

This Week at the Creek

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Here's the text from the pastor's Sunday message:

Wholehearted Service

Romans 1:1-7
January 6, 2008

A man once told his wife that he never wanted to live in a vegetative state dependant upon a machine. He lectured her, "Listen dear, if I ever get in that kind of shape, go ahead and pull the plug." Immediately, his wife got up and unplugged the television! Which brings a couple of questions to mind: One, what is robbing you of really living out your life? And two, who or what are you serving as a slave to?

The apostle Paul began his letter to the church at Rome by identifying himself as a servant or slave of Jesus Christ. Keep in mind that these words are addressed to people living in the ancient world's center of power. Rome was the city that made things happen, for good or for ill, across the Italian peninsula and around the known world. So for a Roman citizen – which Paul was – to choose to be a slave was completely unthinkable! But Paul saw no shame in being a slave and certainly didn't think that the Christian slaves in Rome should feel ashamed of their position in society. If pushed, Paul would have probably acknowledged that everyone is a slave to someone or something – a slave of good or of evil. The important thing to him was to come out clear about the person or power you're serving.

And so Paul quite humbly called himself a servant – to even go farther – a slave of his Master. To him, Jesus was not only his Savior but also his Lord. And that touches on a problem running rampant in the church. So many of us greatly desire Jesus to be our Savior, but we don't really want Him to be our Lord. Yes, we want Him to save us from the penalty of our sins; but no, we don't necessarily want to have to follow His instructions on how to live. Yes, we greatly desire that He preserve our soul from damnation; but no, we don't want Him to have power and authority and influence over our lives. But to truly be a

Christian is to believe in Jesus as both your **Savior** and your **Lord** – something Paul wanted to make quite clear. That's why he explained that he had chosen to be completely dependent on and obedient to his Master.

So what is your attitude toward Christ? Is He your Master, and are you His slave? Our willingness to serve and obey Him enables us to be useful and usable servants to do work for Him – work that really matters. Otherwise, we're really little more than couch-potato Christians living off of some artificial life support system. We simply have to get into the service mode; we simply have to get into the game. And that simply takes more than just coming to church and listening to the music and the message. It takes more than just talking about serving Christ.

As Paul explained some details about his own role, he also made it clear that the job of the church is not to impact the church, but to impact the world. How many of you have paid to watch a football game this season? Did it turn out to be a good game? But how would you feel if you paid an exorbitant price for ticket to, say, the Titans-Colts game, but all either team did for sixty minutes was huddle? All that money just to watch eleven really big guys in helmets and pads stand around in a circle and talk and make plans that they never acted upon! My guess is that you'd probably want your money back! And you'd deserve your money back because you paid to watch two teams in action but all you got was an hour-long meeting! It's not that the huddle isn't important; it really is. But the purpose of the huddle is to decide what offensive plays to run or what defensive schemes to put in place. The huddle is for the purpose of deciding what to do.

And the same is true for the church. We need to huddle; we need to talk about how we're going to serve the Lord outside the walls of this building. But the real challenge isn't in the **talking** but in the actual **running** of the play! When we break our huddle, will you carry out your service assignment in the world? When Satan lines up against us and tries to stop our work for the Lord, what difference will your fulfilling your role on the team make?

Paul introduced himself to the Roman Christians by identifying his Master, his office, and his purpose. He wrote that he was a servant of Jesus Christ; he wrote that he was called to be an apostle – one of those appointed and sent to represent Christ and to provide the foundation for His church; and he wrote that he was set apart – or sanctified – for the sake of spreading the Gospel of his Lord.

We too have a Master, an office, and a purpose to fulfill. When we serve the Lord, we do what we have no right to do on our own: **speak** in God's name, **reach** out with His love, and **lead** His people. Only because God both calls us to minister and gives us the grace to do it can we accomplish anything worthwhile. Only when Jesus is both Savior and Lord does the mission get accomplished through our lives.

So know that it's a good thing to be a servant. The fact is that every one of us has to serve somebody no matter how high or low on the totem pole we think we are. As Bob Dylan's 1979 song says, "It may be the devil or it may be the Lord," but you're going to have to serve somebody. As Joshua told the people of Israel upon conquering the Promised Land, "Choose this day whom you will serve."

And while you're choosing, remember that real power belongs to the Son of God. I know it's easy to be misled by the power of the world. But the influence of earthly leaders shouldn't blind us to the true power that **creates, redeems, and sustains** life throughout the universe. Paul reminds us that Jesus is the real power person. His might and influence are everywhere whether we acknowledge it or not. The Lord doesn't depend on us to give His Gospel power. He doesn't ask the government to give its approval to His resurrection from the dead. He doesn't ask Congress for a resolution declaring Him to be the Son of God. Jesus is already the Redeemer of all creation. The challenge for us is to plug into this power – to plug in through faith in Him. If we will, we'll enjoy a life of wholeness and hope, a life, as Paul wrote later, "full of the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith."

Also realize that the greatest gift is apostleship. The greatest gift and highest honor is the chance to give of ourselves as apostles – to be sent out as servants to spread the good news of what God has done for us through Christ. Although this may sound like an assignment, it really is a gift. Paul made it clear to the church at Rome that his apostleship was a gracious gift designed to bring about faith among more and more people. He saw his call to be an apostle as a joy, not a burden – as a privilege, not a duty. He had been given the greatest of gifts: the chance to deliver God's good news to all people!

And so have we. May we accept with joy the opportunity to deliver God's good news to all those with whom we have influence, to speak truth to both the powerful and the powerless through both word and deed. So tell a friend about your faith instead of keeping it a secret. In this day and age we talk openly about problems with our jobs, our children, and even our sex lives, but we're reluctant to speak about the faith that sustains and helps us to cope. And look for opportunities to serve rather than to be served. Speak out about the greater good instead of only those things that are good for you. The challenge before us as believers is to see beyond **self-interest** and work for the **welfare** of all the children of God. To do so is to be a servant of God; to do so is to be a slave of Christ.

Years ago I read about a nursing student whose story does a good job of reminding us of the importance of looking after the welfare of all. She wrote: "During my second month of nursing school, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?' Surely, this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She

was tall, dark-haired, and in her fifties, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank. Before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade.

'Absolutely,' said the professor. 'In your careers you will meet many people. All of them are significant. They deserve your attention and your care, even if all you do is smile and say hello.' I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned that her name was Dorothy."

The truth is that you don't have to be a powerful person to have an impact; it's all right to be a slave as long as you serve Jesus Christ. Sure, you may have power in your factory or your agency or your financial firm, but remember this: real power belongs to the Son of God. And while you may enjoy the earthly benefits that go along with your earthly position, don't forget: the greatest gift is apostleship – the chance to spread the good news of what God has done for you through Jesus Christ. For in the end, having a powerful position or a high-prestige appointment doesn't really count for very much. All that matters for any of us is that we belong to Jesus Christ and work as His servants – that He is both our Savior and Lord.

An early Church of God hymn written by Andrew Byers puts it this way: "I will not be languid or careless, / Or formal, or cold, or untrue; / But striving with earnest endeavor / The will of my Lord I will do. / I'll put my whole heart in His service, / And do all He asketh of me; / I mean to live holy and blameless – / A Christian indeed will I be."

Let us pray: Lord, shall we delay any longer our offering to You of all that we have and all that we are? Shall we keep back any longer the complete gift of our free will, which we cling to so stubbornly? Lord, may our will be swallowed up in the fire of Your perfect, loving will! Let our will burn for all eternity as a sacrifice to You. In Jesus' name and for His sake.

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