

## *The Great Measure*

Proverbs 31: 10-31 Mark 9: 33-37

Being called a servant is accepted in most Christian circles as something for which a person should strive. To be a servant is to be Christ-like. We get a bit of a buzz, a charge, a rush from our self-perception in that way. This servant stuff is what it's all about. And I don't think that I'm all that different; I'm in the same boat.

The qualifier is that we should always be aware is that **we** are choosing to serve, **we** are choosing what that service will be, when it will be convenient for **us**, if it's where **we** want to be or go, when **we** think it's appropriate, judging it for its worthiness to **us**, and other factors. This matter of choice grants **us** a host of options.

I note this because the word in Greek that we read as "servant" is the same word for "slave." Now slavery is **not** something we have in mind when fulfilling the role of one who is faithful to Jesus and his ministry. Slavery means having **no options**; you do what you're told to do by the one who owns you. Failure to act would likely lead to a variety of unpleasant punishments.

If you *take away* the factor of choosing how, when, and where you serve, then the luster of serving the Lord fades immediately ... for everyone. In scripture translations, great pains are taken to establish the proper context of an expression, so that when we read "servant," not "slave," it is only the speculation of the translator that provides us with one word or another. Needless to say, the translation "slave of the Lord" is rare no matter how appropriate the terminology may seem on its face. Consider that **a lord** *per se* could expect to have slaves ... well, except Jesus, we seem to believe.

In any case, the connection of slave and servant is that your aim is not self, but another. Whether slave or servant, the role expects that you're addressing the needs and desires of someone besides yourself. We even have the expression "self-serving" to indicate a special kind of service that is self-benefiting.

In Proverbs 31, the volume's last chapter, it seems to bridge this slave/servant tension by pointing to the wife. The opening line is a rhetorical question – we know the answer. Our NIV pew Bible says: *A wife of noble character who can find?* But this time the NRSV probably has it better, *A capable wife who can find?* The answer to the question is 'hardly anyone can find such a wife.' Such a wife is a rarity. It goes on to say, *She is worth far more than rubies* – or 'her value is priceless.' Given the value of women as "property" of a husband, clearly it would require great wealth to gain such a wife, and even then, who could be certain?

Then a wide ranging inventory of all that characterizes such a "capable wife" runs all the way to the end. Much of it details the wife's skill and productivity, managing all kinds of materials, crafting all kinds of outcomes from her resources, and energetically laboring however long it takes to provide the good result.

The capable wife is also known as a very good steward. It's noted that she buys a field, initiates a vineyard, engages in profitable trading, and supplies certain merchants with goods for sale. She will labor long hours, into the night, fulfilling her commitments.

She is a provider who makes nice bed covers, and quality winter clothing so that all are warm. *She provides food for her family and portions for her servant girls,* starting her chores while it's still dark.

But not all of it is about her service in labor. Remember that Proverbs is a book of wisdom, a collection of wisdom. And remember how wisdom gets portrayed as a woman, *Sophia*. It is no surprise then that this particular work closes the Book of Proverbs, uniting the uniquely capable wife with the image of Lady Wisdom herself.

The premise of the wisdom tradition in Hebrew scripture is that through the practice of virtues, the discipline of spiritual knowledge, and attentiveness to the values of tradition, one can lead a faithful and righteous life that is pleasing to God and which fulfills God's will. It is never far from the precepts found in Torah-Law, and will praise the virtues within the Torah-Law, but it addresses those who wish to relate to the *values* of the law without having to become lawyers themselves.

Wisdom has what could be called a populist nature. Wisdom represents the core values of the Torah-Law without getting enmeshed in all of its details. It's ideal for a religious tradition that has become more far-flung as time moves forward, spreading in all directions. Jews are no longer only in Israel-Palestine. They would become spread out in what came to be called the diaspora. The further that Jews were from the homeland, the less compelling was the tradition of ritual observance and strict procedures of Torah-Law. Wisdom is one of the ways of addressing the changes that occur within Judaism, from the times after the Babylonian conquest all the way through the time of Jesus. And yes, we can hear Jesus reflecting the Wisdom tradition in his teachings. The Sermon on the Mount is a perfect example where everyday life instances are given new meaning with a format of the sacred wisdom tradition that is closely tied to the values of Torah-Law.

Wisdom plays a role in the capable wife, too, as she reflects wisdom, the female voice who speaks of sacred and eternal things. Besides all of the capable wife's labors and activities, her expertise in production and trade, her finely tuned stewardship, and her diligence and energy, she is a reflection of the highest virtues of wisdom. Putting those pieces together that appear toward the end, we hear: *She opens her hand to the poor, and reaches out her hands to the needy ... Strength and dignity are her clothing, and she laughs at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.* As Jesus is the living presence of God, the capable wife of Proverbs 31 is the living presence of Wisdom.

