

Service: Truth in Action

Mark 9:33-35

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Steve DeWitt

Today we are continuing our summer series on rediscovering what following Jesus looks like. Today is serving King Jesus. The astonishing starting point for serving King Jesus is that King Jesus first served us. Kings don't serve, they are served. Servants fill palaces to meet every need or whim the king has. That's puny human kings.

Jesus is the highest king. Indeed, the King of kings. The last king we would expect to serve us is the highest King. But this is the paradox and wonder of service in the kingdom of God, the greatest citizen in the kingdom of God is the greatest servant in the kingdom of God. There is no greater servant in the kingdom than the King.

So, let's explore kingdom service through the example, the expression, the enablement, and the effect. The net result of this I hope is a renewed vision in each of our lives to serve the One who served us the truest, the best, and the most.

"And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you discussing on the way?' But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. (Mark 9:33-34 ESV)

Sometimes the disciples were just plain embarrassing. This is one of those times. They are walking along the road with the Son of God while debating which of them is the greatest. By this, it doesn't mean they were arguing that other disciples were the greatest, they were arguing for their own claim to greatness. In Mark's account, this is just after Peter, James, and John personally witness Jesus' transfiguration. You would think the sight of the very shekinah glory of God and the thundering voice of God the Father would have put a little humility in them. But no. Just a few verses later, they are making their best case for their own greatness and their own exalted place in Jesus' kingdom.

Jesus calls them on it and asks, what were you discussing? *"But they kept silent."* They were suddenly embarrassed. They looked down and tried to find a rock they could crawl under.

"And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, 'If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.'" (Mark 9:35) A parallel passage in Matthew says, *"The greatest among you shall be your servant."* (Matthew 23:11)

To be first, you must be last. To be great, be a servant. These sound like backwards day. Oxymorons. Blatant contradictions to the norm. How is greatness servitude? How is firstness lastness?

Jesus is trying to help us see what is real and true in the eyes of God and in the kingdom of God. It's challenging for us to understand because we are so enculturated in the kingdom of man. Greatness is kingship. Greatness is firstness. Greatness is winning. Greatness is people serving you.

But in the Godhead from which all truth flows, the Triune God doesn't operate that way. God the Father doesn't lord it over the Son and the Spirit. The Son and Spirit are not

trying to usurp the Father. Their glorious perfections are expressed in service to each other. The Father serves the Godhead by leading. The Son serves by obeying the Father. The Spirit serves as the active agent in the purposes of God. Their starting point within the Trinity is, *how can I bless the others?* This basic selflessness is the eternal source of all divine love.

Jesus comes to the kingdom of man and all its org charts and pecking orders and dares to say, *the servant around here is the greatest person*. The disciples didn't get it. We mostly don't either. The story continues a chapter later:

"And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, 'Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.'" (Mark 10:35) That is pretty much a summary of 99% of prayers we offer. God, will you please do whatever we ask of you? James and John's brazen ambition is on display. "And he said to them, 'What do you want me to do for you?' And they said to him, 'Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.'" (Mark 10:36-37)

Take a moment and just consider what they are asking. *Jesus, other than you, we want to have the highest places of honor possible for a human to have and we want that glory forever, and ever*. The right and left of the throne of Jesus? Are you serious? Here's Jesus' response.

"Jesus said to them, 'You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?' And they said to him, 'We are able.' And Jesus said to them, 'The cup that I drink you will drink, and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized, but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.'" (Mark 10:38-40)

Time doesn't allow to talk about the fact that James and John did suffer like Jesus did and endured their persecution faithfully to the end. The focus turns from James and John to the other disciples who hear about the brothers' brazen request.

"And when the ten heard it, they began to be indignant at James and John. And Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'" (Mark 10:41-45)

The other disciples were upset. Was it because they thought it unseemly to ask Jesus such a question? Perhaps, but more likely they resented James and John beating them to the punch. *If only I had asked, maybe I could be at his right hand*.

We see this driving ambition to advance the kingdom of self even among the disciples. Now we give them some grace as this is before the cross and before their regeneration. They are arguably unbelievers at this point, but still, it looks a lot more like a backstabbing reality TV show than a Christian small group.

Jesus repeats an ethic in the kingdom of God, *greatness is servanthood*. To prove it he says, *even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*." (Mark 10:45)

The Example – Our Servant King

Jesus sets the example of greatness by setting the example of service. He didn't come to lord his authority, although he could. He didn't come to show off his power, although he could. He didn't come to impress us, although he could. He came to serve us. The highest king of all humbled himself to the lowest possible place and from that position of meekness served humanity. This is a wonder and countercultural even today.

How do you view greatness? Do you aspire to it? A quick summary of social media would be ordinary people trying to convince ordinary people that they themselves are extraordinary. If not them, then certainly their extraordinary children. It reminds me of my favorite Winston Churchill quote, he said, "All men are worms, but I do believe that I am a glow worm."¹ James and John thought they were glow worms among the normal worm-type disciples.

You can see Jesus sighing as he thought, *how do I convince these ladder climbers that the way to greatness is to climb down the ladder? To go low. To go humble. To view other people as more significant than your own?* One way we know he did was he gave them an object lesson:

"Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him."
(John 13:3-5)

Washing feet was the duty of a servant. Jesus was the nationally famous rabbi. Yet he washed them? Washing feet really gets at the heart of servanthood. To wash feet requires you to go low. It means your lowest need is my highest priority. You have to get on your knees to wash feet. In doing so, the other person's dirt becomes your dirt. Their feet dirt is now your hand dirt. Your head is at their feet. It's a powerful picture of greatness God's way.

