

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Being a Servant of God: Whatever you do, do it all to the glory of God

Introduction

Today we are going to consider how we can serve God, in ways that will bring glory to Him, whatever we are doing. We will be taking, as our main text, 1 Corinthians 10:31, which says, *“Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”*

I have to confess, it wasn't immediately obvious to me how to tackle this subject! Sometimes, I find it helps me to understand a difficult concept if I consider what the opposite would look like. The opposite of doing all to the glory of God, might be doing all to the glory of myself. What would that look like? Doing all to my own glory would mean always putting **my** reputation and status first. I would tend to think along the lines: “How will this make me look to other people?”, “Will this make me more popular”, or “Will this enhance my reputation”. You might sum it up as, “What's in it for me?” How much an action helps other people, or whether it is fundamentally the right thing to do, is less important than **my** glorification. If I keep thinking and acting along these lines I will tend to become, selfish, vain, arrogant and self-obsessed. Well, that doesn't sound like what I am aiming for, but I least I know what to avoid!

Reverting to *“doing all to the glory of God”*, let's try and break things down into:

1. What does it mean?
2. How do I do it?
3. Some examples, good and bad.

1. What does it mean?

So, what does *“doing everything for the glory of God”* actually look like? Among other things:

- a. It elevates mundane things;
- b. It takes in my **whole** life, **all** the time;
- c. It excludes pride and arrogance;
- d. It arranges the hierarchical order correctly;
- e. It means my vocation and circumstances may not be as crucial as I think they are; and
- f. It prevents me from enduring drudgery just because it pays well!

a. It elevates mundane things

When Paul speaks about doing everything for the glory of God in 1 Corinthians 10 he doesn't mention preaching or teaching, suffering persecution or martyrdom: he doesn't even refer to our careers, or our role in life as a parent or spouse. He chooses instead to talk about eating and drinking. These are the basic essentials of life: things we do simply to keep us alive. Paul indicates that we can do these things in a way that glorifies God. If even these routine actions can be done in God-honouring ways, then **all** aspects of our lives can have this value. This should stop us writing off large parts of what we do as dull and unimportant. If I eat and drink with thanksgiving, I honour the God who provides for my needs. If I see the hand of the Creator behind the physical things in front of me on the table, and the grace of a Heavenly Father Who anticipates the needs of His children as the ultimate source of what I am about to consume, then I am doing a mundane activity in a way that brings glory to God.

b. It takes in my whole life, all the time

Paul didn't intend to elevate the mundane above the more obviously significant. His point is, that if the most routine actions can be done for God's glory, then **everything** I do can be invested with this purpose. This is the best way for us to see the value God attaches to **all** that we do. Far too often, we use the wrong scale to measure our lives against. Our job is ordinary, or even menial; or maybe we don't have **any** formal employment. We are unknown outside our immediate family or social circle. Nobody consults us on important matters of state, or almost anything at all. We do the same things every day, knowing we must do them all again tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that. So,

we measure our lives against someone with a high-powered, well paid job, or an exciting looking life, and we judge ourselves to be unimportant and insignificant. But we are using the wrong measuring stick! Our Lord measures our lives by the glory we bring to Him, and that glory doesn't depend on publicity, or 'success' in the way that success is routinely defined in the world around us. An elderly relative cared for in a way that practically demonstrates the loving heart of God. A family raised with the kind of care that our Father shows to us, even if that family goes on to disappoint later. Surely God knows what it is to be disappointed by His children! A low-profile job done with a dedication to honouring a master in heaven, in the same spirit that Jesus worked as a carpenter for many, quiet years. Surely **these** are things that the Lord values as **enormous** successes, because they are things that bring glory to Him. Even if vanishingly few people on earth see these things; God sees and God values them very highly indeed.

