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The Service of the Lord (1939)

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Then you shall say to Pharaoh, Thus says the Lord: Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me" (Ex. 4:22,23).

"For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of His Son, that without ceasing I make mention of you always in my prayers... But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter... I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service" (Rom. 1:9; 7:6; 12:1).

"And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting... from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Eph. 4:11-14,16).

In each of the above passages, in one way or another, the matter of service is referred to - "Let my son go, that he may serve me"; "whom I serve in my spirit"; "that we should serve in newness of

spirit"; "which is your reasonable service"; and finally, in the Ephesian portion, while the word does not actually occur, it is quite clear that the whole of that portion of the letter deals with the matter of service.

An Underlying Principle of the Creation

It would be a very simple thing to say that service is a governing thought in the very existence of this world, and, indeed, of this universe. Everything exists on the principle of service. All has been brought into being to serve; to serve a purpose, and that which does not serve is altogether outside of the Divine thought. When you come to think of it, what a book of service the Bible is! The thought springs up with the creation and runs right through to the Revelation, where we learn that "his servants shall do him service" even when these ages are past, and eternity has come. All the way along the thought and law of service is in evidence.

The spirit of service is the spirit of the Lord Jesus; for He said concerning Himself, "The Son of man came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give his life a ransom for many". The Lord knows nothing of a working class and an idle class. The Word of God takes no account of part of the creation as being outside of service, and does not recognise anything or anyone not serving. The very highest positions to which the Word of God reveals it possible for us to come, even in relation to God Himself, are shown to be positions of service.

We are familiar with the term "son", and in our use of certain passages of Scripture we may perhaps have made a false distinction between servants and sons. But the Word of God is very clear, and very insistent, that a son is a serving son; that even to come to the position of sonship in its fullest sense is not to become one in a household who does nothing and has everything done for him, but who is there in a serving capacity. "Israel is my son, my firstborn... Let my son go, that he may serve me." So, right through, you find that sonship, the highest spiritual position to which it is possible for us to attain, is after all a position of service.

Service is a Thing of the Spirit

Moreover, service is a matter of spirit. Paul said, "whom I serve in my spirit", and in saying that, he was simply referring to his essential man. The real man is the spirit and he was saying in other words, 'whom I serve in the innermost reality of my being'. In the third passage - "that we should serve in newness of spirit" - he is only saying that his innermost reality, this real man, is altogether renewed and he serves "in newness of spirit". He once served in the oldness of his interests, his sphere, his energies. That was the old man seeking to serve.

Real service is not something imposed. The service of God is not something taken on from the outside. It is not a matter of compulsion or obligation. It is not something which we are commanded or told to do, nor that we have to measure up to and force ourselves to do. Service is a matter of the spirit, our spirit, and we are tested as to the reality of our inward being, as to its relationship with God, by the spirit of service which we show.

That takes us to Romans 12:1. "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." I know the marginal words are different. We will come to that in a moment, but the meaning is the same. It is having our being held unto God. That is service, and all other service springs out of that.

"By the mercies of God" - and of course Paul has been speaking of those mercies through most of the chapters leading up to chapter 12 - the mercies of judgment past, judgment swallowed up by the Lord Jesus; the mercies of justification by faith in Christ; the mercies of fellowship with God: all those wonderful mercies that come before us in those early chapters of the letter to the Romans, the Apostle makes the ground of his appeal. 'Well now', he says, in effect, 'because of these mercies, the Lord has a claim upon you, the Lord has a right to you, and I beseech you that you recognise the claims of God by reason of His abundant mercies; and, all-inclusively, the presenting of your bodies a living sacrifice is service'. Service is not, in the first place, something done. The Word of God does not know anything about that. Service to God is not, in the first place, what we do for God, but, according to His Word, it is firstly what we are for God; that is, that we are for God, wholly the Lord's, and when we get there in very truth, all the other problems or questions about service are resolved. We are not asked to decide what we will do, where we will go, how we will work. These questions are never raised by the Lord at all. The one question that does arise from His side is, Are you Mine? 'If so', He says, in effect, 'I take it for granted I can do exactly as I like with you, and can get exactly what I want from you. You will have no quarrel with Me if I ask you to take a certain line, to follow a certain course, to go in a certain direction or stay in a certain place'. All that is settled in the initial and comprehensive thing, "present your bodies a living sacrifice". Any kind of question or argument or difficulty with the Lord as to the nature or form or direction of service represents some basic and root reservation as to our utter subjection to the Lord, as to the question of our being wholly the Lord's. For, to have grasped the ground upon which this making of our bodies a living sacrifice unto the Lord; to have truly grasped the ground of that transaction, is to have settled once for all every other question that may arise.

