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### The Church God had in Mind: Throwing in the Towel

By Matt Hook

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*“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross!”*

#### **Attitudes are powerful.**

The amount of money spent to influence people’s attitudes is in the billions: Madison Avenue’s ad agencies are willing to spend millions on marketing to get into the minds of our children and youth to find out what they like and don’t like. What they will buy and won’t buy.

Chuck Swindoll, President of Dallas Theological Seminary, nationally broadcast radio speaker, and pastor, reflects on attitude: The longer I live, the more I realize the impact of attitude on life. Attitude, to me, is more important than facts. It is more important than the past, than education, than money, than circumstances, than failures, than successes, than what other people think or say or do. It is more important than appearance, giftedness or skill. It will make or break a company ... a church ... a home. The remarkable thing is we have a choice every day regarding the attitude we will embrace for that day. We cannot change our past ... we cannot change the fact that people will act in a certain way. We cannot change the inevitable. The only thing we can do is play on the one string we have, and that is our attitude ... I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it. And so it is with you as it is with me ... We are all in charge of our Attitudes.”

Church, congregations have thrived or died because they have not remembered that attitudes are powerful.

#### **Attitudes are contagious.**

Church attitudes are contagious. About 10 years ago, a 55 year old woman was traveling by train from Detroit to Chicago. Just west of Kalamazoo, the train broke down. The passengers began to get heated at the delay, and when they found out that it would be several hours before another train could be there to pick them up and deliver them the rest of the way, tempers flared. It was getting very ugly, even vile. But then, this woman, who was traveling by herself, and knitting at the time, began to sing “I’ve been working on the railroad...” Within moments everyone joined in, and in her train car the attitude immediately shifted, transforming the people along with it. That woman’s name is Joan Hook, my mom.

**Church, attitudes are contagious – is ours worth catching?** Is the way we do business catchy? Is the way we worship God contagious? How about our mood, our actions, our attitudes toward one another – are they winsome? Our individual witnesses – are they worth catching? Are we as God’s people contagious? Does the personal way we reflect God make others curious about us or him? Is the way we interact with one another catchy? Is the way we love and care for the world unique? Does it reflect Jesus Christ? I believe it ought to be and do all those things. Attitudes are contagious.

**Attitudes reveal a lot.** We can only hide them for a while. When some 70% of the people we meet at work, on the highway, and in the grocery store say they believe in God, why are there so many bad attitudes in the world?

If we dig deep enough, and sort through the issues, the source of our problems with attitude may surprise you: Our attitude problems stem from a desire for *personal peace and affluence*. The deep desire we all have for personal peace and affluence produces bad attitudes. Francis Schaeffer explains “Personal peace means just to be let alone, not to be troubled by the troubles of other people, whether across the world or across the city – to live one’s life with minimal possibilities of being personally disturbed. Personal peace means wanting to have my personal life pattern undisturbed in my lifetime, regardless of what the result will be in the lifetimes of my children and grandchildren. Affluence means an overwhelming and ever-increasing prosperity – a life made up of things, things, and more things – a success judged by an ever-higher level of material abundance.” (How Should We Then Live? 205).

When we think we are entitled to personal peace and affluence, we are living under the delusion that life will comply. When it doesn’t, that same thinking leads to bad attitudes. But how do we get over these values when it feels so good to be served?

### **We love to be served.**

Every year the demand for services increases. You can hire someone to do just about anything. Isn’t it true that a significant portion of our personal budget goes toward paying for services: water, electricity, housekeeping, babysitting, lawn care, interest payments, repairs, dry cleaning, and more? And what about personal trainers, wardrobe consultants, and other personal advisors? Many of these services are luxuries we have grown so accustomed to having that we consider them necessities. Much of this is so we don’t have to be bothered with the small stuff of life.

Last week I was listening to two people talk about a new service: Professional Pooper Scoopers. They come to your yard after your pup and clean it up. Yeah, well, that service is not new. It existed 20 years ago. I know, because I was the one scooping. It was called “the lawn boy.” Not just at my house, but at every lawn job where there was a dog. It wasn’t a big deal, except at the McKenzie’s house across the street. Man! I don’t know what they fed that dog, but every week I’d come to cut their grass I’d have to spend the first 20 minutes with my little trowel. I just did it because I didn’t want to walk in it with my Jack Parrels. It was more self-dignity than a sense of responsibility. If only I’d have known I could have charged them for the dog dirt!

With so much available to us, we are set up to believe the great lie that’s been around since Jesus’ day. Simply put, it is this: *Those who are being served the most, are the most important. Or the greatest of all is served by all.* Entire industries have learned the monetary truth that those who do the serving reap the most benefits. The businesses that can offer the greatest number of services to their customers will win the lion’s share of the market; they will reap the greatest reward. And that’s anything that helps us with our personal peace and affluence.

**God challenges our attitude.** God messed it all up. He didn’t go for the personal peace and affluence attitude. He chose the opposite. He didn’t remain above it all, aloof and in a cocoon of personal peace. God came on the scene. He demonstrated the exact opposite way to live. And love. He threw in the towel. Jesus gave up his exalted position to serve. If I were God, I’d have come to earth and been king. I would have wanted a little homage. I would have fixed things in a whole different way. But Christ served to the point of giving up his life for us. He died, as the ultimate act of service and love. Talk about throwing in the towel! Jesus was never too proud to do whatever it took to glorify his Father, in helping other people, and carrying out the master plan. He started talking backwards: “*It is more blessed to give than to receive. Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant. The last shall be first and the first shall be last.*” The Greek word *kenosis* means emptying himself through his entire life, death, and resurrection, was God’s beautiful way of giving to us. We worship a giving God! And so we give. The Dead Sea in Israel

supports no life. Its salt content is so great not even plants grow in it. The Jordan flows into it, but because it is the lowest spot on the planet, it has no outlet. It is literally “dead” because it continually receives and never gives.