c. It excludes pride and arrogance

Human pride, and the kind of success that breeds self-confident arrogance, don't bring glory to God. My pride is fed when I focus on **me**. What **I** can get out of this. How will **my** profile be enhanced? What will make **me** look good? If, instead, I am trying to think through how I can accomplish something in a way that will glorify the One I am serving, these things will be automatically excluded.

d. It arranges the hierarchical order correctly

The Bible sets out a simple hierarchy that we often find deeply uncomfortable. It is: God first, others second, me last! We naturally arrange things in the reverse order. A mindset that is constantly asking the question, "How can I glorify God?" is much more likely to result in the biblical hierarchy being honoured. Such an attitude has already put God in first place. The passage in 1 Corinthians 10 that contains our key verse for today, commences with 1 Corinthians 10:23-24 that say, "*All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify. Let no one seek his own, but each one the other's well-being.*" Honouring God first is the way towards recognising the needs of others, and not always putting my needs before theirs.

e. It means my vocation and circumstances may not be as crucial as I think they are

Don't get me wrong, I think it is absolutely right that we consider very carefully, before God, what vocation we take up. And we should always bring our concerns (as well as our thanksgiving!) about our circumstances to Him in prayer. But, that doesn't mean we are the slaves of our vocations and circumstances: as if we can never live lives honouring to God unless He changes them for us.

Let's make sure we are doing everything for the Lord where we are now, before we start insisting that He puts us somewhere different.

f. It prevents me from enduring drudgery just because it pays well!

Don't take what I said earlier, about doing the mundane to the glory of God, to mean that drudgery has a special value, or is to be sought after as a 'good thing' in itself. Some people hate their profession, but continue to do it, because it is well paid, and they love the money and the things it can buy them. That kind of drudgery does not honour God. Nor should we abandon an occupation we love, in order to do something tedious and onerous, in some kind of ascetic attempt to please God by making ourselves miserable! Mundane things **can** be done in ways that bring glory to God, and will usually lose some of their drudgery in the process. Drudgery, in itself, is not to be desired.

2. How do I do it?

If we have gained a little insight into what it means to bring glory to God in everything we do, the next question is, "How do we actually accomplish it?" To do it properly, I will have to:

- a. Understand what things glorify God
- b. Think like God
- c. Value like God
- d. Feel like God
- e. "Keep my knife clean"
- f. Be always **thoughtful** about everything I do and think

a. Understand what things glorify God

Before I can do things in a way that glorifies God, I need to know what kind of things bring Him glory. We'll look at just three.

- i. **Obedience** - Being God, gives Him the right to issue commands. Since He made us, and keeps us in existence, we owe Him honour and obedience, as His creatures. Our topic is, "Being a servant of God", and obedience is a primary characteristic of a good servant.
- ii. **Things in line with His character, e.g. Righteousness** - If imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, it is also a good way to honour and glorify God. Displaying His characteristics shows how we value Him and brings glory to His name.
- iii. **Practical love and grace** - Love is more than just another aspect of the character of God. "God is love" (1 John 4:8). We sometimes talk about the present, church age as, "The day of grace". Grace is a vital part of how God is acting towards the world today. Perhaps more than any other, attributes, showing the love and the grace of God in our own lives, brings glory to Him.

b. **Think like God**

Before we can act like God, we must first think like God - our actions always follow on from our thoughts. When Paul wanted to encourage Christian harmony amongst the Philippians he wrote, in Philippians 2:5, "*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus.*" If they had the right mind they would have the right actions. We must learn to think about things the way God does, in order to bring glory to Him.

c. **Value like God**

Part of thinking like God is to place the same value on things as God does. Ask yourself the following questions.

- Does God value money more than people?
- Does He prioritise the here and now before the eternal?
- Is God more interested in the outward appearance of things, or the heart inside?
- Would He rather we gave Him things, or our obedience?

