about for all of us? Why do you serve? Is serving a joy and a delight to you? Is there a noticeable difference to the way you approach your job? Is there an obvious quality of Christian service? What about at church? Why do you serve? Do you serve, because you can't help but serve? Do you say, I serve because that is what I am? I am a servant. That is my identity. Do you serve because you are so captured by Christ, the greatest servant of all...that he would serve a sinner like you? Do you serve because you are Christ's soldier and he is your commanding officer and he has ordered you to serve him and to serve others? Well, this is why Christians serve.

But, now let's look at today's passage. It's an interesting passage in that it says God cannot be served! Let's read it again:

²⁴ The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. ²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

How do we square this with what we just talked about? We said that we serve because that is our new identity. We serve because we were served by Jesus. We serve because we are commanded to serve. But here it says, "He is not served by human hands." How do we make sense of this?

The Apostle Paul is in the city of Athens at Mars Hill, the Areopagus, the place where religious ideas and philosophies were discussed and debated. And as he enters the city, he sees that the citizens of Athens are indeed very religious. They have great reverence for their gods. And in case they left one out, they had an altar to an unknown god. Paul uses this as a connection point to share with the people that this unknown god is actually the one and only true God. He begins by explaining to them the fundamental differences between the one true God and the gods they believe in.

First, they assumed that God could be contained. Paul saw shrines and idols of the gods within these temples and shrines. They thought that there in the idol, in that temple was an actual god. In one sense they were thinking that God could be contained, that he can be controlled, or manipulated. For us it's like when we think that God is more present at church than he is on my campus or at my workplace. And that is not true. Sometimes we think that God is like a formula. Input X, output Y. Do this and God will do that. That's a way that we try to manipulate God. So Paul says, God does not live in temples built by human hands, as if we could contain him. What a preposterous thought! God is the creator! God made everything. It's worse than trying to force the ocean into a thimble. It's impossible! It's foolish. If you think that a temple of wood and stone can contain God you're out of your mind. If you think that you can control God, manipulate him, get him to do your bidding, you have no idea what kind of God you're dealing with. That was the first misunderstanding.

The **second** misconception about God that Paul addresses is that God could actually be served. But since that's the main point of this sermon, I'll come to that in a just a minute. Let's look at the **third** misconception. The third misconception is to think that God has a form -- that the wood or stone, made by a skilled craftsman is actually a god. How could something inanimate like an idol be a god? How could something lesser than us be a god? We are physical, but we are not inanimate, we are animate. How could something inanimate be greater than the inanimate? And how could the thing that's created (the idol) be greater than the one who created it? Paul tells us that the true God is nothing like that. He is the creator of everything. He cannot be contained in a building and it would be a terrible offense to think we can contain him in an image or an idol. He is far too great for that.

Now back to the **second** misconception. Let's listen to Paul's exact words:

And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. **(v25)**

The misconception is to think that God has needs and that those needs could be met by us. That's what many people, even Christians, think. God needs me to serve him. If I don't serve God then the job won't get done. He needs me. Or we entertain thoughts that God is some vain person, whose entire identity is wrapped up in us giving him worship and praise. Why does God command us to worship him? Because without it, he'd feel sad or lonely or less complete? Is that what we think? Paul tells us something about God that makes that kind of thinking completely ridiculous and nonsensical. He says that God gives everyone life and breath and everything else. The reason you exist is because God brought you into existence. The reason there is air in your lungs is because God put it there. The reason you are not dead yet, is because God hasn't allowed it. The reason you are what you are and have what you have is because God gave it to you. Your physical and mental and intellectual attributes are all gifts from God -- your abilities and talents...all gifts from God. Your connections, your relationships are also gifts from God. Your personality, your life experiences, your education, your earning potential, your creativity...all of it is from God and to think that God could be served by me? To believe that God has needs and deficiencies that I can fulfill and meet, by a paltry offering or an act of worship or a deed of service? It's completely ludicrous.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 50,

¹⁰ for every animal of the forest is mine, and the cattle on a thousand hills. ¹¹ I know every bird in the mountains, and the insects in the fields are mine. ¹² If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world is mine, and all that is in it. **(Psalm 50:10-12)**

People of God, you and I must repent of any thought or any act of service we have done, if we've done it thinking that we are meeting something that's lacking in God. Of if we've ever thought, "I serve because God needs me" or "If I don't do it then who will?" As if!! He is not served by human hands. He does not need you and he does not need me. He alone is the only self-sufficient, non-dependent being in the entire universe.

And yet we are called, commanded even, to serve God.

"No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (**Matthew 6:24**)

How then do we serve the one who cannot be served? How do you serve the God who has all power? How do you serve the God who owns everything? How do you serve the God that needs nothing? That's the question.

First, we see our service to God as an honor, not merely a duty. It's saying to ourselves, "Yes, I have to serve God, but more than that, I get to serve God." There's a huge difference. Understanding the difference will completely change the way we serve. Christian, do you see your service to God as your highest calling, your highest honor, your greatest duty? That's exactly what it is. No matter what you do, God sees it, records it, and rewards it. Even the giving of a cup of water, says Jesus.

Second, we serve God in the way he prescribes it. We serve him the way he wants to be served. He wants to be served by being revered, by being honored, by being worshiped, and by being obeyed. And God is served when his people serve others selflessly and sacrificially.

Third, and most important, the only way we can truly become servants of God is by allowing God to serve us. The gods of most all religions tell their followers, "Serve me and if you meet my requirements, I will accept you, I will bless you." But the God of the Bible, the one and only true God says something radically different. He says, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me." Unless you allow me to serve you, by dying for you...unless you allow me to do for you, what you could never do for yourself, you can have no part with me. Unless you admit that you can't save yourself, unless you admit that all your acts of service are like filthy rags, unless you allow my works of service to be credited to you, you have no part with me. We become servants of God; we become the children of God, by allowing God to serve us through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus. In other words, all Christian service is Gospel-driven service. I love because he first loved me. I serve because he first served me.

Let's pray.