

BaptistWay Press® Adult Online Bible Commentary

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Studies in 14 Habits of Highly Effective Disciples

Lesson Ten **Service**

Focal Text

Mark 10:35-45; John 13:12-16; James 2:14-17

Background

Mark 10:35-45; John 13:12-16; James 2:14-17

Main Idea

Disciples follow Jesus' example of serving others.

Question to Explore

How am I following Jesus' example of serving others?

Quick Read

Jesus taught his disciples that being a servant was the most important thing any Christian could do. Jesus modeled sacrificial service and calls us to follow his example.

Introduction

Calvin Miller once told me that as he processed in cap and gown across the stage of his seminary graduation, the president took his hand, leaned in and said, "I have no doubt you will succeed in life, but I wonder who you will be when you do." This is a good question. What is our great goal in life? According to research collected by Pew Research for the MacNeil/Lehrer Productions' *Generation Next* project, eighteen-to-twenty-five-year-olds listed the following as their life goal:

- Be rich—81 percent

- Be famous—51 percent
- Help people who need help—30 percent
- Be leaders in their community—22 percent
- Become more spiritual—10 percent

All of us have some ambition for greatness and some definition of what that might look like.¹

I remember when I was invited to join the Baylor Board of Regents the first time. I sat next to one of my heroes at the first meeting. In this august group, a distinguished pastor and mentor sat next to me. Before us were pitchers of crystal clear water and cups. I joked about sitting at his right hand and then, in a moment of feigned awe I said to him, “May I serve you a cup of water in Jesus’ name?” Nonplussed, he joked in a whisper, “Sure. That is why you are here. You young guys don’t know anything, but you are here to serve those of us who do.”

Then taking a deep drink from the cup, he smiled and said, “And someday you might be great.” Seizing the moment I whispered back, “But I don’t want to be great. I want to be just like you.” We laughed for a moment and he said I was more like him than I realized.

Jesus took his disciples’ ongoing argument about greatness very seriously. Some of the disciples had come from the fishing boats, one from collecting taxes, and one was a revolutionary. But at the end of the day they asked, “How can I become the greatest?”

Jesus’ answer is counterintuitive, and transformational, even after 2,000 years. Both Mark and John give us examples of Jesus’ teaching about servanthood. Later in the Bible, (though perhaps not later chronologically) Jesus’ brother James also taught about the importance of faith-confirming works in his letter to the churches.

Commentary

Greatness through Service (Mark 10:35-45)

After three years, Jesus’ disciples had not arrived in their transformation and sanctification. Like many Christians today, they lived their lives about the same way that those who rejected Christ did. They wanted to be great and thought that greatness was found in ruling over others. But Jesus showed them a different way: he taught them that greatness lies in service.

How do we feel about being servants? I remember one time my dad invited me to go with my older brothers to work with them at our family car business on a Saturday. I was so excited, and then my older brother Dan put it in perspective for me. He said, “Look Duane – Dad is the man and I am his assistant. You are my assistant. That makes you an assistant’s assistant.” It was a sobering assessment of my situation.

Are we servants? We will know whether we are servants by the way we respond to others who treat us like servants. If we are going to live the way Jesus lived we will have to serve. When we serve we find the greatness that Jesus wants for us as his disciples.

There are two ways to achieve greatness in our world: one is the way of Machiavelli, who advised the real Borgias in the Middle Ages. He said, "Might makes right," and the "end justifies the means."² A common saying in our culture is, "It is easier to get forgiveness than permission." Jesus, on the other hand was headed for the cross, serving humankind, and choosing to be the least. His way is the way of the gospel. Christ's call to serve helps us to examine not only what we do, but why we do it. As we serve each other we are serving Christ!

