

# On Being a Servant of God

Revised Edition

Warren W. Wiersbe



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Whether you are a volunteer or a full-time Christian worker, I wish I could sit down and leisurely chat with you about your ministry. I obviously can't do that, so I'm doing the next best thing and sharing my thinking with you in this book. Perhaps you're just getting started in your ministry, or you may be a veteran with battle scars. In either case, I trust that what I say will encourage you in the greatest work in the world, serving the Lord Jesus Christ.

Serving God is a wonderful thing if we understand what it is and how God does it through us. Ministering for Jesus Christ can be as uplifting and exciting as hang gliding, or it can be as burdensome and boring as repeatedly rolling the same rock up the mountain as Sisyphus did in the Greek myth. No matter how difficult the work or how many times we feel like quitting, we can keep going and growing *if we minister the way God tells us to in His Word*.

When I began my ministry back in 1950, I'm afraid I didn't have a clear vision of what Christian work was all about. Consequently, I floundered and was frustrated, not knowing exactly what to do or how to evaluate what I was doing. A Roman proverb says, "When the pilot does not know what port he is heading for, no wind is the right wind." I was certainly a bewildered pilot! Because I had received excellent training, I didn't lack for methods or ideas; but I wasn't clear as to *principles*. I

# *On Being a Servant of God*

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was on the ocean of life with a road map instead of a compass, and I wasn't sure how to handle the rudder of the ship.

Now, many years and tears later, I think I have a limited grasp of a few of the principles of ministry; and I want to share them with you. As the familiar couplet puts it,

Methods are many, principles are few;  
Methods always change, principles never do.

Certainly we need methods to serve God, but we must remember that methods work because of the principles behind them. To adopt a new method just because it worked for somebody else, without first understanding the principles behind that method, is to abandon both the compass and the rudder and start drifting helplessly on the tempestuous sea of service.

If you're frantically searching for guaranteed quick-fix methods, this book isn't for you because ministry is built on *basic principles*, not clever methods. God doesn't want us to have "ministry by imitation." He wants "ministry by incarnation," what Paul wrote about in Philippians 2:13: "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure."

Let's begin with a definition of ministry that I've been using for several years. All definitions have their limitations, and this one isn't perfect; but it will at least keep us on the right track as we think together.

*Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory of God.*

The kind of ministry this definition is talking about is best illustrated by an event recorded in Acts 3:

Now Peter and John went up together to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a certain man lame from his

mother's womb was carried, whom they laid daily at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, to ask alms from those who entered the temple; who, seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, asked for alms. And fixing his eyes on him, with John, Peter said, "Look at us." So he gave them his attention, expecting to receive something from them. Then Peter said, "Silver and gold I do not have, but what I do have I give you: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk." And he took him by the right hand and lifted him up, and immediately his feet and ankle bones received strength. So he, leaping up, stood and walked and entered the temple with them—walking, leaping, and praising God. And all the people saw him walking and praising God (vv. 1–9).

Here you have the four basic elements of ministry. Peter and John saw a man in great need: he was physically lame and spiritually dead. Manifesting the compassion of Christ, they shared God's power with him; and he was completely healed and soundly converted to Christ. God was glorified, opportunity was given to preach the gospel, and two thousand more people trusted Christ (Acts 2:41; 4:4).

So, if you and I are going to serve Jesus Christ—the way God wants us to minister and the way the apostles ministered—we must (1) know the divine resources personally, (2) see the human needs compassionately, and (3) become channels of God's mighty resources so that (4) God alone is glorified. When God is glorified, His Spirit can work to bring Christ to those who need to know Him. In reaching one individual, Peter was able to reach the masses.

Before you turn to the next chapter, ponder this definition of ministry and examine your own heart. Do you know God personally and the marvelous resources that are available through Jesus Christ? Are you concerned about the needs of others so that you see them and want to help? Do you have compassion

# *On Being a Servant of God*

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for those with needs? Are you willing to be a channel for God's glory?

*Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory of God.*

I suggest you memorize this definition.

The trouble with too many of us is that we think God called us to be *manufacturers* when He really called us to be *distributors*. He alone has the resources to meet human needs; all we can do is receive His riches and share them with others. “Silver and gold I do not have,” Peter announced, “but what I do have I give you” (Acts 3:6). When it comes to ministry, all of us are bankrupt, and only God is rich. Like Paul, we are “as poor, yet making many rich” (2 Cor. 6:10).

The miracle of Christ’s feeding the five thousand comes to mind, the only miracle of Christ that is recorded in all four Gospels (Matt. 14:15–21; Mark 6:35–44; Luke 9:12–17; John 6:1–14). When the disciples saw more than five thousand hungry people before them, they didn’t know what to do; but they made their suggestions just the same. As yet, they didn’t really know how poor they were!

First, they advised Jesus to avoid the problem by sending the crowd home. *Where was their compassion?* The Lord knew that the people were hungry and could never make the journey, so He rejected that plan. By the way, we are often tempted in ministry to get rid of the very people God wants us to help. The disciples did it more than once (Matt. 15:21–28; 19:13–15).

Philip admitted that there wasn’t enough money on hand to buy food to feed such a big crowd, so a bigger budget wasn’t the answer. (Most people think that having more money to spend is

## *On Being a Servant of God*

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the solution to every problem.) Then Andrew found a boy with a small lunch of five barley loaves and two fish, a food supply totally inadequate to meet the need. “But what are they among so many?” Andrew asked (John 6:9), and the answer is, “Of themselves, they are nothing.”

The disciples were trying to be manufacturers. They thought that it was *their* responsibility to come up with the money or the food or some clever way to solve the problem. But all the while, “He Himself knew what He would do” (John 6:6). *Jesus needed His disciples, not as manufacturers but as distributors.* He took the lad’s lunch, looked up to heaven, blessed the food, broke it, and put it into the disciples’ hands for them to feed the hungry multitude. The *multiplication* took place in His hands; the *distribution* was the work of the disciples’ hands.

Once you accept yourself as a distributor of God’s riches and not a manufacturer, you will experience a wonderful new freedom and joy in service. You won’t be afraid of new challenges because you know God has the resources to meet them. You won’t be frustrated trying to manufacture everything needed to get the job done; and when God blesses your work, you won’t be tempted to take the credit. Dr. Bob Cook used to remind us in our Youth for Christ ministry, “If you can explain what’s going on, God didn’t do it!” That sounds like the experience of the Jews recorded in Psalm 126: “We were like those who dream. . . . The LORD has done great things for us, and we are glad” (vv. 1, 3). *How do you explain a miracle?* You don’t! You just receive it and share it and let God have all the glory.

What are the divine resources that God makes available to His servants for their ministry? The word that best summarizes it is the familiar word *grace*: “And of His fullness we have all received, and grace for grace” (John 1:16). The image here seems to be that of an ocean, with wave after wave coming in to shore



in unending fullness. I'm reminded of the poor woman who had her first view of the ocean and stood on the shore weeping. When asked why she was weeping, she replied, "It's so good to see something that there's plenty of!"

You don't *earn* grace, and you don't *deserve* grace; you simply receive it as God's loving gift and then share it with others. In ministry, we are *channels* of God's resources, not *reservoirs*: "Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you" (Luke 6:38). It's a basic law of the kingdom of God that the servants who know how poor they are become the richest, and those who give the most receive the most and therefore have the most to give.

Because we have a "manufacturer mentality," we're prone to depend on our own resources, things like experience, training, money, talent, and education. God can sanctify and use these assets, but they become liabilities apart from the grace of God. With all of his abilities and training, the apostle Paul knew that the secret of his effective ministry was the grace of God. "But by the grace of God I am what I am," he wrote to the Corinthians. "I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). By God's grace, Paul was what he was, and Paul did what he did.

