

# Dylan: “Gotta Serve Somebody”

By Chic Smith

You may be an ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance  
You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You’re gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you’re gonna have to serve somebody

— Bob Dylan, “Gotta Serve Somebody,” 1979

Bob Dylan, who first achieved great critical and commercial success in 1963, and is now a Nobel Prize winner, was not given his first Grammy award until 1980. The award, for the best rock male vocal performer, stemmed from his song “Gotta Serve Somebody,” which is on his *Slow Train Coming* album, recorded in 1979. *Rolling Stone* later recalled that Dylan “seemed shocked” when his name was called out as the Grammy winner. “I didn’t expect this,” Dylan was reported as saying. “I want to thank the lord for it.”<sup>1</sup>

We will shortly turn to an analysis of the song’s lyrics, but first some of the background, and this in line with literary theorist Kenneth Burke’s emphasis on “the situation” of a given text, as well as on the “associational clusters” related to its key words and symbols.<sup>2</sup> *Rolling Stone* has summarized Dylan’s career:

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<sup>1</sup> Andy Greene, [\*\*This Week in Rock History: Bob Dylan Wins His First Grammy and Led Zeppelin Become the Nobs\*\*](#), *Rolling Stone*, February 28, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The present essay uses Burke’s cluster analysis method approach to identifying the motive and meaning of a given text or writer. The method focuses on key symbols and what other symbols cluster around the key ones. Burke has written:

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For almost 50 years, Bob Dylan has remained, along with James Brown, the most influential American musician rock & roll has ever produced. Inscrutable and unpredictable, Dylan has been both deified and denounced for his shifts of interest, while whole schools of musicians took up his ideas. His lyrics—the first in rock to be seriously regarded as literature—became so well known that politicians from Jimmy Carter to Vaclav Havel have cited them as an influence.<sup>3</sup>

In 1963, when Dylan was 22, Peter, Paul and Mary’s cover of “Blowin’ in the Wind” had sold a then-phenomenal 300,000 copies in the first week after its release.<sup>4</sup>

But two decades after this, in the period prior to the recording of “Gotta Serve Somebody,” several tumultuous events had occurred in Dylan’s life. His wife Sara had filed for divorce and received custody of their five children. He had lost \$2 million on a film project (comprised of footage of his and Joan Baez’s Rolling Thunder tour). More centrally, he had publically stated that—though born Jewish in 1941; a bar mitzvah in 1954—he had now become a born-again Christian.

For such Christians, faith is to be a deciding factor in all areas of life. And being of service to others is a fundamental belief of Christians. Christ washed a prostitute’s feet, supplied wine at a wedding reception, and fed a hungry crowd of strangers. “Serving somebody” is a normal and expected part of the born-again life.

Dylan’s song has seven verses, each followed by a chorus containing the refrain “Gonna have to serve somebody.” (Complete lyrics may be found at the bottom of this essay.) Each chorus contains four lines and uses the key word “serve” in both the first and second lines of the chorus, as well as in the closing fourth line. *Merriam-Webster* defines the verb “to serve” as to be of use, to be worthy of reliance or trust, to hold office or

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Now the work of every writer contains a set of implicit equations. He uses “associational clusters.” And you may, by examining his work, find “what goes with what” in these clusters—what kinds of acts and images and personalities and situations go with his notions of heroism, villainy, consolation, despair, etc.

*The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (University of California Press, 1973), 20. First published in 1941. It may be useful, too, to read how Burke begins this book (page 1):

Let us suppose that I ask you, “What did the man say?” And that you answer: “He said, ‘yes.’” You still do not know what the man said. You would not know unless you knew more about the situation, and about the remarks that preceded his answer.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of Dylan’s career up (prior to the Nobel Prize), see [Artist Bio/Bob Dylan](#), *Rolling Stone*. This article appears online without a date, but there is this credit line: “Portions of this biography appeared in *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock & Roll* (Simon & Schuster, 2001). Mark Kemp contributed to this article.”

<sup>4</sup> Source of sales figure is Wikipedia article on [Blowin’ in the Wind](#) (consulted November 2016). See also, Andy Greene, [50 Years Ago Today: Bob Dylan Premiered “Blowin’ in the Wind”](#), *Rolling Stone*, April 16, 2012. For much more one might see Howard Sounes, *Down the Highway: The Life of Bob Dylan* (Grove Press, 2011).

discharge duty or function (serve on jury duty). In Dylan's lyrics the word "serve" is always followed by the word "somebody"—an unspecified person. This suggests that Dylan sees serving as being of use, or worthy of trust toward an unspecified person. Simply stated, in the mind of Bob Dylan, rendering service or being of service is not reserved just for those exclusively in your circle, or in a particular socio-economic bracket, or political persuasion, or religious denomination. For Dylan, serving does not have a quid pro quo built into it. Service can be rendered to a best friend or a worst enemy and anyone in between. Either way, service is done; it is an active rather than a passive action.