***We Could Become Great in Our own Eyes in the World's Way by Serving Ourselves!
(Mark 10:31b-37, 41-42)***

Jesus has just been talking about the cross. In fact three times he tells his disciples he is going to the cross and three times he invites them to follow his example of serving (Mark 8:31/8:34-9:1; 9:31/9:33-37; 10:32-34/10:38-45). Amazingly, while Jesus is preparing to die, James and John are conniving to become greatest among the disciples. They approached Jesus with an interesting request. "We want you to do for us whatever we ask of you."

Immature disciples want what we want when we want it. It reminds me of children who say to parents, "Just say 'yes.'" Parents say, "To what?" Our kids respond, "First, promise you will say yes." Do your parents work that way? Mine did not. Not many parents work that way.

Ashleigh Brilliant, that odd vestige of the seventies who scribbled his offbeat humor on hippie postcards, once penned: "All I ask of life is a constant and exaggerated sense of my own importance."

Matthew 20:20-28 tells us James and John even brought their mom to make the request. By some accounts, this may well have been Jesus' aunt.³ Are you able to say 'no' to your aunt? One of my aunts made the suit I wore to graduation and to my speech meets. To this day, I can't think of anything that she would ask that I wouldn't do. Another aunt sent the Bible that I started to read before God called me to preach. Clearly James and John were pulling out all the stops to force Jesus' hand.

What did James and John really want? "We want you to put us at your right and your left when you come in your glory." The positions at right and left of a king were honored positions filled by his most trusted family members or advisors. By all accounts the disciples had been arguing over who was the best, the greatest. James and John were already in the inner circle of three who saw the Transfiguration. They knew they were in the top three in some order, but that was not enough for them. They wanted to be

numbers one and two. Most likely they were trying to edge Peter out and take their places in front of him.

I *want* to tell you I would not do that. But I'm not so sure about myself in that regard. We can even serve ourselves under the guise of serving the Lord. David Brooks wrote about the famous baseball player Alex Rodriguez,

Self-preoccupied people have trouble seeing that their [talents] come from outside themselves and can only be developed when directed toward something else outside themselves. Enclosed in self, they come to believe that their talents come from self, and are for [themselves] ... Locked in a cycle of insecurity and self-validation, their talents are never enough, and they end up devouring what they have been given.⁴

At the end of the day we have to get over ourselves in order to serve others.

Jesus patiently asked James and John, "Can you drink the cup I drink and be baptized with my baptism?" Jesus is asking them if they are willing to die. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who gave his life as a martyr in World War II wrote, "When Christ calls a person to follow him, he bids him come and die." They gave the right answer. "We can." Indeed, Jesus asserts, they will have their chance. Not long afterward, Jesus was arrested and they ran. Jesus' words were fulfilled when James became the first martyr among the apostles (Acts 12:1-2).

We Could Become Great in God's Eyes by Serving God and His People (Mark 10:41-45)

All of this made the other ten apostles angry. Were they angry because James and John wanted to be great? Or did they wish they had asked before James and John? This may well be the backdrop for Peter promising, "Even if all fall away, I will not" (Mark 14:29). His bravado may have been rooted in his jealousy. Perhaps Judas was also stirred at this moment to betray Jesus.

At this point Jesus called a team meeting of the apostles and spelled it out. There are basically two ways to live: the way of the world and the way of the Word! The disciples knew that the Gentile rulers "Lord it over" and exercised authority over their subjects. Isn't this still the pattern for many political and business leaders in the world?

Years ago I heard Leith Anderson talk about an unusual bike race in India. The race was a timed race. Whoever went the shortest distance in an hour staying on their pedals the whole time won the race. It sounds counterintuitive, doesn't it? Just imagine if we were in that race but didn't know the rules. We might take off and leave everybody behind, thinking, "Wow, I am killing it. No one will catch me." Meanwhile an hour later the winner would be crowned near the start line.

The kingdom of God is counterintuitive. All of our lives we have observed people stepping on others to get ahead. We have heard it is good to be served. Now in the great Luby's line of life, Jesus tells us to put on aprons and ask, "May I serve you today?"

