

The Discipline of Love

By Bob Moffitt

When we begin to form a habit we are conscious of it. There are times when we are conscious of becoming virtuous and patient and godly, but it is only a stage; if we stop there we shall get the strut of the spiritual prig. The right thing to do with habits is to lose them in the life of the Lord, until every habit is so practiced that there is no conscious habit at all. -- Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for his Highest, May 12

All parts of God's creation reflect His glory, but He placed the richest reflection of Himself—His image—in us! As He created people, God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Genesis 1:26-27). So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them.

Created in God's Image

The uniqueness of bearing the image of God has staggering implications. Because of God's image in us, we are involved in restoring “all things” (Colossians 1:20) and in making known the manifold wisdom of God through the church (Ephesians 3:10). We also carry characteristics of His image in us. His creativity is reflected in our ability to make something new, to shape the future, to bring order out of disorder/chaos, and to work as God worked and works. With our linguistic ability, we are able to communicate ideas and abstractions through words. We are relational beings; we know how to form intentional and purposeful interaction with people, nature, and work. We have been given moral choice, which animals and nature do not share; we have capacity to discern and choose between the constructive and destructive, between beauty and non-beauty. And we have the ability to act in intentional selflessness towards others: sacrificial servanthood.

Loving and sacrificial servanthood—the last characteristic—is the most important mark of God's image. Why? Without it, the other attributes can become corrupt. We have plenty of examples in our world; creativity has been used to produce an atomic bomb. Our linguistic ability has produced pornography. Relationships can become tyrannical. Moral choices have been used to justify ethnic cleansing and partial birth abortion.

Created for Servanthood

God intended that people use His attributes in the context of service, but—from the time that Adam and Eve believed the original lie—people have turned the attributes of God's image to selfish advantage and have distorted the image of God. Romans 1:22-32 graphically describes what happens when people exchange the eternal image of God for a corrupted image: Our societies are full of sexual impurity and worship of the creature rather than the Creator. We are prone to envy, murder, strife, deceit, malice, gossip and slander. There is constant God-hating, insolence, arrogance, boasting, evil intent, and disobedience; living in ways that are senseless, faithless, heartless and ruthless. And we'd rather approve others who do the same rather than

helping each other to live better lives according to God's intended purposes. We have become fools.

In the Old Testament, people were never fully able to see what it means to bear the image of God—especially the attribute of loving and sacrificial service. In the New Testament, though, God revealed His image in two clear ways—in Jesus and in the church.

At the appointed time, God sent His Son, the perfect and complete image of God (Hebrews 1:1-3b). For the first time, people could *see* what God is like. They could see not only divinity, but also humanity as God intended it—humanity that perfectly models what it means to be made in the image of God. Now, when we look at Jesus, we see the most important attribute of God's image. We see more than perfect spirituality, physical stamina and strength of a carpenter, wisdom that exceeded that of the Pharisees, and relational skills that endeared Him to the humble and silenced the proud. We see in Jesus that most important aspect of God's image—servanthood. Jesus Himself described service as His purpose, saying “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28).

Consider, also, Paul's strongest description of Jesus' servanthood:

“[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even the death on a cross”
(Philippians 2:6-8).

God is a servant, and Jesus modeled that servanthood! As the passage continues, we see that God exalted Jesus as He fully expressed the highest expression of God's image—voluntary and sacrificial servanthood.

“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name . . . and every tongue confesses that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:9-11).

Servanthood is seen in other passages, as well. God told the people of Israel that He was pleased by their sacrifice of service to the oppressed (Isaiah 58). Jesus told His disciples that the distinguishing mark of those in the Kingdom is their service—they feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and visit those sick and in prison (Matthew 25). Pure and perfect religion is summarily defined as serving the widow and the orphan—those who need protection (James 1:27). Elsewhere, Jesus emphasized the priority of loving and serving our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:31).

God now invites His children to be conformed to the image of His Son (Romans 8:29)—including servanthood. Only as servants can we fulfill the role God gives us. Created in God's image, we were also created to serve sacrificially. When we sacrificially serve as Jesus did, we most fully bear the image of God. And as we reflect God's image and glorious nature, He is honored. God also revealed His image in the church. The church expresses the fullness of God: “the church which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Ephesians 1:22-23). The church, the Body of Christ, is a community of servant-believers who bear His

image and carry out His agenda by facilitating the process of new birth, discipleship, equipping, and sending people into the world as servant-ambassadors.

Many Christians—especially those who are economically and politically disadvantaged or historically abused—are often offended by the idea that they should be servants. In their frame of reference, servanthood is degrading and involuntary. Indeed, involuntary servitude can be outright slavery. It can be degrading action that is, required by economic hardship. It can be servitude forced on the unwilling by those who are powerful. But this is not the willing, sacrificial servanthood of which the Bible speaks. This is not the image of God that is the birthright of His children.