The True Conception of Service

Throughout the Bible, there is one means of illustrating this that is frequently employed, and it lies there as a governing law of service. It is that of the law and purpose of relationship. Not only did the Lord say of Israel to Pharaoh, "He is my son, my firstborn", but we frequently find in the Old Testament another relationship represented as existing between the Lord and Israel, and Israel and the Lord. Take a fragment from a prophet. "I remember for thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals; how thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown." Do you catch the significance of that? Or take again the familiar passage in Jeremiah 31, "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith the Lord." "The love of thine espousals" - "I was a husband unto them." Now, if you look closely into the Hebrew law on that matter, you will find that the whole idea of that relationship was an idea of service.

Sometimes a whole book of the Bible is given up to the enunciating of but one principle only. You know that the book of Esther, for instance, has but one principle around which the whole book revolves. It is so, again, with the book of Ruth. What is the one principle in this case? It is the working out of one of the laws of the year of Jubilee. One of the laws relating to that year was that all alienated properties should be restored. But there must be a kinsman who stands in a position of ability and willingness, on the one hand, to receive, to take charge of the restored inheritance, and, on the other hand, to take responsibility for those concerned in the loss of the inheritance. Now, briefly, that is a law of the year of Jubilee. When you come to the book of Ruth, you find that, although the year of Jubilee is in view, it is all a question of the recovery of a lost inheritance. Naomi

comes back to find that the inheritance has gone, gone into other hands. She is destitute. Ruth is with her and they two stand in relationship to that lost inheritance, but entirely unable to do anything for its redemption. Boaz is a kinsman, and one who is in a position to recover the inheritance: he is a man of affluence, a man of standing, a man of resource. He is tested on the matter, and found not only to be able, but to be willing. He undertakes all; and we know the scene in the gate of the city where he challenges another kinsman and finds him unwilling, and so enters himself into the transaction of redeeming that lost inheritance. Having redeemed the lost inheritance, he has also surrendered himself to another law bound up with that redemption, that he must be responsible for those who lost the inheritance.

I will leave it there for the time being, and step over to the other side of the little romance. There is Ruth, and she also knows the law on this matter. She is destitute, and wholly dependent upon the mercies of the redeeming kinsman to deliver her from her destitution, to save her from her terrible plight and to bring her back into an inheritance rich and full. But one thing governs, namely, that just as the redeeming kinsman must be willing to take responsibility for those concerned in the loss of the inheritance, the one for whom the inheritance is being redeemed has to be willing to be the servant of the redeeming kinsman, the life servant. And what is the relationship to be? For this is the law - oh! not of master and servant, but of husband and wife. That explains just why Ruth silently creeps into the tent of Boaz when he has gone to rest and takes the cover from his feet and spreads it over herself and over his feet. She is at his feet. She is from henceforth in absolute subjection to him as his property for his service. Well, all that is needed now is a formal recognition of a relationship, and that follows - their marriage.

But you see it is the principle of service and Paul is simply working on that principle when he says, "Present your bodies a living sacrifice... *your reasonable service.*" The mercies of God have claimed you. The law of the mercies of God is, You must be the Lord's and be brought into the Church's most intimate relationship to Him, that of the bride to the bridegroom. The whole idea of the Church is one of service.

The matter of service to the Lord runs right through the Word of God. It is there in the book of Ruth. The most sacred and honoured relationship known in heaven or on earth is that relationship of which the Apostle speaks in Ephesians 5: "For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the church." (vv. 31-32).

The most holy, honoured relationship known in heaven or on earth expresses itself in service. Oh! from heaven's standpoint, service is not servitude, vassalage. It is the most holy, and the most exalted, dignity. To be able to do anything for the Lord is the greatest privilege. Oh! how we need to be captured and captivated by Him to whom we belong, and not to regard the service of the Lord, because it takes certain forms, as something to be shunned, to be shirked, to be avoided.

