

Friends and servants: John 15:9-17

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [May 5, 2009](#) issue

When you hear the word *slave* or *servant*, what image comes to mind? Do you see one of the 100 million conquered humans who were seized and sold across the Mediterranean during the millennium of Rome's dominance? Or a chained African on a ship crossing the Atlantic toward U.S. shores and a life of hard labor for the benefit of others? Or one of the women and children being sold into today's sex trade, which generates more crime-produced income than any other illegal industry except the drug trade? If these are the images of slavery that we hold in our minds, how does that color our thinking about becoming a slave?

Slaves and servants have no rights, just duties. Jesus illustrated this with a "suppose" story: "Suppose one of you had a servant [slave] plowing or looking after the sheep. Would you say to the servant when he comes in from the field, 'Come along now and sit down to eat?'" To paraphrase Jesus, we might say, "No way!" We'd expect the servant to prepare our meal, serve us, get the dishes out of the way and then take care of his or her own needs.

Jesus did not tell that story because he agreed with the cultural norm of owning slaves or because he wanted to say, "Hey guys, this is the way it is; it doesn't get any better than this." Rather, Jesus was talking servant to servant.

Jesus modeled servanthood and had the audacity to call others to do the same, even though this resulted in harassment, persecution and death. And he dares to call us to servanthood. At this stage, we need to shed the world's view of servants and slaves and remember that for some, bearing the title of slave was a high honor. Moses, Joshua, David, Paul and James counted it a privilege to be known as a slave of the Lord.

In the last days of Jesus' life, he became increasingly intimate in his teaching of his closest followers. After clarifying that he was the true vine and that their life and productivity depended on remaining in him, he startled the disciples with a quiet bombshell: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead I have called you friends, for everything that I learned

from my Father I have made known to you.”

The disciples did not choose Jesus as a rabbi. He initiated the search for them. For much of his ministry he taught, acted and modeled the way he expected all his followers to think and act. In that sense, they had been apprentice-servants under his guidance. Now they were being taken to a deeper level of relationship: friend. Why?

Jesus would be depending on his friends to be the hands and feet for the mission of God. When they met Jesus in Galilee at a prearranged place, he reminded them that everything written about him in the law of Moses, the books of the prophets and the psalms had to be fulfilled.

How would you like to have been present at that seminar where Jesus opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures? (Luke 24:45). In that moment Jesus provided the clue of reading the whole of scripture through a missional lens. From beginning to end, the mission of God is the big story.

Abraham was a friend of God because he did what God called him to do: be a blessing to all the peoples of the world. “Those who believe are children of Abraham. The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you’” (Gal. 3:6-8).

Today Christ still seeks those who will take his yoke upon themselves and become “friends of the King.” That friendship is not for privilege but for service. While it is possible to be a servant without being a friend, it is impossible to be a true friend and not be a servant. Christ gave us a new command: to love each other as he loved us. As the Father has loved us, so we will love. As the Father sent Jesus, so he sends us as servant-friends to bear fruit.

The beloved apostle John gives us a glimpse of what was promised to God’s friend, Abraham: “Before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. . . . And they cried out in a loud voice: ‘Salvation belongs to our God . . . and to the Lamb. . . . Praise and glory and wisdom and thanks and honor and power and strength be to our God for ever and ever. Amen!’” (Rev. 7:9-12)

What a glorious climax to the grand metanarrative. That is our story also in the here and now. Who are you servant-friending today?