



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Service: The Greeks Had a Word for It

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A fascinating aspect of studying the New Testament's original language is the precision one finds. For example, where we try to express many ideas with one word for "love" (e.g., we love our parents, our spouses, our children, our jobs, sports, etc.), the Greeks had no fewer than eight words, three of which appear in the New Testament. The same is true with regard to ministry. Although the word *diakonia* is the main focus of this study, I would be remiss if I did not introduce related words the New Testament writers used.

There was *doulos*, a slave or bond-servant (see the NASB). This word involved the idea of belonging wholly to a master and being under obligation to do his will, the opposite of freedom. It is the word used so often by the early church "to express the spiritual reality that a believer belongs wholly to his heavenly Lord and consequently must obey Him in total submission" (D. Edmond Hiebert, "Behind the Word 'Deacon': A New Testament Study," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, April-June 1983: 151) (cf. Rom 1.1; Gal 1.10; Tit 1.1; also Luke 6.46).

Often used as a practical equivalent of *doulos* was *oiketēs*, a "house-slave" (cf. 1 Pet 2.18). This word, which conveyed a more intimate relationship between slave and master than *doulos*, shared its idea of intimacy with *pais*, a word that meant "child," but which was also used to refer to a slave (Luke 7.7). Both words stood in contrast to the words *misthios* and *misthōtos*, words that referred to "a hired servant." Significantly, these self-centered words are never used in the New Testament to refer to Christian service, but are reserved for references like that of Jesus to the hireling, in contrast to the "good shepherd" (John 10.12-14).

Denoting the idea of tenderness, *therapōn*, the word from which comes the modern word "therapy," referred to one who served out of respect and concern for others. It was often used in a technical sense to refer to one who performed a ministry of healing (Luke 14.3; cf. Acts 17.25; Heb 3.5).

Two words that came to have religious overtones are *latreus* and *leitourgos*. The first word originally referred to one who worked for pay as opposed to the compulsion of slavery. Its kindred verb, *latreuō*, was used in the Septuagint and New Testament to refer to

religious service, whether given to the true God or to idols. It thus suggests the idea of service in worship (Rom 1.9; Heb 9.9; 10.2). The word *leitourgos*, from which comes the word “liturgy,” referred to a public servant who discharged service on behalf of the state. It was used of priests ministering in the temple (Luke 1.23), of government officials (Rom 13.6), and of Epaphroditus who served Paul on behalf of the Philippian church (Phil 2.25).

A word that referred to helpers, assistants, officers, stewards, and servants is *hupēretēs*. Literally, it meant “an under-rower” and had as its main idea one who worked under the direction of another who was his superior. It was originally used to refer to those who toiled in the bowels of a ship to provide propulsion. The officers of the Jews who acted at the behest of the high priest were designated as *hupēretēs* (Mark 14.54, 65; translated “guards” - ESV; “officers” - NASB; “servants” - CSB). Both Jesus and Paul used the word to refer to Jesus’ disciples (John 18.36; 1 Cor 4.1).

None of these words is as comprehensive in scope as *diakonia*, but each contributes to our understanding of Christian ministry. In different ways, each shows that ministry is never about us, but rather the one we serve. There is no hint of the ideas of prestige, success, or position so often associated with ministry in the minds of some today. Instead, all point to the model seen in the slave (*doulos*) in Jesus’ parable in Luke 17.7-10. “So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty’” (v. 10).

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