As God's children and God's servants, we can draw upon the riches of His grace (Eph. 1:7; 2:7), the riches of His glory (Eph. 3:16; Phil. 4:19), unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8), the riches of His mercy (Eph. 2:4), the riches of His wisdom (Rom. 11:33), and much more: "And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work" (2 Cor. 9:8).

## *On Being a Servant of God*

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So, one of the first steps we must take before our service can be used of God is to *confess our bankruptcy and receive by faith the grace that we need for acceptable service*. Just as we were saved by grace, through faith (Eph. 2:8–9), so we must work by grace, through faith, as we seek to minister. Only then can God work in and through us for His glory.

Ministry takes place when divine resources *meet human needs*.

In ministry, we're called to live for others. Ministry is not just another way of making a living; it's a wonderful opportunity for making a life, a life that's lived for others. It's an opportunity to be like the Lord Jesus Christ. When He was here on earth, He met human needs, all kinds of needs; and He wasn't always thanked or even appreciated. In fact, one man He healed turned state's evidence and got Jesus into trouble with the authorities (John 5:1–16).

We live in a world filled with people who have incredible needs of all kinds, and we can relate to these needs in one of several ways. We can *be blind to them and live our own lives*, but then we wouldn't be living as Christians are supposed to live. We certainly wouldn't be living like the Lord Jesus: "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better [more important] than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3–4).

Or we can *take advantage of those needs to benefit ourselves*. Yes, it's possible to be in ministry and *use* people to get what we want instead of helping people to get what they need. The Pharisees, for example, used the common people to build their own authority instead of using their authority to build the people (Matt. 23:1–12). If we aren't careful, we can minister in such

## *On Being a Servant of God*

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a way that we exploit the needs of others to get ourselves recognition, position, titles, honors, and privileges. *True servants of God help others whether they themselves get anything out of it or not.* Their concern is only that God be glorified and people trust Christ.

A third way we can relate to the needs of others is *to know about them but do nothing.* That is what the priest and the Levite did when they saw that battered Jew dying by the side of the Jericho road (Luke 10:25–37). Both saw the needy man and “passed by on the other side” instead of stopping to show mercy. Granted, it’s impossible for us as God’s servants to do something about *every* need that we see or hear about; but we must never be thankful for a reason (or an excuse) to escape responsibility, and we must guard against the kind of professionalism that leads to a hard heart.

In Christian service, a sensitive spirit and a tender heart are absolutely essential; but we can easily become calloused. Then our work becomes routine and perfunctory, and we say with the backslidden priests of Malachi’s day, “Oh, what a weariness!” (Mal. 1:13). The Scottish minister and novelist George MacDonald, whose books so influenced C. S. Lewis, wrote, “Nothing is so deadening to the divine as an habitual dealing with the outsides of holy things.” That’s the best definition of religious professionalism I’ve ever read.

No, we must have neither a blind eye nor an averted eye, nor should we think only of ourselves when we see the needs of others. The only right way for the servant of God to respond is to ask, “Lord, what do You want me to do?” (Acts 9:6). We can’t do everything, but we can do something; and we must do it as Jesus would so that He might be glorified.

The people God calls us to serve have all kinds of needs—physical, emotional, relational, financial—but at rock bottom their greatest need is *to be rightly related to God and His will.*

That doesn't mean the Word of God and prayer will pay their bills or feed their stomachs. We don't quote a Bible promise to hungry people, pray for them, smile, and say, "Depart in peace, be warmed and filled" (James 2:16). We do what we can to put food on the table. But unless we help people grow into a right relationship with God, whatever help we give will be only a stopgap measure, a quick fix until the next time they have a need; and then the cycle is repeated.

Perhaps that is one of the major differences between Christian ministry and mere humanitarian benevolence, as helpful as it may be. Both can be done in love; both can put food on the table and shoes on the feet; but only true Christian ministry can put grace in the heart so that lives are changed and problems are really solved. The best thing we can do for people is not to solve their problems for them but so relate them to God's grace that they will be enabled to solve their problems and not repeat them.

