

Servants Are Brethren Who Humbly Serve

Peter Ditzel

In this article, I examine some of the minor words that are translated "minister" and show their specialized nature. But I especially want to take a good look at Matthew 23:1-12 to reveal how this passage is so often and blatantly violated today.

In the last article (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/servants2.htm>), we saw that servants in the assembly, ministers in the assembly, and deacons are all the same thing and are based on the same Greek word—*diakonos*. The best word to use to translate *diakonos* is "servant" because it clearly shows what these people do—serve—without adding confusing baggage from unbiblical church traditions. Some of these servants, those who meet certain criteria found in 1 Timothy 3, are recognized by the assembly as servants. It is something like politicians who are vetted. When dealing with these men, you knew that, as far as the assembly could determine, you were dealing with an honorable, sober man with a good record who showed his leadership abilities through leading his family. None of it is very formal, and being a servant in the assembly is not an "office," something the Bible knows nothing of.

This doesn't mean there weren't other people who served. In a healthy Christian assembly, many people will serve. In one usage of the word *diakonos*, they too are servants. It is likely in this sense that Phebe is said to be a servant of the assembly (Romans 16:1), although it is possible that she was in the special group of widows sixty years old and older. These had no relatives to care for them and were apparently cared for by the assembly in return for their devoting their lives to service (1 Timothy 5:3-10). But it is certain that Phebe was not the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:12)! Therefore, she did not meet the qualifications to be recognized by the assembly as a servant. Nevertheless, she still served. We also saw last time that Acts 6:1-6 does not describe the ordination of the first deacons.

Other Words Translated Minister, etc.

In the last installment, I said that "minister" and related English words are translated in the King James Version from fourteen different Greek words. I spent most of the last article dealing with the words that are

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most often translated as "minister," etc. Now I will mention some of the others.

Many of these are simply poor translations of words that should clearly have been translated another way. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:13, "minister" is *ergazomenoi*, which is a common word meaning "work." And there are places where the words "supply," "give," and "cause" would better translate the Greek words that the King James Version translates as "minister."

But there are some words that deserve more careful examination. I will list them below.

Hierourgeō—Translated as "ministering" in Romans 15:16, this verb literally means "doing sacred work." In this verse, Paul is painting a word picture that shows him as being like an Old Testament priest doing a sacred work or a sacred service, offering up the Gentiles, and so on. This does not mean that Paul actually held a special office as a priest. All believers are priests under the New Covenant (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Revelation 1:6; 5:10 20:6). Paul was merely painting a word picture.

Leitourgos—Also in Romans 15:16, Paul calls himself a minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. "Minister" here is *leitourgos*. It literally means a worker of the people or public worker. It came to be used of both public and religious servants, servants of the king, and temple priests. Paul uses it here because it fits the picture he is painting. It is also used in Hebrews of priests. This word also took on the idea that the service was rendered at the servant's expense. Thus, Paul uses it in Philippians 2:30 because of the service Epaphroditus had rendered him—that is, Epaphroditus was a servant to Paul at his own expense.

Leitourgeō—The meanings of the noun above can also be seen reflected in this verb. In Romans 15:27, Paul is saying that because the Gentiles were partakers of the spiritual things from the saints in Jerusalem, they were debtors to serve at their own expense the saints in Jerusalem with carnal things. At the beginning of Acts 13, we see prophets and teachers at Antioch intensely fasting and praying. In verse 2, the word "ministering" is *leitourgeō*, and it is intended to liken this fasting and praying to the work of a priest in the temple. Hebrews 10:11 uses *leitourgeō* to refer to the work of the Old Testament priests.