The word cluster that precedes the key term serve is "have to." Modal verbs such as "have to" are used when the speaker believes something is certain, probable or possible (or not). In this case Dylan uses the verb to illuminate that rendering service or being of service is non-negotiable. Rather it is basic requirement. As Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm once put it, "Service is the rent you pay for your room here on Earth."<sup>5</sup> As a commercial artist, Dylan would have learned first-hand that some things were negotiable and others not. Offering service, he is saying, is non-negotiable.

"You may be an ambassador to England or France / You may like to gamble, you might like to dance". Regardless of who you are and your current station in life, you will have to be of use, be worthy of trust. And not only will you have to serve another human being or other human beings, but you don't get to choose who. The Christian call makes no room for favoritism, nepotism, sexism, or any of the other 'isms' to which humans tend to fall prey. Rendering service to humanity may be as comfortable as offering a kind word to a trusted friend or as challenging as committing time to address an issue of injustice that only indirectly impacts you as a member of the human race. Either way, as Dylan keeps stating, service must be rendered.

Dylan sung of this particular idea of service at a time when the United States was in flux. In March 1979, an accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Middlesex, Pennsylvania, caused uncertainty domestically and abroad. Later in the year, the federal government granted the third largest US automobile maker, Chrysler, a \$1.5 million bailout to ensure the corporation's survival. And 1979 saw the beginning of the Iran hostage crisis in which sixty-three Americans were among those taken hostage at the American embassy in Tehran by militant student followers of Ayatollah Khomeini. (Their demand: that the former shah of Iran, who had been put in place by the American government, be extradited to Iran where he was to be put on trial.) For Dylan, and many Americans, the world around them was filled with consternation. In retrospect, Dylan's mantra of rendering service to humanity hardly seems a bad idea! Looking through the lens of 2016, the state of affairs of the late 1970s may not seem very troubling. Nonetheless, these events were far from the norm, and they continue to serve as case studies of catastrophic economic and hostage scenarios.

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<sup>5</sup> Slight variations of the Chisholm remark may be found in various sources, to include Brian Lanker, *I Dream a World: Portraits of Black Women who Changed America* (Stewart, Tabori and Chang, 1989).

The vocabulary, grammar, and sentiments of “Gotta Serve Somebody” may seem, *on the surface*, simpler than those of many of the famous songs from Dylan’s youth. For example, “Chimes of Freedom,” from 1964, begins

Far between sundown’s finish an’ midnight’s broken toll  
We ducked inside the doorway, thunder crashing  
As majestic bells of bolts struck shadows in the sounds  
Seeming to be the chimes of freedom flashing  
    Flashing for the warriors whose strength is not to fight  
    Flashing for the refugees on the unarmed road of flight . . .

And “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind”—the famous refrain of Dylan’s first big commercial hit—has been described as “impenetrably ambiguous: either the answer is so obvious it is right in your face, or the answer is as intangible as the wind”.<sup>6</sup> One might think, too, about the lyrics of the 1966 “Rainy Day Women #12 & 35,” a song that takes its title from the King James Old Testament (Proverbs 27:15: “A continual dropping in a very rainy day and a contentious woman are alike”).<sup>7</sup> Dylan scholar Clinton Heylin has proposed that this song was a forerunner to “Gotta Serve Somebody.”<sup>8</sup> The opening lines, call attention to the ambiguity of “getting stoned”—getting high or getting attacked or killed—

Well, they’ll stone ya when you’re trying to be so good  
They’ll stone ya just a-like they said they would  
They’ll stone ya when you’re tryin’ to go home  
Then they’ll stone ya when you’re there all alone  
But I would not feel so all alone  
Everybody must get stoned

Is “You’re gonna have to serve somebody” a step down from youthful genius, or is there a justification for such simplicity? Or, is there some ambiguity here, too?

As regards this latter question, it may be noted that—beyond *Merriam-Webster*—the verb “to serve” may also refer to serving against one’s will; service can—if not in Jesus’s case—imply inferiority. Could Dylan (post-divorce?) be saying, or saying also, no matter how

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<sup>6</sup> Seth Rogovoy, *Bob Dylan: Prophet, Mystic, Poet* (Simon & Schuster, 2009), 88.

<sup>7</sup> Dylan condensed in Michael J. Gilmour, *The Gospel According to Bob Dylan: The Old, Old Story for Modern Times* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011):

I read the Bible a lot; it just happens that I do. It tells you specific things in the book of Daniel and the book of Revelation which might apply to these times here. Because Russia is going to come down and attack the Middle East; it says this in the Bible. And I’ve been reading all kinds of books my whole life, and I really never found any truth in them. These things in the Bible, they seem to uplift me and tell me the truth.