It isn't too hard to work out the correct answers! Now ask the same questions about yourself. Much of our lives depend on the choices we make. Big choices that we recognise as significant, and small choices that we rate as less significant, but which slowly form our lives for good or bad. Those choices will be driven by how we value one thing more than another. If we are to bring glory to God, we need to start sharing His values.

d. **Feel like God**

Human beings are not pure thinking machines. We can't be programmed with a set of values, and then expected to think, and therefore act, on logic and reason alone. We have emotions - it is part of being made in the image of God. When the Bible speaks about God loving and hating, being moved with compassion or roused to anger, it is not just using human emotions to illustrate to us how God responds, as if God was far beyond such feelings Himself. We have emotions, because God had them first, and created us to reflect something of Himself. Of course, human emotions have been damaged ever since the fall, and they can often lead us astray. But it is not wrong to have them. They are like compasses that no longer point reliably in the correct direction. They need realigning to true north, not abandoning. Just like our thoughts and our consciences; our feelings need to be realigned with God's.

This may be a slow process that needs regular repetition, but spending time in God's presence through the disciplines of Bible study and prayer will teach us to love the things (and people) that God loves, mourn over the things that hurt Him, and delight in the things that bring Him pleasure.

e. **"Keep my knife clean"**

I'd better explain that rather violent sounding expression! If you've ever worked in a commercial kitchen you will know that certain utensils will be reserved for particular types of food. The Food Standards Agency even recommends colour coding to avoid cross contamination. Red chopping boards and knives are for raw meat, yellow for cooked meat, brown for vegetables and so on. The idea is to reduce the risk of food poisoning by eliminating the transfer of bacteria from one food type to another. There is no law mandating this system, but the alternative is lots of breaking off work to keep washing the knife before it is used for the next task. I think this is a good illustration of the way that God keeps having to "clean up" our lives to make us ready for His service. In my case there is just one knife, me! And every time God wants to use me in His service, to bring glory to Him, He has to clean me up to be fit for purpose. All of us sin, and get "contaminated" by the world around us, but the more time God has to spend cleaning us up, the less time is spent living for His glory.

f. **Be always thoughtful about everything I do and think**

Life in the 21st century is a rush. If you are anything like me, you spend your life racing from one activity to another. Meals get shorter. Important activities get squeezed into smaller periods of time. You find yourself doing one task, while thinking about the next, or the one after, or the one you will never get done today because there is just no time! We spend little time being thoughtful about the activities we do, or contemplating their purpose and importance.

We said earlier that Paul encouraged us to “do **everything** for the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31), including mundane activities like eating and drinking. We remarked how this involves attitudes, such as being thankful to the Lord. You can’t be thankful without being thoughtful! It really is not possible! To be thankful means taking a few moments to consider what we have, who gave it to us, and then to mentally express our appreciation. It means thinking about what we are doing. Many of us struggle with how we can serve our Lord during the many hours that we spend at work. Being thoughtful about Him, and how we can honour Him with a job done to the best of the abilities He gave us, is a big part of the answer. Socrates is supposed to have said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.” I’m not entirely sure what he meant by that, but I am sure that the thoughtless life is never going to give glory to God!

3. **Some examples, good and bad**

Many of us can understand something better if we are given an example. So, let’s consider some people from the Old Testament, and the New, who show us how to serve in ways that bring glory to God: and some who show us how not to!

a. First the good examples...

i. **Abraham’s servant**

Genesis 24:1-67 tells the story of how Abraham sent his servant to find a wife for Abraham’s son Isaac, amongst Abraham’s relatives. This servant is often used by Bible teachers as a fitting illustration of the work the Holy Spirit does. He also gives us a great example of how we can live for the glory of God. This servant drew no attention to himself; he is not even named! He always spoke about his master, Abraham, and his master’s son, Isaac.