Leitourgia—This refers to work undertaken at one's own expense, a public service, and the work of a priest. "Ministration" in Luke 1:23 refers to Zacharias's work as a priest. Second Corinthians 9:12 again uses it to refer to the collection for the saints in Jerusalem. The beginning of the verse says, "For the administration of this service...." It would be better translated as, "For the service of this work at one's expense...." In Philippians 2:17 Paul is painting another picture based on the work of a priest. It literally says, "But even if I am poured out on the sacrifice and sacrificial service of your faith, I rejoice; yes, I rejoice with you all." The word I have translated as "sacrificial service" is *leitourgia*.

Hupēretēs—This literally means "an underrower" or "an underoarsman." It refers to the galley-slaves who rowed a boat. It came to mean an assistant or attendant or an officer of the law or of the court or a soldier. In John and Acts, it is used ten times to mean law officers or soldiers. In Matthew's and Mark's accounts of the trial of Jesus, it is translated as "servants" in the King James Version, but should be translated either "attendants" or "officers." Interestingly, in John's account of Jesus' trial, Jesus uses the same word when He says, "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence" (John 18:36). "Servants" here should probably be "officers" as meaning soldiers. In Luke 4:20, it is used of the attendant in charge of the scrolls of the Old Testament in the synagogue. "Attendant" would be a better translation than minister. In Acts 13:5, John Mark is called Paul and Barnabas's "attendant" ("minister" in the King James Version). In Acts 26:16, Jesus says that he has chosen Paul to be "a minister and a witness." The word "minister" is from *hupēretēs*, and can be translated as either "officer," "attendant," or "assistant." We see a similar use of *hupēretēs* in Luke 1:2 and 1 Corinthians 4:1.

Hupēreteō—This verb is found in Acts 13:36; 20:34; and 24:23 where the King James Version translates it "served," "have ministered," and "to minister" respectively. Instead, it is better translated "attended," "have attended," and "to attend."

Matthew 23:1-12

We have seen that "deacon" is not a good word to use in English Bibles because it does not transmit any information to us about what a *diakonos* does, and can, in fact, impart a wrong idea because of centuries of unbiblical church tradition of deacons as officials and

clerics in institutional churches. We have also seen that "minister" is not a good translation of *diakonos* for similar reasons. "Minister" today rarely transmits the idea of a servant, but rather of a revered cleric, sometimes in priestly garb, and often getting preferred treatment.

In Matthew 23:1-12, we read,

Then spake Jesus to the multitude, and to his disciples, Saying, The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat: All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not. For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers. But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments, And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues, And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi. But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven. Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ. But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

What Jesus was doing was taking the world as it was conceived at that time, and as it is still usually understood, and turning it on its head. Remember that Jesus was speaking before His death and, thus, while the Old Covenant was still in effect. He is telling people what to do at that time (obey the scribes and Pharisees) until His death, and He is also speaking of the age after His death, the New Covenant age that we now live in, when His followers were not to be like the scribes and Pharisees but would be servants.

This passage starts by immediately contrasting the multitude and Jesus' disciples (even those who would be Jesus' apostles among them) with the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus says that the scribes and Pharisees sit in Moses' seat or *kathedras*. What He means is that they stood to read the law and then sat down to explain it. This was speaking "from the seat" or, as it is expressed in Latin, *ex cathedra*. Even now, the Pope speaks *ex cathedra*, sitting on his throne. He expects what he says to be followed. Today, in many churches, not

only Popes but also bishops (a cathedral is a church where the diocesan bishop has his seat), pastors, and ministers think they can speak with the same kind of authority even if they are not sitting on a cathedra but are standing at a pulpit. But this kind of authority is found in the Bible only associated with Moses' seat and Moses' authority—that is, the authority of the Old Covenant law. But the Old Covenant and its law have ended. Christ says nothing of anyone speaking *ex cathedra* in the New Covenant age. Those who try to exercise such authority are usurpers who are trying to take authority to themselves that only Christ has and which He exercises through His Word.

