

Masters and Servants

[Luke 17:5-10](#)

Rev. Curtis Bablitz

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There's an old joke about the difference between cats and dogs. A dog says, "These humans give me shelter, food, love and attention - they must be gods!" while a cat says, "These humans give me shelter, food, love and attention - I must be god!" We have two cats, so I can vouch for the accuracy of this joke, but I also think there's a pretty sound scientific basis for the idea. Dogs are fully domesticated, they have been bred through thousands of generations for specific purposes, trained to serve our needs; they think of themselves as members of a pack, and we humans are the leaders of that pack, so of course nothing makes them happier than to be of service to those humans. They will happily hunt and fetch, herd our livestock, defend our homes, lay down their lives if necessary to protect their masters. Cats don't do any of that. They aren't pack animals, they're not really domesticated at all - they're a small furry roommate who has decided that living with humans will be helpful to them. It's a mutually beneficial arrangement, an agreement between equals: you submit to my demands, and in return I will keep mice from eating your grain, and occasionally let you pet me. Our cats love Johanna, and they tolerate Calvin and Lewis, but in their eyes I am just a servant, a

somewhat incompetent servant, and when I fail to keep their food dish full or their water at the correct temperature, I will hear about it.

Now of course, as a human being, I think of myself as being smarter and stronger than a cat - they might not agree with that assessment, but at least from the human perspective, we are in charge, we are the dominant species. Human beings have reshaped this planet and many of the creatures on it to suit our needs - we've used biological engineering and genetic modifications to create fruit that is juicy and sweet and seedless, cows that continuously produce milk in abundance, chickens so top-heavy with all that tender breast meat they can barely stand up in their tiny little cages. If you compare the wild ancestors of our crops and farm animals to their modern descendants, it's mind-boggling how much we've changed over the centuries, how we've remade creation to suit our desires. And we accept this as the natural order of things, that for better or for worse, animals and the rest of the natural world are all under human control, we are the masters, we are in charge. You can certainly argue that we need to do a much better job running the place - you might feel a little guilty when you see that truck full of pigs driving past on their way to become breakfast, or see footage of polar bears clinging to melting ice floes and baby sea turtles stumbling their way across polluted beaches - but that just goes to show how deeply our human influence extends all across this planet, how fundamentally we've transformed the world around us. Whether we like it or not, we're in charge of this world; We

are the masters, they are the servants. All the plants and animals on this planet are shaped by our decisions and actions, we hold their fate in our hands.

So if the relationship between humans and nature is one of master and servants, what does that say about our relationship with God? After all, humans are part of nature, part of creation – yes, we’ve got big brains and opposable thumbs, language and self-awareness and all the other stuff that separates us from the rest of the creatures on this planet – but we still have much, much more in common with the natural world than we do with God. We have more in common with an ant, or a bit of seaweed, or even with a rock, than we do with God. God is fundamentally different from us – God is outside of nature entirely, not made of the same stuff that we are made of. God does not consist of quarks and electrons like everything else in creation, God is not ruled by the same fundamental forces of gravity and electromagnetism that like it or not, we all have to obey. If we’ve come to believe that our ability to use scissors, recognize ourselves in the mirror and create reality television somehow puts us in a higher category than aphids and armadillos, well, God is on another plane altogether, so much higher and bigger and stronger than anything we can possibly imagine. The way we look at bugs, bacteria and mold, or the slime that accumulates at the bottom of the vegetable crisper in your refrigerator, God would be more than justified to see human beings that

way, because God is further above us than we are from every other form of life, every other form of matter in creation.

And yet for some reason, we usually don't see things that way. We don't usually see God that way. Maybe because we've become so accustomed to being in charge, to being able to control and manipulate the rest of creation all around us, but most of the time we act as if we are in charge of God. Most of the time, we act like God is just as much under our control as the rest of creation – as if God can be deployed to advance our interests and suit our agenda, to make ourselves more comfortable and prosperous and secure. We use God to justify our own actions – we claim that God is on our side in human disputes over territory and resources, we launch crusades and build residential schools in God's name even though we're the ones who benefit. We act as if God is just a theological puzzle to be solved, something we can perfectly figure out and understand, and that anyone who disagrees with us on the smallest point of interpretation must be banished from the church. Just like we do to the rest of nature, we try to mold and adapt God to suit our purposes – we ignore the parts that challenge us and focus on the comforts, we want a nice, tame, God that only tells us what we want to hear.

