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WHATEVER OUR STATE WE WILL SERVE HIM

Because our state may change by the day (sometimes very suddenly and unexpectedly), the particular state we are in is not terribly important. Except in cases of sudden death, often by accident, in most families one partner will precede the other partner to the grave. Lynn Caine has written a book entitled *Widow*, and in chapter 9 she has as her first sentence “Now I had a new role. Widow.”¹ Before the introduction to the book, she quotes Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem “Lament”:

Life must go on,
And the dead be forgotten;
Life must go on,
Though good men die;
Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forget just why.²

Although Jesus honored marriage in his ministry, again and again he asserted that full, complete, dedicated service is possible apart from earthly relationships. The single woman has problems, but so does everyone else. Most of her problems are simply human problems not specifically rising out of her marital status. Frank O’Malley of Notre Dame, a dedicated teacher and

¹Caine, *Widow*, 73.

²Millay, “Lament,” 65.

bachelor, said, “Whether you get married or not, you live to regret it”³—a wry way of saying that every kind of life has its difficulties. Paul Tournier has a chapter in his book *A Place for You* entitled “Our Places Change,”⁴ and so they do.

The status of one of my very close friends changed this past year. She said in a visit during Christmas, “I’ve decided I’m probably going to spend the rest of my life in this apartment, so I had the superintendent of maintenance come and drive all the nails I want in the walls.” Then in less than three months, she called to say, “Annie May, I’m going to get married.” I think the change in her status was as much a surprise to her as it was to everyone else. A former college roommate had died, and she was marrying her former roommate’s husband. In the marriage she also acquired two children.

The biblical story of Ruth brings to mind a number of different changes in state. Naomi, a wife and mother when she goes to the country of Moab, returns to the land of Judah without her husband and her sons. In Ruth 1:19 the women said, “Is this Naomi?” She said to them, “Do not call me Naomi, call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went away full, and the LORD has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi, when the LORD has afflicted me and the Almighty has brought calamity upon me?” (Ruth 1:20, 21). The change in her status was from pleasant to bitter. In the same story, we see the role of Ruth change from that of widow to wife and mother, and Naomi becomes a grandmother. According to Ruth 4:17, “The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, ‘A son has been born to Naomi.’ They named him Obed; he was the father of Jesse, the father of David.”

Our state is not so important. What is crucial is that we resolve to be God’s person whatever our state—teenager, young adult, middle-aged adult, older adult, single, married, widowed. The

³Source unknown. Frank O’Malley (1909–1974) taught classes on modern Catholic writers, Catholic philosophy in literature, and the philosophy of literature at the University of Notre Dame, Notre Dame, IN. <http://ethicscenter.nd.edu/inspires/fomalley.shtml> (accessed March 23, 2009).

⁴Tournier, *A Place for You*, 53–65.

age and the marital status are secondary factors.

I am not interested in listing off specific acts you can do. Every one of you could come up with a list a mile long of services that you know need to be performed without any committee assignment. I am, however, very much interested in some biblical principles that will make you want to be involved whatever and wherever the need.

Contentment in Our State at Any Given Time

The Shunammite woman of 2 Kings 4:8–13 is a giver; she is so hospitable that she urges Elisha to eat with her every time he passes her house. She needs no man’s favor. When Elisha asks, “What is to be done for you?” she replies, “I dwell among my own people.”

Paul said that he had “learned, in whatever state I am, to be content” (Phil. 4:11). Contentment isn’t a state in which we are born or which we inherit or which we come to have by our surroundings. We *learn* it. And no learning is easy. In 2 Corinthians 6:10 he speaks of having nothing and yet possessing everything.

Jeremiah Burroughs describes Christian contentment as “that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in God’s wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.”⁵

Wives are reminded in 1 Peter 3:4, “Let [yours] be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God’s sight is very precious.”

God’s Purpose for Me

Look at the St. Vincent Millay poem again:

Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on;
I forget just why.

⁵Burroughs, *Rare Jewel*, 19.

If you believe that the Lord will fulfill his purpose for you, then you won't forget why life must go on. Read Psalm 57:2: "I cry to God Most High, to God who fulfils his purpose *for me*" (italics mine). Or read Psalm 138:8: "The LORD will fulfil his purpose *for me*" (italics mine). Job says to God, "I know that thou canst do all things, and that no purpose of thine can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Paul, in Romans 8:28, said, "In everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose." Paul had dreamed of planting Christianity in distant places where the name of Christ was unknown; but when he found himself surrounded by prison walls, he was happy that he could pray, write, and teach.