**So as believers in Christ, our attitude reflects the God we worship, summed up in one word: Servanthood. How do we do it?**

**First, to live out servanthood, be “in the moment”:** Jesus didn’t let a moment pass without seeing an opportunity to help someone else. Let’s make it personal: What about the person sitting next to you, in the parking lot after service, at home this afternoon, at work tomorrow? Ask yourself, “Right here, right now, how can I show this other person God’s mercy? How can I give them a chance? How can I help this person? How can I add value to his life or her life?” Where can I serve? Because we are to have the attitude of Jesus, every Christian should be generous. Every Christian a good neighbor, each willing to do things for others. Why? Because that’s our theology! The only way the world is going to change is if we change. But intentions are nothing without actions. Faith without works is a dead faith. The good news is we can choose. We can live it out, in each moment.

**Second, to live out servanthood, be an example:** In my study of leadership this past year, I learned the truth that you cannot lead someone where you are not willing to *first go yourself*. If we as a church are inviting people to surrender their lives to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, we must first do that. If we are inviting people to go through his death to new life, we have to do that. If we are inviting people to follow him, we must first follow him ourselves. If we are asking people to respond to him by laying down their lives and becoming a servant to others, ought we not become like a servant first?

We’d better throw in the towel first. God reached out to us first. Nowhere in the Bible does it say someone beat down the path to heaven to seek God’s friendship. Adam and Eve even hid from him. So God in Jesus Christ took the first step toward us. People in the church God had in mind can be an example for others by seeking God in worship and doing good works for the people around us.

**Third, to live out servanthood, be aware of the God you are serving:** Because our attitudes and our lives are a constant response to the God we worship and serve, Paul wrote the church in Philippi: *“Have this attitude in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross.”* Philippians 2:5-8.

Jesus himself put it this way: *“I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this (attitude) everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”* (John 13:34). When we are being the church God had in mind, people will be doing little things and big things for one another, a climate of love will fill the place, Christ will be lifted up, and all kinds of people will be drawn in. That’s the church God had in mind.

**Why? Because God loves to serve!** God literally threw in the towel. The last night Jesus had with his disciples before he was arrested, Jesus tied a towel around his waste and began washing the disciples’ feet. This was the job of the lowest servant in the household. It was a sign of hospitality and humility. Have you ever participated in washing someone else’s feet? It’s awful. It’s embarrassing. It literally stinks. And that’s what Jesus did for us. *But here’s the key:* this was not an extraordinary act for God but right in line with who he is. Jesus Christ was a servant. He was doing nothing more than expressing the serving heart of God.

It sounds so bizarre to our ears to say that God is a servant, but that’s only because our value systems are so corrupt and distorted. We feel comfortable attributing to God those things we aspire to be. To describe God as all-powerful makes him only what we want more of. To describe God as all-knowing once again reinforces something that we value. To describe God as all-present is not only comforting, but it even affirms our personal value for control. If we want God to be all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-present, *how many of*

*us would choose to let servanthood be the ultimate expression of all that potential? Isn't the whole point of being God to be served? It would be for us, but not for Jesus.*

**Jesus said we would be known by our love, but the greatest expression of love is when we lay down our lives for someone else. (John 15:13) Until then, it's a call to servanthood.**

Whenever we are known by love, God's reputation is intact. Sometimes we get so focused on God's truth that we forget God's mandate to speak the truth *in love*. God's truth and God's goodness are never to be pulled apart from God's love. It's the same with faith. Faith is never to be separated from God's love. Paul tells us the only thing that counts is faith expressing itself *through love*.

One of the U.S.'s earliest missionaries to China, Henry Poppen, made an extended trek to a remote village. Though he'd lived in that country for some forty years, he knew of no Christian who had ever visited the secluded little town with its simple huts and simple people.

Upon his arrival, the villagers listened patiently as he tried to explain who Jesus was. He talked of Christ's gentleness, his truthfulness, his all-encompassing love. The villagers nodded their heads and smiled. Some had moist eyes.

He described how Jesus bore no grudges when wronged, how he lived for what he could give rather than get. He spoke about how Christ was selfless to the point of death.

The grizzled old villagers glanced back and forth with knowing eyes. Finally, one of them spoke. "We know this man. Your 'Jesus' lived here."

Dr. Poppen smiled, but shook his head. Feeling there was some misunderstanding, he explained that Christ had actually lived many thousands of miles away.

"No, no. He lived and died right here," the old wrinkled villager insisted. Rising to his feet, he pointed off in the distance down a rutted path. "Follow me. I'll show you his grave."

Dr. Poppen shrugged and followed the pack of men and women as they guided him to a Chinese cemetery. There they stopped at a headstone carved with the name of a Christian medical missionary – a man who felt God had led him to that secluded corner of the world. He had lived and died there – his existence unknown even to other missionaries. Yet he was so Christlike that Jesus of Nazareth was mistaken for "Jesus" of China.

Every Christian among us is a missionary – God's representative, God's ambassador, in his or her own corner of the world. Every Christian is called to serve other people. In your school, your home, your job, you'll meet people no other Christian can.

That's why Christ said his life is an example for us. By following it and throwing in the towel, others are bound to see Christ in you...and perhaps to even mistake you for the real thing.