Greatness finally resides in servanthood. Mark used the word *diakonia* which means "through the dust." The servant kicks up dust waiting on tables. The one who wants to be first, needs to be slave of all. Jesus literally wanted them to serve each other.

Some years ago I was pitching a baseball to my seventh grade son on a large baseball diamond so that he could practice hitting. The downside, of course, was the need to stop and collect the baseballs sprayed all over the outfield. Just then, the high school quarterback, a member of our church came jogging by. He asked me if he could shag the fly balls and throw them in. Why would a high school quarterback do the hard work of catching fly balls? As I helped with his wedding recently I was reminded that he is a dedicated follower of Jesus Christ.

Who washes feet? Latin American theologian Rene Padilla remembered vividly one of his early encounters with pastor and theologian John R.W. Stott. On the previous night they had arrived in Bariloche, Argentina, in the middle of a heavy rain. The street was muddy and, as a result, by the time we got to the room that had been assigned to us, our shoes were covered with mud.

In the morning, as I woke up, I heard the sound of a brush—John was busy, brushing my shoes. "John!", I exclaimed full of surprise, "What are you doing?" "My dear René," he responded, "Jesus taught us to wash each other's feet. You do not need me to wash your feet, but I can brush your shoes."⁵

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."⁶

There is no way to become truly great as a Christian apart from a willingness to serve others. And why would we do it? Because we are followers of the one who did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. What did Jesus mean? Christians were sold into slavery to sin. Jesus paid the ransom to set us free from our captivity.

Remember when Jesus died there were men on his right and left. When we are willing to join him on the cross, we will make a difference in the world. We are assistant's assistants. We have been selected as servants of a Servant! The good news is we are servants of the greatest Servant of all – Jesus Christ, who now reigns as Sovereign over the universe.

Improving Our Serve (John 13)

Jesus practiced what he preached. On the night before his crucifixion, his disciples were still debating over who would be the greatest. So Jesus gave them an object lesson by washing their feet. Then he told them to do the same for each other.

The Motive for Serving (John 13:1-4)

We serve because we are secure in God's love. More than any other Gospel, John shows us all that Jesus *knew*. John 1:47-48 tells us that he *knew* Nathaniel under the tree. John 6:13 tells us that he *knew* he was going to multiply the fish and loaves.

Here we see that Jesus knew three things: First, He *knew* the time in God's plan and purpose. "The hour has come . . ." Jesus lived life on G.S.T.: God's Standard Time. He lived his life according to God's timetable for him. In chapter 2 he said to his mom, "My hour has not yet come;" In John 12:23, the hour has come. In Matthew 26:18 he said, "The appointed time has come."

Second, Jesus *knew* he was guarded by God's power (John 13:3). Jesus well understood that he was going to be betrayed (v. 2, vv. 10-11). He *knew* all this and v. 4 says, "So, he served . . ." He served not because he was powerless, but because he was powerful. One of our misconceptions about servants is that they are just too weak to do anything else. The lesson of Jesus' knowledge is important. The things which he *knew*, led him to *do*!

A few years ago, a good friend of mine left the corporate world to become a volunteer church administrator in a small mission church. I asked him one time, "What do you do there?" He said, "I do the same thing your church administrator does." I said, "No you don't. What do you do?"

He said, "Every Saturday night, I set up the chairs in the school gym, and every Sunday afternoon, I take them down." He used to pay people to pay people to do that kind of work, but by taking down those chairs, he demonstrates to the whole congregation what it means to serve.

At St. Bede's Episcopal church in Santa Fe, New Mexico there is a hand-lettered sign that hangs over the only door into the sanctuary and it reads: SERVANT'S ENTRANCE. There isn't any way in or out of that church except through the service door. Jesus says in v. 17, "Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them." He had already said in 12:26, "Whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me."

Third, Jesus *knew* who would betray him (13:11). Can we believe Jesus washed the feet of the man who sold him to the chief priests and Pharisees? Jesus lived what he believed.