It has been said that "the heart of every problem is the problem in the heart"; but the statement is only partly true. Sometimes it isn't what *we* have done that creates the difficulty but what *others* have done. Children sometimes suffer from what their parents do, and the opposite is also true. The company president embezzles money and wrecks the business, and scores of innocent workers are out of jobs. People may not cause their own problems, but if they relate to their problems the wrong way, they will make the problems worse. What life does to us depends on what life finds in us, and that is where the grace of God comes in.

The church is the body of Christ on earth, taking the place of the Savior who has returned to heaven. He "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28); and that must be our attitude: sacrifice and service to the glory of God.

## *On Being a Servant of God*

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There was a time when Peter didn't say, "What I do have I give you" (Acts 3:6). He said, "See, we have left all and followed You. Therefore what shall we have?" (Matt. 19:27). Selfishness says, "What will I get?" Service says, "What I have I'll give to you."

The human needs in our world today are indescribable, innumerable, and (if you have a tender heart) almost unbearable. You and I can't do everything, but we can do something; and that something is the ministry God has called us to fulfill.

I ran across a new word in my reading: *Erinaceus*. It's a zoological term that describes the hedgehog family. Like hedgehogs, some people are as the genus *Erinaceus*: the closer you get to them, the more they stick you with their protective quills. You want to help them, but if you do, you're going to get hurt.

That's why we need *love*. Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs *through loving channels* to the glory of God. If the motivation for our service is anything less than Christ's love—His love for us and our love for Him—our ministry will not really meet human needs or glorify God: "But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them" (Matt. 9:36); "For the love of Christ compels us" (2 Cor. 5:14).

When I use the phrase "loving channels," I don't mean to imply that God's servants are passive conduits through whom God pours His blessing, come what may. God works not *in spite of us* or *instead of us* ("Let go and let God!") but *in us* and *through us*. And as He's working to share His divine resources with others, He wants to bless the channel as well. *If the worker doesn't get a blessing out of the work, something is radically wrong.* Serving God isn't punishment; it's nourishment. Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of Him who sent Me, and to finish His work" (John 4:34).

## *On Being a Servant of God*

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Serving God means working with people; and people not only *have* problems, but they can *be* problems because of the way they deal with their own needs. They can grow invisible protective quills to keep others at a distance; and unless you really love these people, you can never help them.

We learned in the previous chapter that you and I must rightly relate to the needs of others. We must not be blind to their needs or ignore them, nor must we use their needs as opportunities to promote ourselves. *But the people we're trying to help may take any or all of these same approaches to their own problems!* Some people are blind to their real needs and constantly want to go on a detour. Other people choose to ignore their needs and perhaps blame somebody else. And there are people who have learned to “exploit” their needs to get what they want from others. They can't afford to solve their problems because their whole lifestyle is built on them. This third group is perhaps the hardest to help.

We must remember, nevertheless, that we are loving channels of the *grace of God*. As Bernard of Clairvaux said, “Justice seeks out the merits of the case, but pity only regards the need.” We who are servants of God don't deserve His grace any more than the ones we are serving deserve it, and who are we to limit God's grace and mercy?

However, Christian love is not blind. Paul prayed for the believers in Philippi that their love might “abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment” (Phil. 1:9). Jesus loved the young man we call the rich young ruler (Mark 10:21), but that didn't motivate Him to lower the standards and make it easy for the man to follow Christ. It isn't enough for us merely to love suffering people and want to help them. We must also love the truth that God has given us (Ps. 119:97; 2 Thess. 2:10). If truth and love contradict each other, something is amiss.



Many of us confess that we're not capable of loving people the way Jesus loves them and us. We do our best to practice 1 Corinthians 13, but it doesn't always last. But that's the "manufacturer mentality" again. God doesn't ask us to *work up* our Christian love in our own strength because He offers to create it within us when we need it: "The love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Rom. 5:5); "But the fruit of the Spirit is love" (Gal. 5:22).