Always God's purpose is filled with compassion and mercy (Jas. 5:11). François Fénelon said, "From the moment you wish nothing more according to your own judgment, and that you wish everything which God wishes without reserve, you will have no longer so many uneasy returns and reflections to make over what concerns you."⁶ He has a purpose for my life as much as he did for the lives of Sarah, Rachel, Deborah, Mary, and Dorcas.

Waiting on God is an important aspect of God's purpose. "Wait on the LORD" is a constant refrain in the Psalms (27:14; 37:34; 40:1; 130:5), and it is a necessary phrase. It is hard to wait for God. He has eternity to accomplish his purpose, and our concern is for the present time.

God Knows Me

In a family with several children, the mother knows the dispositions, the temperaments, the attitudes, the moods, the abilities of each child. No mother likes for comparisons to be made among her children because she recognizes these differences and in love deals with each different child.

But God knows these differences better than any mother can. He knows when I get up or sit down, he is acquainted with all of my ways, and he knows my words before I speak (Ps. 139:1–6 and

⁶Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*, 90–91.

13–18). He knows all men and “needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man” (John 2:25). During the course of daily life, we may easily forget God. Our lives are varied, but he knows every activity, every word, and every intent of the heart even when we do not know ourselves. Joe Hacker, former head of the Bible Department at Harding University, once said, “I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. There is not a moment when his eye is off me or his attention distracted from me and no moment when his care falters.”⁷

How I Can Serve God Whatever My Status

I would like to suggest six areas in which I can serve God whatever my status if I believe he will fulfill his purpose for me.

1. Be an example.

God sets every person down in a network of relationships where he must be some kind of link between the generations and, whether he knows it or not, leave his particular touch on the lives of those around him. We don’t very easily learn by listening to someone giving instruction; we’re constantly saying, “Show me.” Recently, my library assistant and I were working on a listing in correct form for our journals for a computer print-out. Even before reading instructions, we told our vendor, “Do a sample for us.”

One of the most touching stories of the power of example was reported in the Memphis newspaper. Joseph Hardy Miller, a 17-year-old Central High student, president of the student body, son of a neurologist, grandson of a well-known Baptist preacher, was appointed commissioner of sanitation at Central High School when he was a freshman. One of his duties was to see that the cafeteria was clean. After two hospitalizations and surgery for a

⁷Hacker (speech, Harding Graduate School of Religion, Memphis, TN, n.d.). Used by permission. Email from Joe Hacker, Searcy, AR, to Don Meredith, Memphis, TN, August 29, 2007.

malignancy, the principal found him stacking trays in the cafeteria. “The students have gotten messy while I was gone. I thought if they saw me doing this, they would be better.”

God knew there was no power like that of example, so he sent Jesus in order that we could actually see him with the woman taken in adultery, with the woman at the well, with the woman in Simon’s house. If it were not for this last incident, how could we know that love grows out of forgiveness?

Why do you think we have Hebrews 11? The Bible gives definitions of faith—but we can’t fully know what faith is until we see Abraham leave his home, not knowing where he was going, just because God said for him to; or Abraham ready to offer Isaac, his only son; or Moses leave Egypt and not be afraid; or Rahab protect the spies. But these accounts seem far away and long ago.

Is it possible for us to be a modern-day example to our students in school, in Bible study, to our family, our friends, our associates at work? We talk a lot about our contemporary world and its culture to which we must adapt, but what this contemporary world would take note of is plain Christian living.

2. Really believe with Paul that you are a debtor to all men.

Paul was indebted to Aquila and Priscilla. “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house” (Rom. 16:3–5b). “Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord” (1 Cor. 16:19). They were some of the earliest personal workers with Apollos but were also active in their church life (Acts 18).

Once when Jim Bill McInTeer was asked why he continues his strenuous schedule, he gave a one-word answer—debt. The Lord has been so kind. It takes a lifetime to thank him. Then we need an eternity to praise him.

Part of God’s purpose for us is that we teach his truth—whether it’s in kindergarten, summer camps, a Bible study in the home, or wherever we can find people who have not yet been told of his grace.

3. Be steadfast.

“Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). “And let us not grow weary in well-doing” (Gal. 6:9). You can name your own list of Christian services and endeavors which had no difficulty getting started with all kinds of promotion and fanfare. How many times have we heard, “I’m excited about . . .”? From mission work abroad, to mission work here in difficult places, to ministry to long-neglected groups of people, the ministry begins with excitement. Then we grow weary in our visitation and benevolent work. We grow tired of giving our energy and time to a program of work that everybody else, including perhaps church leaders, has lost interest in; we decide to give up too.