In the kingdom of God, we don't ascend to greatness, we descend to greatness. From that place of descent, the opportunity to serve our servant King by serving his people is viewed as a great privilege. Why? We are following his example.

The Enablement – The Spirit and His Gifts

"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."
(1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

We just recently saw this in Romans 12, so I won't spend a lot of time here. God has enabled his people to serve one another with spiritual gifts intended to build up the body of Christ. God's gifts are his enablements. Every Christian is called to serve, and every Christian is enabled by the Holy Spirit to serve others for the common good. What is your role here? What is your gift?

¹ Winston Churchill as quoted by Martin Gilbert, *Continue to Pester, Nag and Bite: Churchill's War Leadership* (Toronto: Random House, 2010), page unknown.

The Expression – Humble and Happy

It's humble in that kingdom service is not self-advancing. It's not like James and John. Happy as is appropriate for serving King Jesus. The Psalmist urges us to "*serve the LORD with gladness!*" (Psalm 100:2) Working for money can be a drag. Working for Jesus must be a joy. That it is not to say it is easy and faithful long-term ministry requires grit. During this pandemic I've been pastoring much on the grit side of things. But when God's people are humble and happy, incredible ministry can happen.

I remember years ago a new member of our church said to me, *You know that thing that needs to be done and you are embarrassed to ask anyone? Give it to me. I want to do it.* That stuck with me because it captures the heart of serving King Jesus. *What wouldn't I be willing to do for Christ?* Often, we experience the opposite when people join our church and expect to immediately be platformed or move into leadership or eldership. No. The way we know you can handle the platform or the leadership role is that you show you are willing to be faithful in the low task.

David served sheep long before he was king. We easily skip Moses' 40 years in the desert. Even Jesus waited until he was 30 years old before displaying his glory. There is a great scene in the *Chronicles of Narnia* where Aslan informs Prince Caspian he is going to be made king. Caspian says, "I don't think I'm ready." Aslan says, "It's for that very reason I know you are."²

What I take this to mean is that the greatest Christians in our church probably aren't on the platform or in the spotlights, senior pastor included. The greatest Christians in our church are the ones whose hearts are humbled under the gospel and whose attitude is one of happy service wherever they can to whomever they can.

I think of servants in our church like Joe and Donna Heuer whose lives were taken by COVID-19 this year. Year after year they helped organize the National Day of Prayer service at the courthouse in Crown Point. They did that for a couple decades. They faithfully served in our hospitality ministry. Very kingdom-minded people. I think of old Ruth Kennedy who is with Jesus now. Her ministry was the bulletin boards in the old church building. She carefully decorated and kept the calendars for the church up-to-date. It was her ministry and she took it very seriously. That doesn't impress you? Too humble a role? Bulletin boards. We don't even do bulletin boards anymore, but we do admire the humble, happy service of King Jesus.

I remember a member whose ministry each week was to bring breath mints for the pastors. Every week there he was with a roll. Why he thought we needed them more than other members, only our dentists know. That was his thing. Rod and Paulette Cable brought our equipment trailer to Merrillville High School for 72 straight Sundays so we could set up church in 1999. I still remember. How about our faithful funeral luncheon crew who have made more JELL-O mold salads than they care to remember just to serve families in their grief? Or dear Martha Koves serving for 30 years in our children's ministry. Engineer Jeff Warren rocking babies in the nursery for 25 years. Not to mention similar faithfulness by Kim Glenn, Debbie Willison, Joy Morales, and Janet Thompson.

² J. E. Bright, *Prince Caspian: Fight for the Throne* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 60.

Some of you might be new here. Let me make something clear: the engine of Bethel Church is the proclaimed Word of God, but the wheels, transmission, gas, and everything else is the faithful serving, giving, praying, and sweating of the people of this church. Today, we say thank you! Perhaps we should have had Culver's for the adults instead of the kids today!

The Effect – Glory to God

"In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16)

Listless, lifeless, joyless service of Jesus demeans the King. But when we follow his example, serve with his enablement, humbly and happily express it, the effect is that God is glorified.

Must we? yes, we must serve the King. But serving Jesus is much more than a duty; it is a delight and it must be a delight.

Imagine at our outdoor service today, our neighbors can look out their windows and see for the first time the way we go about things. If they look out and see people dragging their feet, moping around, they might wonder, *is that a church or a funeral home? They don't seem into it at all. I knew it, there's nothing to their Christianity.*

But if they peek out their windows and it looks like ants at a picnic where there's energy. Passion. Vibrancy... *These people care a lot about this. What's got them so fired up? What are they about over there? I'm curious.*

"Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 5:16) If someone observed your service for King Jesus, is there enough light emitting from you to lead them to glorify God? I'm not asking what you're doing, or what you used to do. I'm asking how are you doing it? Some people say, *I'm not wired that way.* Yet I see you on Facebook and you've got plenty of energy for the Cubs or gardening club or some other silly thing. Meanwhile, the King of kings bids you to serve him, to bring him pleasure, to bring him glory. Give him your best and most faithful effort and serve him with gladness.

Let me end with how Jesus ended, *"and [gave] his life as a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20:28) Jesus gives the ultimate example of servanthood which is his own death for us on the cross. "Ransom" speaks to the redemption price of his own blood. In the words of the old song,

*"He gave his life, what more could he give?
Oh, how He loves you;
Oh, how He loves me;
Oh, how He loves you and me."³*

Let's be a church filled with humble and happy servants who are not here to be served, but to serve, like Jesus our King served us.

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³ Kurt Kaiser, 1975 Word Music, LLC (a div. of Word Music Group, Inc.)

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