The Method of Servanthood (John 13:12-17)

Servants absolutely abdicate their rights! If anybody had a right to be served it was Jesus. He was the Son of God. Yet he said, "I did not come to be served, but to serve and to give

my life as a ransom . . .” Listen to the description of his power: He knew how strong he was, yet he laid down his outer garments and assumed the role and the attire of a slave.

So Jesus the Lord and Master (13:13;16) voluntarily and volitionally laid down his rights in order to care for the disciples he loved. As his followers, they too, would have to lay down their rights. Jesus knew Pentecost was coming and how greatly God would use Peter, so he washed his feet as a reminder of how important it is to serve.

Peter may have had difficulty with being served because he had a hard time serving (13:8). In fact on a trip to Israel in 2000 we participated in a simulation of the Last Supper, and the insights were magnificent. The way the meal is described in 13:22-27, I envisioned John at the head of the table, Jesus beside him, and Judas Iscariot as the guest of honor. This would have placed Peter who desperately wanted to be first, in the position of the servant. There he could get John’s attention (vv. 22-24) and there he would be the last to have his feet washed. Peter was in the natural position to wash their feet, but refrained, so Jesus washed their feet.

This may seem like a meaningless exercise to us, but having been over there, I have to tell you how important it is. Dirt abounds in the Holy Land. In a world where there was little pavement, Jesus and his disciples must have had dirty feet. The slave or servant would wash the feet, but somebody fell down on the job. So Jesus assumed that role. He laid down his rights to show his disciples that they could do the same.

The Meaning of Servanthood: Servants appraise the value of others’ lives more highly than they value their own (John 13:34-35)

What does Jesus’ washing of their feet mean? The key is found in v. 1, when it says, “Having loved his own who were in the world, he now showed them the full extent of his love.” The literal rendering might be, “He loved them to the end” or he showed them how far love really goes. The disciples’ greatest concern at that moment was personal greatness but their greatest need was to love each other.

Jesus was trying to teach them that true love is manifested in servanthood. Later, he says, “By this will all men know you are my disciples, if you love one another” (13:35). Jesus loved them so much, he wouldn’t settle for less than their greatest and highest need.

If you think this moved them, then consider what the rest of the evening did. This was just a parable of what he was about to do when he laid down his life for them. We remember that Judas Iscariot was at the dinner. Jesus washed the feet of the man who would betray him. Is there anybody we would refuse to serve?

In his book, *Conspiracy of Kindness*, Steve Sjogren tells about how his church led a revolution in their city by serving people. They washed people's cars for free and would not accept a love offering. They went to downtown Cincinnati and found cars that were at parking meters that had expired or were about to expire. They fed the meter and left a

note, "While you were gone, we fed your parking meter to show you God's love in a practical way. If there is anything further we can help you with, please call us at 671-0422."

One woman who benefited from this act of service called the AM Talk Radio station and asked, "What kind of people do this for other people?" They go into laundromats and meet the people coming in, by putting quarters in the machines and saying, "Hot water or cold?" When the person responds, they explain, "We are a group of Christians doing a community service project to show God's love in a practical way. We want to pay for your wash this morning to demonstrate God's love to you."⁷

When you go to the airport do you ever have your shoes shined? I am usually in a hurry, but occasionally I stop. It feels good. You get up on a high chair that resembles a throne for all to see. Then somebody washes the dust and waxes the wear off of your shoes. Brennan Manning had his shoes shined one day by a man and then, when he paid, he tipped him and said, "Now it is your turn. You get in the chair." Then Brennan Manning shined the shoes of the shoe shine man. The man wept.⁸

Who shines shoes at your place of business? How can you serve them today? Servanthood is still the only path to greatness. And Jesus did more than wash feet, he went to the cross and gave his life as a ransom for many.

Faith Works (James 2:14-17)

James provides the most succinct summary of putting faith into action. Faith works. At least, authentic faith does. James poses two questions: "What good is it my brothers if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him?" (James 2:14). In other words, once we are saved by faith, what role do our works play in salvation? For example if a Christian brother or sister is without clothing and in need of food and someone speaks the right words but offers no help, what good would that do? The obvious answer is no good at all.