Jesus says that scribes and Pharisees have authority, and the multitude and disciples were to obey them at that time. But the scribes and Pharisees are hypocrites, and the multitude and disciples are not to follow their example. The scribes and Pharisees wore special garments that advertised their piety; Jesus' followers were not to do this. The scribes and Pharisees were social climbers who loved to get recognition (the "uppermost rooms" should be translated as "chief reclining couches") at social occasions; Jesus' followers were not to seek such things. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to sit in the "chief seats"—the *prōtokathedrias* (see "Does Your Church Have Chief Seats?" <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/chiefseats.htm> for more information about what these are)—in the synagogue so they could sit up front and be seen by everyone; Jesus' disciples were not to want this. The scribes and Pharisees wanted to be greeted in the marketplaces as Rabbi or Master—they wanted to be recognized wherever they went as being a special class of people, much as we today think of clerics. But Jesus' disciples were not to want this; they were not to be called Rabbi or Master because they have only one Master, even Christ.

Then Jesus specifically says, "All ye are brethren" (verse 8). Remember that Jesus was speaking even to Peter and James and John and the other apostles. All were to be brothers, no one the Master. I consider this and verses 11 and 12 to be the key verses in the entire passage. They get right to the heart of it.

Next Jesus says, "And call no man your father upon the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven" (verse 9). Of course, this is not speaking of our earthly, physical fathers; New Testament writers continue to speak of them as fathers throughout the New Testament. Jesus means that we should call no man father as a title of honor. No Father O'Reillys here. No popes. For the bishop of Rome to so

completely ignore this clear command of Jesus Christ (as well as every one of the other admonitions in this passage) and call himself "pope" (a word that means "father") shows a hubris that exposes him as the prideful chief priest and Pharisee of a false antichristian church.

Then Jesus again says that we are not to call ourselves Masters because only Christ is our Master. He didn't repeat this by accident. It is important. Catholics are not the only ones at fault here. It should be obvious to any thinking person that "Reverend," "Right Reverend," and "Very Reverend" are also forbidden by the spirit of what Jesus is saying. In fact, I believe it is clear that Jesus is forbidding all titles of honor amongst His followers. That is, if "Pastor" or "Bishop" or "Deacon" or "Archdeacon" or "Dean" or "Canon" and so forth are being used in the same way as "Rabbi" or "Master," what's the difference? There is none that I can see.

Jesus then says the other two verses (besides verse 8) that I consider to be the keys to the entire passage. He first says, "But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant." "Servant" is *diakonos*. The King James translators based this on the Bishops' Bible, which inexplicably got it right. It got it wrong in Matthew 20:26 and Mark 10:43, however, where it translated *diakonos* as "minister," and the King James Version dutifully followed it. But consider this: Jesus wanted the words "servant" and "greatest" to be seeming contradictions, because in this world they are. But we don't really consider "minister" and "greatest" to be contradictions, do we? That is why "minister" is a poor translation for *diakonos*. There is no necessary contrast. Ministers often go around making authoritative pronouncements, dressed differently, seeking preferred treatment, loving recognition, and being called by various titles that set them apart from others. But *servants* don't do these things! And that is what God wants us to see when he uses the word *diakonos*.

Now read what Jesus says in verse 12: "And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted." Yes, it is the truly humble person who will be exalted. But let's get this straight—don't make the mistake of thinking that it is the world who will exalt him. Jesus said in John 15:19, "If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you." The humble servant of God is not waiting for the world to exalt him. If he were, he would have a very long wait indeed! No, it is God who will exalt His humble servants: "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10, "he shall lift

you up" is from the same Greek word as "shall he exalt" in Matthew 23:12; see also 1 Peter 5:6).

Summary

So we see that there are not three different roles called "ministers," "deacons," and "servants" in God's assembly, but one role called "servants." These servants are not exalted "deacons" and "ministers," but are people following the example of their Lord (see John 13:1-17 and Philippians 2:5-8), assuming the role of a humble servant. Even the apostles used *diakonos* to describe themselves, and it is this role of a humble servant that is the basis for serving in any other function in God's assembly. We will examine these functions in future installments.