The love that we need for ministry is not a natural ability; it's a supernatural quality that only God can provide. When the people we serve irritate us or disappoint us, the first thing we usually do is pray for them and tell the Lord to change them. What we ought to do first is *pray for ourselves and ask God to increase our love*. Otherwise, we may give the devil a foothold in our own hearts, which will create problems the next time we try to minister to those people: "And be kind to one another [even if they aren't kind to you], tenderhearted [even if they hurt you], forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you" (Eph. 4:32).

I'll have more to say later about the work of the Holy Spirit in ministry, but this much needs to be said now: the Holy Spirit can make you adequate for any ministry challenge God brings to you. In fact, God often allows problem people to come into your life so that you'll learn to depend more on His power and not your own resources.

Now is a good time to point out a truth about Christian service that for some reason we overlook: *God is as concerned about the servant as He is the service*. If all God wanted to do was get the work done, He could send His angels, and they would do it better and faster. But He not only wants to do something *through* us, He also wants to do something *in* us; and that is why the "hedgehogs" show up in our lives. God uses them to encourage us to pray, trust the Word, and depend on the Spirit

## *On Being a Servant of God*

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for love and grace. Difficult people and difficult circumstances can be used by the Spirit to help us grow and become more like Christ.

However, when these difficulties come, our tendency is to pray for deliverance instead of growth. We ask the Lord, “*How* can I get out of this?” instead of “*What* can I get out of this?” When we do that, we miss the opportunities God gives us to develop spiritual maturity.

Sometimes you feel like quitting and running away, and that’s the worst thing you can do. Resigning from your church, giving up your Sunday school class, leaving the committee, or abandoning the choir will never solve the problems or meet the needs in your heart. You’ll probably meet the same situation and the same people (with different names) in the next ministry you accept. Why? Because God won’t let His servants run away. God is determined that His children be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29), and He will keep working until He accomplishes His purpose.

It’s human to want to run away from a tough situation. Many believers have done it, and many more have wanted to do it. Moses had such a difficult time with Israel that he wanted to die (Num. 11:10–15), and Elijah became so discouraged that he deserted his post and went into the wilderness where he asked to die (1 Kings 19). Dr. V. Raymond Edman used to tell the Wheaton (Illinois) College students, “It’s always too soon to quit.” On the flyleaf of my copy of his book *The Disciplines of Life*, Dr. Edman wrote, “Remember always to keep chin up and knees down!” Good counsel!

You’ll meet problem people and problem situations wherever you go, so make up your mind to expect them, accept them, and let God use them in your life. The devil wants to use problem people as weapons to tear you down, but the Spirit can use them as tools to build you up. The choice is yours. If you stay on the

job and trust God to work, you'll experience His grace in a wonderful way; and you'll be a better servant. *One of the best ways to discover the divine resources that others need is to need them yourself and trust God to supply them.* Paul wrote,

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort those who are in any trouble, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God (2 Cor. 1:3–4).

Martin Luther said that prayer, meditation, and temptation make a minister, and he was right. Jesus was “in all points tempted as we are” (Heb. 4:15) that He might be able to understand our needs and adequately meet them, and we sometimes suffer for the same reason. The prophet Ezekiel wrote, “Then I came to the captives at Tel Abib, who dwelt by the River Chebar; and I sat where they sat” (Ezek. 3:15). *I sat where they sat.* That's the posture of the true servant of Jesus Christ who wants to be a loving channel of the grace of God.

In Christian ministry, problems with people are among the most difficult to bear; and the people who have—and cause—the greatest problems are those who need us the most. That's why we must be *loving* channels, no matter how people may respond to our ministry. It may take years before they allow the Lord to change them, and you may not even be on the scene when it happens. No matter; the Lord is at work, and He will finish what He has begun (Phil. 1:6).