In Paul's letter to the Ephesians he argues extensively and effectively for the concept of salvation by faith alone, "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Thankfully Paul does not stop there, but adds that we are "...God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." We do well to emphasize that our works do not save us. We are saved by faith alone. Perhaps James would agree and add, "We are saved by faith alone, *but not by faith that is alone*. Faith without works is dead. Real faith works." What are we doing to demonstrate that our faith is alive?

Conclusion

In my work with universities, I get to meet some of the most amazing students. Some of my former students have joined us on staff at Tallowood. Many serve Christ in other places.

Recently, at a graduation dinner I heard a young woman named Jolene Damoiseaux tell her story. She said in her orientation at Baylor they challenged her to get lost in something bigger than herself. As part of her pre-med program she studied the problem of maternal mortality.

In Kenya, 360 out of every 100,000 pregnancies end in the mother's death because of complications in labor. That is a multiple of thirty-six times the risk compared to pregnant women in the United States. Often the Kenyan women die from readily treatable illnesses and infection. Jolene wondered why.

Later she visited Kenya on a mission trip and interviewed ninety of the moms, sitting in the lush grass or in a mud hut in a rainstorm with water dripping through the roof. What she learned was that the moms in the villages would love to have their babies in the hospitals, but they cannot get there. For them, it would mean, in some instances, walking three miles to the clinic after labor begins, with one child on their backs, three others in tow, and the food to survive balanced on her head. Many choose to have a home birth or use a midwife instead of making the treacherous journey while in the throes of labor.

Damoiseaux started "Mothers on the Move" after receiving a \$1,500 grant from the Baylor Interdisciplinary Poverty Initiative. When one of the women goes into labor, she can call a designated hotline for the "Mothers on the Move" program, and a local representative will arrange for a motorbike taxi to take her to the Sigoti Health Center. The health center covers the cost of the ride, which is about \$5, and is reimbursed by "Mothers on the Move." The program also covers a \$10 car ride from the health center to a regional hospital for mothers who must have a C-section or face other labor complications.

I found myself thinking that night: this is greatness! It will not show up on the stock market. She will not land in an athletic hall of fame. But her life is making a difference. This is just one example. There are lots of ways to make a difference. Faith without works is dead.

Real faith works.

So let's put our faith to work today by serving others in Jesus' name.

Meet the Writer: Dr. Duane Brooks

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Duane was called to preach while in middle school in Germany and ordained in Great Falls, Montana. He has served as pastor in four Texas Baptist churches - New Hope Baptist Church in Cedar Park, Williams Creek Baptist Church in Mart, and Pleasant Grove Baptist Church in Rosebud. Duane and his wife, Melanie, have two sons, Graham and Chase, and a daughter, Casey.

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¹ www.gseis.ucla.edu. (2005) www.pewresearch.org. (1-9-07)
<http://www.nextgenerationproject.org/>.

² Niccolo Machiavelli, *The Prince*, translated by N.H. Thomson. Vol. XXXVI, Part 1. The Harvard Classics (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14; Bartleby.com, 2001. www.bartleby.com/36/1/. [accessed July 9, 2014].

³If we do the math looking at the names of the women who went to prepare Jesus' body after his death, it appears that Salome may be Mary's sister and the mother of the sons of Zebedee.

⁴ http://www.nytimes.com/2013/08/06/opinion/brooks-the-a-rod-problem.html?_r=0. Accessed 7/10/2014.

⁵ Christopher J. H Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple: Recollections of John Stott's Life and Ministry* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 140-141.

⁶ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.:* Second Edition. (New York: Newmarket Press, 2008), 17.

⁷ Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness: A Unique Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2007), 43-44, 169.

⁸Brennan Manning, *The Relentless Tenderness of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2004), 129-130.