



## Christ Before All

*The goal of the servant leader is to glorify Christ and to enjoy Him forever. If Christ is not before all, then our foundation is like shifting sand that cannot support the superstructure of our lives and ministry.*

Why do we do what we do? All of our core values are a reflection of this question, and our prayer is that we remain intentional about asking it of ourselves each and every day. Each of the preceding core values has attempted to answer the question from a unique angle, but the cosmic, over-arching answer to the question is now revealed.

Why do we teach and preach? Christ. Why do we evangelize? Christ. Why do we help those in need, comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable? Christ. Please don't mistake the simplicity of our answer for glibness. Our model for all things, of course, is Christ himself.

Pontius Pilate asked the first and greatest question in all philosophy when he asked Jesus, "What is truth?" (John 18:38) How would you answer this question? A pastor or teacher might do a word study, including the ancient Greek, Roman and Hebrew understandings and usage of the term. An evangelist might prefer to stand on a street corner and proclaim with passion and energy that "the truth will set you free." A counselor might throw the question back onto the questioner to probe the heart issues of the client. There are many reasonable and even spiritual responses to the question, "What is truth?" Which of these responses best reflects what Christ did?

Of course, we know the answer because we know the text. He did none of these things. In fact, he neither said nor did anything whatsoever. Why? Because the answer to the question, "What is truth?" is not a fact or an idea or an action. It is a person. It is Christ. Christ is truth. So Pilate's question echoes unanswered throughout eternity, and the only response is the presence of the silent Christ, standing before his very eyes.

Pilate has much to teach us. Presumably, Pilate was concerned with issues of law and order, since that was his principal responsibility as the governor of that unruly community. As a Roman citizen and magistrate, much of his thinking about law and justice would echo our own, since our own form of law is largely predicated upon the Roman. Pilate wanted to do the right thing both by the community and by the person who stood before him, whom Pilate himself declared innocent of any wrong doing. But when faced with the choice between serving the clamoring public and the silent Christ, it was all too easy to dishonor and destroy the Silent One in favor of meeting the needs of the moment. Pilate's ultimate mistake was this: he thought his primary responsibility was to uncover "the truth" and to administer justice (or at least order) for the community. He did not realize that his primary purpose in the universe was to worship the God-man who stood before him.

Aren't we Pilates, too? How easy it is to believe that the reason we serve people's needs is to meet those needs. The reality is that needy people don't need me, they need Christ. The mystery, of course, is that if Christ is the answer, why are people needy? People are needy because in a

world of plenty, there is a scarcity of human grace. Poverty is both imposed and self-inflicted, as is every other form of human sin. Jesus calls us to meet the needs of others, to be sure, but it is not primarily for the purpose of alleviating those needs. If that were the object alone, then Jesus would prevent the needs from occurring or miraculously provide relief from every form of want and pain. Why does the all powerful Christ ask his broken and sinful people to do what he refrains from doing himself? It must be because the movement toward servanthood helps us to become more like him. In a word, God is glorified when we become more like his glorious Son. And we become more like his Son when we live our lives as if Jesus were living our lives for us.

Is it appropriate to care for the person we're serving? Of course. In fact, Paul says it's prerequisite, for if we do anything for any reason other than love, we're wasting our time. We do have compassion for the afflicted, and we act on behalf of the weak in order to help them. But if these become the primary motives for what we do, we're standing on shifting sand. It is all too easy to believe that we are good people because we do good works. It is even easier to believe that I have purpose and meaning in life because every day I venture out into the fallen world and render aid to those who have less talent/time/treasure than I do. If I begin to base my self-worth or my identity on what I do—even if it is "good work"—then the basis of my ministry is me and my efforts rather than Christ and his work on the cross. But I am weak, and there are days I will fail miserably. What then? Worse yet, there are days when the people whom I serve and with whom I serve fail me—fail to respond, fail to recover, fail to repent...fail to give thanks for all of my hard work! And if these shifting sands aren't enough, there is an even more terrible prospect. A ministry driven by the needs of those around us becomes quicksand to the soul. The physical, social, emotional and spiritual needs of any one person is nearly infinite, which is part of the reason why an eternal Christ had to pay the price for us. Now if you and I foolishly step in to play Christ and try to bear the needs of a community of people, we will be consumed. A hungry person may also be a jobless person, who may also be a homeless person who likely has chemical dependencies and perhaps even psychological issues, all of which might be compounded by other medical concerns. If we try to meet the needs of the whole person, we will be driven by the insatiable neediness of the human soul. But if my desire is to glorify Christ rather than to "solve" the problems of the person standing before me, I am no longer driven by brokenness. Christ in his wisdom may lead me to enter into the brokenness of others, but he does not want me to be driven by that brokenness, because he knows my brokenness. Christ calls me to himself because he is the source of healing for all brokenness, including mine.

To be sure, Christ gives us gifts to be used in the world on behalf of others and it is the faithful servant who uses those gifts that glorifies Christ. And as the parable of the talents reminds us, there is a reward. "Well done... enter into the joy of your master." Our goal is to glorify Christ in all we do, and in doing so, we shall enjoy Him now and forever.