And that's why the words that Jesus speaks to his disciples in the gospel of Luke are so important for us to hear. Jesus tells the disciples that the relationship between God and humanity is ultimately similar to the relationship that exists between a master and his servants, and he

makes it perfectly clear that we are not the master in this situation. God is the master, the creator, the king, and we are the servants, we are created to do God's will and follow God's word. We are not in charge of our lives, God is. We are not in charge of the church, God is. We are not in charge of determining who is and who is not part of God's family, part of God's kingdom; we are not in charge of determining the precise answer to every question anyone could have about God's nature and identity. Our job isn't to run the show, to rule the church, to dictate exactly how things are supposed to be. We aren't God. Only God is God, and our job is to follow, to follow God's guidance and obey God's word, and doing that isn't some kind of special achievement that earns us a gold star and a seat at the table where all the big decisions get made – Jesus makes it clear that we follow God not to earn divine credit or reward, to be thanked by our creator for our stellar work. No, whatever we do for God's kingdom, whatever work we carry out, whatever acts of service we perform, that's just what we're meant to do, what we were created to do – we're still unworthy servants, simply doing our duty, the work we were created to carry out.

And that might come as a bit of a downer, right? If you came here this morning looking for one of those nice, comfy, 'God thinks you're super amazing just the way you are' sermons, well, I'm sorry – that's not what you're getting today. Jesus' words here sound a little harsh and uncomfortable, but sometimes it's good for us to be uncomfortable, for

God's word to make us uncomfortable. There is work that God wants us to do, work that we have been called to do, and it is our job to carry that work out, even when it's difficult, even when it's uncomfortable. But even in the middle of this challenge, there's still good news. See, the reason this story sounds like such bad news is because when we hear about what masters are like, we think about ourselves. We think about what a terrible job we have done as masters of this planet, the ways we've used our power to dominate and destroy the rest of creation. In human experience, masters exploit and abuse their servants, and servants suffer, and we assume that's the only kind of master there could ever be, because that's the kind of masters we've always been. But that's not the kind of master we serve. When Jesus describes the relationship between God and humanity as one between master and servant, he always, always, always puts himself on the side of the servants. Jesus knows his role is to serve the people around him – serve the rest of the world by giving up his comfort, his safety, even his life, so that the people around him can know the life and love that God wants them to experience. In Jesus Christ, our master became a servant, God became lowly and meek and humble, part of this creation, in order to serve and save all God's creatures from the mess and pain we've caused in this world. And that work that Jesus did – coming into the world as a servant, emptying himself of all his power to lift up those on the bottom – that's the same work Jesus calls us to do. That's the same task we've been called to do as well. Just as in Christ,

God becomes a servant to all creation, so we are called to serve the creation around us, the people we used to think are beneath us, the creation we've exploited and abused, that's who we're meant to serve. And we know we can do this, because Jesus is doing the same thing for us. Jesus is serving and blessing us too, giving us God's love and power and strength so that we can pass that on down to the rest of creation. As God's stewards, God's hands at work in this world, we are called to care for this planet and one another the same way Jesus cares for us, to serve one another as we have been served, and through the power of Christ's Holy Spirit, we know we can get the work done. We know we can accomplish amazing things through the power of God's love, because when we work for Jesus Christ, we are never, ever working alone. When we know that God's spirit is working in us, when we see ourselves for who we truly are, as God's faithful servants, ready to share what we've been given and follow where God leads, we will be able to do the impossible, we will be able to move mountains, to speak words of power to creation that will change the world. When we let go of our need to be in control, our conviction that we are in charge, and we start serving the way Jesus serves us, start loving the way we've been loved by God, then the church can be transformed, the world can be transformed, we can be transformed into the people we were created to be. As God's faithful children, we are called to serve with humility and courage, to know who we are in the light of Jesus Christ and share that news with everyone in the world, so creation

will no longer be defined by human strength or human weakness, but instead by the love of God made real in Jesus Christ. Today, and everyday, may we be servants for the kingdom of God. In the name of Jesus Christ – Amen!