God does not command service for its own sake, but because it demonstrates and is motivated by His greatest attribute—love. Love was not listed as an expression of God’s image because the love of God is most reflected through the church and its people as they serve. In fact, John asked how the love of God could be in someone who says he loves but does not serve a brother in need (1 John 3:17). God wants to so fill us with His love that onlookers will know that the love we express to them is *God’s* love. Scripture shows that the principal way to demonstrate our love for God is by loving others (Luke 10, Isaiah 58, James 1, James 2, 1 John 3). We must never diminish our consciousness of God’s plan that we, the Body of Christ, are the primary instruments through which God’s life-transforming power is channeled!

Loving and sacrificial servanthood is perhaps the most difficult characteristic of the image of God. Why? Serving others as Christ did means giving up our rights and positions. It means denying ourselves for other persons. Serving as Jesus served is *impossible* except by the indwelling of His Holy Spirit, but serving as Christ served *is* possible. Not only is it possible, its practice results in the fulfillment of God’s intentions when He created us in His image.

The church needs to help its people reclaim the biblical understanding of servanthood. What are we to do if we have not been servants in the biblical sense? Where we have served our self-interests, we must turn and walk in the other direction—serving the interests of others. Biblical servanthood is not possible without the indwelling Christ, but it is possible through the power of God’s Spirit. Paul reminded his readers that God and man work together to achieve the purposes of God:

“...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose” (Philippians 2:12b-13).

Discipline and Practice

If all this is true, how do we reflect this aspect of the image of God? One way is to develop what God has placed in us. Obviously developing Christ-like character requires new habits and new skills. To develop new habits and skills, we have to be disciplined. Why submit to a discipline? Athletes who want to become professionals must discipline themselves to rigorous schedules of training and endless hours of practice. All students who want to finish at the top of their class and get the best jobs possible discipline themselves to study hard for years. Ultimately, people submit themselves to a new discipline because their desired outcome is very important to them.

Similarly, discipline and training are necessary for growth in godliness. Paul called his young protégé, Timothy, to spiritual exercise. “Bodily exercise is all right, but spiritual exercise is much more important and is a tonic for all you do. So exercise yourself spiritually and practice being a better Christian because that will help you not only now in this life, but in the next life too” (1 Timothy 4:8, LB). Yes, discipline requires sacrifice and effort, but it is good! It is good for those who are being served, and it brings us closer to what God created us to be.

The Discipline of Love

We propose an exercise to help discipline us in becoming more conformed to the servant aspect of God’s image. This exercise—The Discipline of Love—is a spiritual discipline. It is designed to help followers of Christ practice demonstrating God’s love by serving others. In other words, it trains us to serve! Other spiritual disciplines—such as prayer, Scripture reading, meditation, memorization, and fasting—have a vertical emphasis, strengthening the relationship between disciples and their Lord. This discipline has a horizontal emphasis—so that the infusion of God’s love in us that comes from abiding in Christ is expressed outwardly, to others.

The Discipline of Love is, essentially, simple. Those who use it prayerfully look for opportunities to serve—and then serve! This discipline requires commitment and a close relationship to God, so His strength can work through us. Though simple in concept, practicing this discipline will change one’s life.

The Discipline of Love is also very practical. It helps believers personally reflect Christ’s servant character in four areas of God’s concern (wisdom, physical, spiritual and social) in the world in which they live (family, church and community). God’s love and His intentions are demonstrated as we serve others in different contexts and areas of life! The people we serve most frequently in this discipline are the people we know and normally encounter in daily life—the people in our families, churches, workplaces, schools, and neighborhoods. Our service to them can be very simple. We do not need great amounts of money, time, talent, personality, or expertise. We simply need to reflect the image of Christ by sacrificially serving them. Think of the impact that servant-believers, one by one, can make on the world around them—and then think of the impact that *many* obedient and loving individual believers could make as they serve the people God brings across their paths!

People who practice the Discipline of Love experience growth in several ways. They show sensitivity to others’ needs. They learn to obediently respond to the needs of others in a broad and balanced manner. They are creative in their service. They display ability to intentionally point to God as the source of our love. Their service to others is marked with grace. They are developing a lifestyle of loving service. And most importantly, they experience increasing intimacy with God.

The Discipline of Love Exercise

The Discipline of Love uses a matrix to plan and record small expressions of service to our families, fellow-believers, and non-Christian ‘neighbors’. The matrix gives us a wide spectrum of opportunities for service. Afterwards, each service is recorded in a short journal, so we can prayerfully reflect on our service and be accountable to a mentor or small group. We use it as a principal tool to plan, act, reflect and be accountable

May God use The Discipline of Love to help us and those we disciple to become more Christ-like—more of a reflection of God’s loving, sacrificial, willing service. May it enlarge our ability to see and respond to the needs of those in our respective worlds, and may it help us develop lifestyles of service that reflect the image of God. May we grow in intimacy with our Father when we love others with the power and abundance of His love in us and when we obey the greatest commandment—to love God with all of our hearts, souls, and minds by loving our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-38). And may those we serve experience a fresh and more complete understanding of God and His love—through His image in us.

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