He went exactly where and when he was directed by his master, and completed his mission conscientiously and efficiently. He dealt faithfully with everything that his master gave him, and was trusted with significant amounts of Abraham’s wealth. It is not hard to see how we can apply those things to our own lives.

ii. **John the Baptist**

Moving to the New Testament, one of the best patterns of service we have is John the Baptist. John knew that the whole purpose of his mission as a prophet was to direct people towards Christ. When prompted to say something about himself, he replied “*I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness*” (John 1:23). When two of John’s own disciples heard him speak about Jesus as “*The Lamb of God*” (John 1:29, 36), they followed Jesus instead of John. When, a little later, John was told **everyone** was turning to Jesus he replied, “*He must increase and I must decrease*” (John 3:30). How do we measure up against the standard of John’s service? Are we much more interested in attracting people towards Jesus than towards ourselves? Do I think about myself as just a voice in the wilderness, or am I secretly impressed with my own abilities and my own importance? Would I genuinely be happy to keep decreasing in peoples’ estimation, so long as their estimation of the importance of Jesus Christ was increasing?

iii. **Christ, the ultimate good example**

Of course, the Perfect Servant, and the only one who brought glory to God is every single thing He did, is Jesus Christ. He could say, in John 8:29, “*The Father has not left me alone, for I always do those things that please Him.*” What servant could say more than that? Towards the end of His life He says, “*I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do*” (John 17:4).

Commenting on the fact that Jesus requested those He had healed not to make great publicity of what He had done, Matthew, in Matthew 12:19, quotes Isaiah 42:2 as saying about Christ, “*He will not quarrel nor cry out, nor will anyone hear His voice in the streets.*” Jesus had come to make the Father known and to complete the work He had given Him, but not in a way that brought lots of publicity and acclamation to Himself. We live in a society where many people want to be celebrities; famous for little reason. It is hard for us to learn how to emulate our Lord, Who had every reason to be proclaimed as great, but routinely shunned public acclamation.

b. Now the bad examples...

i. Jonah

I have been teaching from the book of Jonah in the last few weeks and, although I find myself rather warming to the character of Jonah for his honesty and plain speaking, I have to admit, he is a very poor example of how to bring glory to God. He is, rather, an object model of how **not** to do so! When God sends Jonah to Nineveh (see Jonah 1:2) he is disobedient, and heads off in the other direction (see Jonah 1:3). He appears to be more interested in his own reputation than the success of his mission. When God sees how the people of Nineveh have repented after the message of judgement **eventually** delivered by Jonah, and decides not to destroy the city after all, Jonah is livid! (Jonah 4:1). What kind of fool will Jonah look now, since he preached about destruction and nothing happened? More than that, Jonah simply didn't think and feel like God - he didn't have the same heart of grace and mercy. Jonah saw the people of Nineveh as the arch-enemies of Israel, and wanted them destroyed. He wasn't just angry that God had made Jonah look foolish, he was furious that God had been merciful to people Jonah wanted wiping out! (Jonah 4:3) As a result, Jonah sulked and fumed, and insisted that God should align Himself with Jonah's plans and outlook, rather than the other way around.

ii. James and John

When we come to the New Testament we find that the brothers James and John, can be as bad as Jonah. In Mark 10 James and John ask Jesus for the most prominent positions of honour in the coming kingdom for themselves. It is hard to see how this is anything other than wanting to bring honour to themselves. In Luke 9:54, Jesus had been slighted by a Samaritan village and James and John want to call down fire from heaven to destroy it. This sounds much more like the spirit of Jonah, than the spirit of the gracious Son of God!

iii. Satan, the ultimate bad example

If Christ is the ultimate example of the perfect servant, Satan probably stands at the other extreme. Satan fell due to his pride. He wanted some of the glory of God for himself. Having been created as a beautiful heavenly creature, like all angels, for the service and glory of God; he determined to put himself before, and above, God. In doing so, he dragged down large parts of God's creation in his ruin, including the human race. No wonder the Bible has some harsh things to say about pride. I find it chilling that, after decades as a believer, I still find the pride in my heart, that is determined to put my interests before God's, to be as strong as ever.

Conclusion

May God teach us to find our delight in learning from these examples to live in ways that bring glory to Him alone.

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