She is praised and esteemed by all, and the listeners are urged to honor and acclaim not only what she does, but also who she is. She is in the image of Sophia, Wisdom personified.

Of course, for every model of what one should seek to be as a servant, there is also the opposite of the model. That brings us to Mark 9, a somewhat different version from what appears in Luke 9. Luke adds a little more drama to Mark's plainer version. In Mark, Jesus simply asks what the disciples had been discussing along the road. In Luke, Jesus states that they were arguing and that Jesus "perceived the thought of their hearts."

In Mark, the narrator mentions that *they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest*. Notice that we don't hear the disciples answering the question, so perhaps we can join Luke in believing that Jesus knew exactly what they were talking about, but wanted to hear them explain themselves. However, the disciples won't admit to the topic of their disputing. It's rather embarrassing now that they're thinking about it. Now that Jesus has made his inquiry, they know that their answer is going to be one more instance of failure on their part.

What ensues is an embarrassing, prolonged, and truly dead silence. They have to be thinking, 'Dang, I think we screwed up again.' They reckon they're going to get chewed out big time, again. The thought didn't seem to have entered their heads that none of them had actually **done** something to warrant being called the greatest of anything. Jesus seems to have pity on them this time, perhaps thinking that it was a sign of progress that they even had an inkling that they had screwed up once again.

Instead, Jesus tells them: *Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all*. Yet again, Jesus has set their agenda upside down.

To make his point, Jesus fetches a little child. Now remember, the child is a symbol, an object in an object lesson, an illustration for Jesus' point about being one who is **disregarded as a nothing**. It is not some drippy, sappy point about the blessedness of children, or of Jesus' high regard for children. No! Not at all. Children were not outstanding in any way. If they survived childhood, then they might be worth something. But until then, it cost to feed and clothe them, and they didn't produce anything of value. Even a dog can ward off strangers and alert you to intruders. What are kids good for? They run up the electric bill, complain about everything, eat you out of house and home, complaining that there is never any good food around after eating your pint of Ben and Jerry's. Children in Jesus' time were the perfect example of what was considered the least in a society.

The child is a symbol of the status which the best disciple should seek. It is not a question of greatness, what you've done, what you've accomplished, or what you've gained. It is a matter of becoming like one of the least, pursuing the servant status that's a mark of true faithfulness and discipleship.

To conclude, Jesus completes the circle of his lesson, saying: *Whoever welcomes one such child in my name **welcomes me**....* To settle the question of greatness among the disciples, becoming as one among the least is to follow the model of Lord himself who makes himself as one of the least among them.

This points us to the quality of humility. Augustine said: *Do you wish to rise? Begin by descending. You plan a tower that will pierce the clouds? Lay first the foundation of humility.* And in another quotation: *Humility is the foundation of all the other virtues; hence, in the soul in which this virtue does not exist, there cannot be any other virtue except in mere **appearance**.* In other words, all virtue is founded on humility first, otherwise all such virtue is merely an appearance; without humility to start with, there is no virtue.

The model of faithfulness as servants that Jesus teaches is oriented to humility, specifically in humility toward God. To bear such an attitude, the faithful one must recognize that you only count for something in the eyes of God. Nothing else matters because God is the only One who matters. The regard of society, the world, and the powerful of the earth mean nothing. They are like chaff that a wind can scatter to oblivion, lacking any anchor or roots sunk into the true blessing which comes from God.

The capable wife who is the living image of Sophia-Wisdom may get noticed, but you won't find anyone seeking her job, or seeking to measure up to her level. Further, she doesn't do it to be noticed. In true humility, she relates herself to all aspects of her life as a servant. She has a clear spirit that is unobstructed by worldly ambitions, egos, and agendas, really reflecting a servant spirit, a spirit of humility that rejoices in everything that she can do.

The disciples in their arrogance and stupid scheming needed a lesson on humility, on the true nature of the servant life in following Jesus. To attain greatness, they might take note of the capable wife – all of the same attributes apply.

As we consider our roles as servants, we may realize that we are making choices, hopefully faithful ones. We aren't slaves when we have such choices, but we are bound by the bonds of service to the one whom we call Lord. Serving him faithfully means getting ourselves out of the way and getting our spirits tuned to a path that starts with humility, rejoicing simply in the opportunity to serve and contribute to the life-giving, hope-sustaining, promise-bearing mission of Jesus in the world.