The Test of Our Appreciation of the Lord

Now, there is the principle, the law of service. It is a matter, after all, of appreciation of the Lord. Whatever form it takes, it is that. But then we come to the matter of the form, and here we get very close to practical considerations. The Lord tests our spirit, that is, the innermost reality of our being, along the line of service. It would be no test whatever to our innermost being if the Lord always asked us to do the things that are the greatest pleasure to our flesh. There is nothing more testing

than the service of the Lord, because that service swings us entirely out of one realm into another. Yes, I know that men outside of Christ serve; they give themselves. It is not for me to try and track down how much there may be of personal motive or interest in human service, how much there may be of self-satisfaction and self-gratification in it; for doing good work very often brings a great deal of satisfaction to the one who does it. It is not for me to search out how much ambition lies behind it for fame, influence, success, prosperity, and so on; but this I do know, that, when we really do get into the Lord's hands, the question or the matter of service becomes His means of finding us out.

Now, to come back to Israel. "Let my son go that he may serve me." That is the word that may be said to be written over Israel's going out of Egypt. That was the goal. Moses was challenged fully on that matter all the time. Israel too grasped something of its meaning, and Pharaoh on his part was recognising the significance of their serving the Lord in the wilderness. Israel's own idea of going out to serve the Lord in the wilderness was a very romantic idea, and doubtless there was a great deal of enthusiasm associated with it. That idea of serving the Lord was a glamorous idea, a captivating idea. But follow them out, and mark them in the wilderness, and see if, after all, it proved to be as romantic as they expected. All their enthusiasm died: all the element of romance disappeared. The thing assumed a form which required something very much more than all the enthusiasm of which they were capable, and their attitude came to be one of disillusionment. Oh! this is not what we expected it would be! This is something altogether different! We thought this and we thought that. We never thought it would be like this! Sooner or later, when we get into the hands of the Lord, that is what happens. Whatever were our expectations, we come to the time when we discover that the service of the Lord tests us to the very core of our being, and the point of the rest is whether, after all, we are finding any personal gratification, pleasure or satisfaction in this, or whether we have such a devotion to the Lord that we are found in His service, and wholeheartedly in it, solely because it is for Him, for His pleasure, for His satisfaction; because of what He is and because of the mercies of God. God will corner us wholly on that question.

Now, it just works out in thousands of practical, everyday ways. If only the Lord would let us serve Him in this direction, how delightful it would be! how satisfying it would be! how happy we should be! The principle of service is one thing; the form of service is quite another thing, and we are tested there. We are not tested on anything less than our devotion to the Lord. The question that arises all the time is, Can this in any way serve the Lord's interests, be a contribution to the whole? We are not to ask how or what, we are to serve with our spirit. You get the spirit of service and you will have no difficulties over the form of service. It is the people who have not the spirit of service who are always in difficulties as to the how of service. They are waiting for something to come along which wholly accords with their idea of service. They have their ideas as to what service to the Lord is and, until their ideas have an opportunity of being realised, service does not exist for them. Oh no! The voice of the true servant is heard in the words, "whom I serve with my spirit". That is where it begins. The spirit of service solves all the other questions. Do not start off with the question of where you are going to serve the Lord, how you are going to serve the Lord, what you are going to do for the Lord, but see to it that the Lord has you wholly and utterly, that you are enamoured of the Lord; that you can say that the mercies of the Lord have captured your heart. I am the Lord's, as truly as ever Ruth was at the feet of Boaz, in the place of utter surrender and subjection to Him, for all time. You seek to be at the feet of your Lord, married to Christ, and all other questions about service will cease to exist. The Lord will be able to do as He likes and you will have no questionings nor debatings.

So the question of service is seen to be very definitely one of the spirit. That is only touching very lightly upon the matter.

Service Has Three Aspects

I would just mention one other thing, that service has three aspects, as far as I can see, in the Word of God; three and three only. First of all and above all, worship; for, indeed, that is what Israel went out to the wilderness for, and that is what God called service - "that he may serve me". When they reached their destination, it was a matter of worship. They could not do much else in a wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Listen to what the Lord said of them at the time of their going out. "I remember for thee the kindness of thy youth, the love of thine espousals; how thou wentest after me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown" (Jer. 2:2). That is worship, when God can have us in a place and state and position of devotion to Him when we cannot do anything else, being in a barren place. Oh! we can give the Lord so much of what we call worship when we are having a good time, when all sorts of interesting things are happening in what we call the service of the Lord. But when we are in a wilderness, in a land not sown, that is, when we are cut off from these self-gratifying, self-satisfying activities in service, cut off from things, and we are shut right up to the Lord Himself, and only have the Lord, and the heart goes out to Him, then you have that which God calls the highest service. He is having us for Himself. Thus was it in the wilderness for Israel, where the Lord would have Israel for Himself and to Himself and find Israel responding to Him and being satisfied with Him. That is what God calls the highest service, that is worship. So the alternative rendering of those words in Romans 12:1 is, "which is your spiritual worship": "your reasonable service" - "your spiritual worship".