Irene Johnson did essentially the same work for more than 35 years in Germany. She was involved in teaching children’s classes, teaching others to teach, visiting, encouraging, loving, praying, working with her hands. She added new works, including Bible camps and women’s retreats, but she did not give up the earlier call to service. She just kept doing the good she started and for which she went to Europe so many years ago. Others came and went, but she stayed.

She had to wait for the children to grow up to see the fruit of her labor. Now preachers all over western Germany who were in her children’s classes rise up to call her blessed. She married Otis Gatewood in the twilight of her life and continued her good works in Vienna, Austria, as long as she was able.

W. E. Sangster in his description of a saint gives this comment: “The saint never gives up. He goes on serving, loving, helping. . . . He aches for souls. Neither indifference nor slander, nor injury can stop him. He does not make a motive of gratitude. His great motive is his utter love for God.”⁸ A saint “is kind to the ungrateful and selfish” (Luke 6:35).

“May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 15:5, 6).

⁸Sangster, *Pure in Heart*, 104.

4. Be one in whom the love of God has made all people one family.

To so many of us, the phrase “the brotherhood of man” is just a pious phrase. When we practice rather than preach James’ teaching on not being a respecter of persons, when we teach and show hospitality and minister to the needs of those who are different from us no matter what the pressures are from family, friends, or church community, we will be able to say with Alan Paton’s mission figure in *Cry the Beloved Country*,

I shall do this, not because I am noble or unselfish, but because life slips away, and because I need for the rest of my journey a star that will not play false to me, a compass that will not lie. . . . I am lost when I balance this against that, I am lost when I ask if this is safe, I am lost when I ask if men, white men or black men, Englishmen or Afrikaners, Gentiles or Jews, will approve. Therefore I shall try to do what is right, and to speak what is true.⁹

Paton is saying essentially what George Müller said earlier: “There was a day when I died; utterly died to George Müller, his opinions, preferences, tastes and will; died to the world, its approval or censure; died to the approval or blame even of my brethren and friends and since then I have studied only to show myself approved unto God.”¹⁰ According to 1 Corinthians 4:1–4, only in Christ can we solve the problem of living together with all of our differences.

5. Be one who believes that life does not consist in what one has.

The tyranny of things is more than a well-turned phrase. We won’t ever have any impact with our teaching on sacrificial living unless we can demonstrate it in our lives. As long as silver, china, antiques, and collectors’ items have priority over whether somebody gets to hear the good news about Jesus, we lose our

⁹Paton, *Cry the Beloved Country*, 175.

¹⁰Sangster, *Pure in Heart*, 141.

influence. Treasures are not confined to money or to what money will buy but to whatever stops with this life and this world.

6. Believe that we are strangers and exiles (Heb. 11:13).

Today I'm nearer my home than I've ever been before. Even today Christ might come to receive his own. We need desperately to keep alive that hope and to rekindle it in the lives of others. J. I. Packer likens the meeting of the redeemed in heaven with their father God and their brother Jesus as a family gathering like the day "the sick child is at last able to leave the hospital, and finds father and the whole family waiting outside to greet him."¹¹

Jesus is coming, and all of the excuses for failing to teach others, all of my lack of steadfastness (holding out to the end), all of my involvement with things, all of my failure to do whatever I could have done to break down the barriers that separate—all of these excuses will seem so feeble when I by myself stand before Jesus who spent his life teaching others, who held out to the end doing his Father's will, who didn't own anything material, and who by his life and teaching made us know that the brotherhood of man could be a reality.

I hope we can all pray the prayer of Thomas à Kempis in complete submission of our lives to the God who made us and beyond whose love and care we cannot stray (Ps. 139:7–12):

O Lord, Thou knowest what is best for us, let this or that be done, as Thou shalt please. Give what thou wilt and how much Thou wilt and when Thou wilt. Deal with me as Thou thinkest good, and as best pleaseth Thee, and is most for Thy honor. Set me where Thou wilt and deal with me in all things just as Thou wilt. . . . Behold, I am Thy servant, prepared for all things; for I desire not to live unto myself; but unto Thee; and O, that I could do it worthily and perfectly!¹²

[Date and occasion of this speech are unknown.]

¹¹Packer, *Knowing God*, 198.

¹²Thomas à Kempis, *Imitation of Christ III*, 15.