This is a condensation of comments made to an audience in Toronto, Canada, April 20, 1980.

<sup>8</sup> Clinton Heylin, *Revolution in the Air: The Songs of Bob Dylan 1957-1973* (Chicago Review Press, 2009), 309-10.

rich and powerful you may be, you're going to have to do someone else's bidding, prostitute yourself, or wash a prostitute's feet?

From a Christian perspective, service is an interesting phenomenon to explicate. Being of use or having to do someone else's bidding against one's will are actually different sides of the same coin. Either of these two can be beneficial to both parties. On one hand, the person doing the serving makes a contribution to the individual in some way or even to society as a whole. In the Old Testament, Dorcas served her community by making garments for the widows, and Aaron and Hur held up Moses's arms during a battle with the Amareks which led to victory.

The Bible also contains accounts of people doing someone else's bidding against their own will. Pontius Pilate is a fitting example. Although he did not concur with the Jewish leaders' accusations against Christ, he gave in to their lobbying and ordered the crucifixion. He washed his hands before the boisterous crowd and told them that he was not responsible for Jesus's blood. His story warns those within the Christian faith that rendering service can be dehumanizing and irrational even for those with significant positions, wealth, and influence. Nonetheless, service (i.e. doing someone else's bidding) must be rendered.

Embracing, nonetheless, a simpler reading of Dylan's song, we can see it and Dylan's conversion to Christianity as an opting for simplicity. Christ may be seen as someone who led a simple life, without a home or material possessions (though of course also challenging the ruling powers of his region). I believe Christianity allowed Dylan to seek to emulate, either consciously or subconsciously, Christ's simplicity. In this way he may have sought to subdue some of the turmoil of his personal life and that was coming from events in the United States and the world. It has been said that decades earlier, in 1966, the stress of and hysteria surrounding his celebrity had led to a serious motorcycle accident which was followed by nine months of seclusion. The simplicity suggested by "Gotta Serve Somebody" might be considered a more successful approach to decluttering his world, and as a quite intentional departure from the complexities and ambiguities of his previous work.

In a day and time when complexity is the standard—complex elections, taxes, education, criminal justice, food production and dissemination, etc.—Dylan's Grammy-award-winning song is a little reminder that regardless of how chaotic things get, simplicity is an option. Although Dylan's faith appears to be the motivation that led him to seek a path less travelled, his blueprint of serving is as relevant in 2016 as it was in 1979.

## **"Gotta Serve Somebody" Lyrics**

By Bob Dylan; copyright 1979, Special Rider Music

You may be an ambassador to England or France  
You may like to gamble, you might like to dance

You may be the heavyweight champion of the world  
You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls

*Chorus:* But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

You might be a rock 'n' roll addict prancing on the stage  
You might have drugs at your command, women in a cage  
You may be a businessman or some high-degree thief  
They may call you Doctor or they may call you Chief

*Chorus*

You may be a state trooper, you might be a young Turk  
You may be the head of some big TV network  
You may be rich or poor, you may be blind or lame  
You may be living in another country under another name

*Chorus*

You may be a construction worker working on a home  
You may be living in a mansion or you might live in a dome  
You might own guns and you might even own tanks  
You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks

*Chorus*

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride  
You may be a city councilman taking bribes on the side  
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you may know how to cut hair  
You may be somebody's mistress, may be somebody's heir

*Chorus*

Might like to wear cotton, might like to wear silk  
Might like to drink whiskey, might like to drink milk  
You might like to eat caviar, you might like to eat bread  
You may be sleeping on the floor, sleeping in a king-sized bed

*Chorus*

You may call me Terry, you may call me Timmy  
You may call me Bobby, you may call me Zimmy  
You may call me R.J., you may call me Ray  
You may call me anything but no matter what you say

You're gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed  
You're gonna have to serve somebody  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody

## Commercial note

*Gotta Serve Somebody: The Gospel Songs of Bob Dylan* features traditional and contemporary gospel singers performing songs written by Bob Dylan during his “born again period” (1979–81). Five songs are from his Grammy-Award-winning “first Christian album,” *Slow Train Coming*, and six songs from the second, *Saved*. There are no songs from his third and last album of this period: *Shot of Love*. Performers on *The Gospel Songs* album include Shirley Caesar, The Fairfield Four, Aaron Neville, the Chicago Mass Choir, and Mavis Staples.

A comment attributed to session drummer Jim Keltner: “Twenty years had to go by for people to become aware of the fact that Bob Dylan is one of our great gospel writers? I hope this is the beginning of a lot of people really paying attention to that period of his writing.”