

My Prayer: as Servant – or Substitute?

Authors: Mel and Susan Finlay

Our beliefs about our responsibilities as Christians shape our prayers. If we see ourselves primarily as beneficiaries rather than dispensers of God's blessings, we will be more likely to pray that God will pour out His blessings upon us, rather than pray that we will be a blessing in the lives of others. If we see ourselves as critics of society, we will more likely pray that the eyes of others will be opened, rather than that we will see others through God's eyes. If we see ourselves as executives in God's service, we will more likely pray that others will follow our leading, rather than that we will serve others.

A few years ago initialized bracelets began appearing on the wrists of many Christians. "W.W.J.D." "What would Jesus do?" They became so popular that by May of 1998 more than 15 million had been sold (*Today's Christian*, May/June 1998). They continue to be popular, particularly among young people. The bracelets reflect a particular belief about our responsibility as Christians, and so they provide a particular framework for prayer.

The viewpoint expressed on the bracelet is that we are stand-ins for Jesus, that is, that since He is not present in the flesh we are to stand in or be substitutes for Him, to be in the lives of people what He was when He walked the earth. Thus, if we can become attuned to what He would do in a particular situation, then we can, in effect, do it for Him, be a substitute for Him. Our prayers then are framed around asking God to make clear to us what Jesus would do and, in effect, to enable us to become a form of Jesus in the lives of others.

That is a noble sentiment. Certainly, people who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ are to be Christ-like in our approach to others. Certainly, followers of Jesus are to be ethical and moral in our behaviour. Certainly, if we claim to be His followers our word should be our bond, our yes, yes and our no, no (as Jesus Himself commands us). All of those things are true. Our behaviour should reflect our talk. So, to that extent, the question of what Jesus would do in a general sense should undergird our every action.

But is that all there was to Jesus? Was He simply a moral teacher who espoused general behaviours and engaged with people in a readily discernable way? If He was, then W.W.J.D. rightly serves as the template for the way in which Christians are to engage with others and with the world around us.

That perspective is limited however, in that it does not reflect the complete picture of Jesus presented in the four Gospels. Jesus claims much more for Himself than that He is simply a moral teacher, or an interpreter of God on a level with Moses the law giver and the great prophets. In fact, He claims the authority to reinterpret a number of the laws Moses gave, to address the underlying spirit of the law and not just the obvious practice, and to expand its application into the realm of thought as well as action. He claims to be the fulfilment of prophecies, and even claims to be the Son of God. He states that there was a greater claim on His life than His own, that “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.”

Therein may lie the clue to a deeper understanding of what our responsibility as a Christian is. If Jesus was doing the will of one who sent Him, are we not to be taking our direction from that one as well, that is, from God? If that’s the case, then simply trying to figure out what Jesus would do in a particular situation is not being totally true to Him. It is to fall short of what Jesus Himself sets out as His purpose.

But Jesus said even more than that He came to do the will of the one who sent Him. Referring to Himself, he said, “...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” We’ll come back to the first half of His statement. For now, let’s think about the implications of giving His life as a ransom for many. None of us can aspire to do that in the sense that He meant. To lay down our life as a means for defeating sin and the wages of sin, which is death, is way beyond our power. The answer to what would Jesus do in the face of sin and suffering and death is very clear. He took the sins of the entire world, and every individual in it, on Himself, went through death, then rose triumphantly and now is seated at the right hand of God, offering to each one of us to restore our broken relationship with God. None of us would claim to be able to do the same. We are the beneficiaries of His act of love and sacrifice, not the stand-ins for it. We may seek to act in a loving, compassionate, restorative way, but we can never do what He did.

There is value in praying to be more like Jesus, but to pray that we will be able to do what He did in bringing about reconciliation between God and humanity is to pray for the impossible.

Jesus lays down the model for what our responsibility as Christians is, and bases it upon His own life. "...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave — just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

To be a servant is to do the will of someone else. Jesus came to do the will of the one who sent him. We are to do the will of that same one. No manual has been written on what the full range of responsibilities is for a servant. The wise, observant servant does not need explicit instruction on what to do in many situations, nor on how to do it. To know one's Master is to have a pretty good idea of what to do most of the time. To that extent, W.W.J.D. can serve as a reminder of the One we serve, and can stand us in good stead as a guide. But there are situations we encounter for which there is no prescription, where the wisest course of action is to seek direction from the Master.

Seeing ourselves as a servant rather than a substitute for Jesus changes our prayers. As a servant, we pray that God will use us in a particular situation, and that He will give us the wisdom, the words, and the wile to be effective for Him. As a servant, we pray that God will show us what He would have us do. As a substitute, we pray that we would know what Jesus would do, but to know what Jesus would do does not necessarily mean that we can do it. Jesus had a much broader range of options available to Him than we do, so being a stand-in for Jesus becomes largely impossible.

To be a substitute is to imitate; to be a servant is to be an instrument. If being a servant was the role that Jesus accepted for Himself, surely it can be a fulfilling one for us.