I am not going to speak about these three things, only to mention them, but the highest form of service to God is worship; that is, where the Lord is the one object of our devotion, not for what we get, not for the blessing that accrues to us, not for any pleasure or satisfaction of our own, but just for Himself. He calls that service. It is marvellous, I believe, what service that does render to the Lord, in addition to being His own satisfaction. I mean, if the Lord has a life that is really worshipping, devoted, given to Him for His own sake, there is an influence that goes out from that life, there is a power in that life, there is a testimony in that life. That is where service begins, and it is unconscious service; it is a service of unconscious fruitfulness, just to be for the Lord.

Then there are two other phases of service. One of these is ministry to the saints, and the other, of course, is testimony to the world. Three aspects of service; worship, ministry to the saints, testimony to the world. When you have said that, you can resolve them into two. The first, Godward directly, and the second and third manward, Godward indirectly. As I said, I am not going to talk about those three things at length, but I want to say this, that, in the Word of God, all the Lord's people are regarded as being in each and every one of these phases of service; all the Lord's people, from the least to the greatest. Worshippers are not a class by themselves. I suppose you will accept the statement that all the Lord's people are regarded as being worshippers, wholly for the Lord. Well, that is service; that is the service of the Lord's people to Him.

All the Lord's people are also regarded as being in the ministry to the saints. That is a matter we are more and more being brought to face and that is just what the fourth chapter of the letter to the Ephesians is about. The Lord certainly did give special gifts to the Church; some apostles, and some prophets, and evangelists, pastors and teachers. To what end were these given? For the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry. I believe that is what Paul meant. The punctuation should

be arranged according to that sense. It was for the perfecting of the saints, the bringing of all the saints to a position where they could fulfil the work of ministry. The rest of the chapter makes that clear. You see what it goes on to say. "All the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love" (Eph. 4:16). The Body, with each several part working in due measure, builds itself up. It is what we call "mutuality". The service of the Lord, in the second instance, is the mutual ministry to the saints, the mutual building up of the Body of Christ. It is not that one ministers to the saints, but that all the saints minister to one another spiritual measure, and everyone in due measure. That has a very large place in the Word of God, both in the Old Testament and in the New.

Then, lastly, there is the testimony to the world. It seems to me that this third aspect of service has taken pre-eminence, as though the others were quite secondary. Testimony to the world - you can call it evangelization or soul winning - has become the service of the Lord. That is what people mean by "working for the Lord" today; most people have that in mind. I do not want to take anything from the importance of this aspect of service, rather would I strengthen it; for here again I want to say that the Word of God sees all the Lord's people in this aspect of ministry or service also. All the Lord's people are witnesses. You may not be an evangelist in the specific sense, but you are a witness, and that is a part of the service of the Lord, and one in which we must all be faithful.

Here, then, are three aspects of service, and we are all regarded as having part in them; worship, ministry to the saints, witnesses to the world. Yes, upon every one of us individually devolves this threefold service of the Lord.

Service and the House of God

Now, beloved, as I close, I want to remind you that service always begins in the house. If you look at the New Testament, you will find that the basis of all service is the local assembly. The local assembly has in it all those elements of service necessary to service. It is there that the highest form of service is expressed, namely, worship, and the local assembly is constituted upon the basis of worship. We are for the Lord, unto the Lord; we are the Lord's. The local assembly is also constituted upon the principle of mutual ministry the one to the other; and, further, it ought to be giving out of its life, and out of all the values of a local assembly, the resources and energies for testimony to the world.

Now, that opens a very great deal. The local assembly is the training and testing place for service. When there is a true assembly life, a safeguard is provided against a whole list of perils that are connected with service; and it means a great deal more. But I do want you to get at least a comprehensive, if not detailed, grasp of what service is and what service means, and especially to leave you with this urge in your hearts, that the test of our relationship to the Lord is found, firstly, in the spirit of worship, devotion to Him; and secondly, in how much we are concerned for the building up of His people and are in the way of that ministry; and then the spirit of service is proved by our witness to the world, our concern for the Lord's interests in the unsaved. This is the threefold test of the spirit of service. May the Lord find us in the company of His servant who said, "...whom I serve with my spirit": "...that we should serve in newness of spirit"; "...present your bodies a living sacrifice... your reasonable service"; and about none of us may there ever be in the presence of the world a hesitation to give the declaration of our allegiance, as did that servant of the Lord in the words, "whose I am and whom I serve".