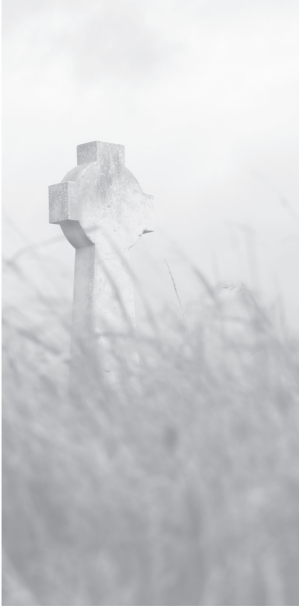
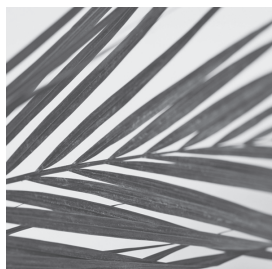


Chapter 2



Lead by Serving



Lead by Serving

Scripture

Luke 22:24–30 Jesus encourages the disciples to follow his lead and serve others rather than enjoying any other advantages.

Prayer

Gracious God, the world encourages us to enjoy all of the advantages that privilege brings our way, yet Jesus tells us that the servant is greatest among us. Forgive us for not putting the needs of others before our own. Transform us by your Spirit into the people you want us to be. Bend our wills and shape our dreams that we would look more and more like you. In Christ's name. Amen.

Introduction

"Membership has its privileges" was one of the more memorable advertising taglines in the 1980s and 1990s. Having access to an American Express credit card was pitched as the way to take advantage of the privileges that come from entrance into an exclusive club. Of course, all of those privileges accrued to the member and not to anyone else. If you are impressive enough to get into the club, why should anyone else benefit?

In Luke 22:24–30, Jesus answers the question "Why should anyone else benefit?" Any benefits we gain because we are impressive, or talented, or great, are to be shared with others, because "the greatest among [us] must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (v. 26).

In Mark and Matthew, Jesus says that if we want to be great, we must become a servant. However, in Luke, Jesus states flatly that the most impressive person must become a servant. In other words, people that society already considers great, impressive, privileged, or powerful must become servants not in order to be great but because



these and any other advantages are used most faithfully to serve others. In Jesus' eyes, the strong serve the weak, and the wise serve the simple.

It's a hard idea to take in, both then and now. The disciples struggled; we see that struggle when they discuss which of them is to be regarded as the greatest just after Jesus announces his suffering at the Last Supper. Jesus' response reminds them again of the crossbound ethics of the table—that the great are to use their privilege as a means to serve.

The first time I served communion as an ordained pastor, I dropped a plate of bread. Before I could recover from my embarrassment, an elder was on his hands and knees cleaning up my mess. The man on his knees was a philanthropist, a man of faith who quietly donated millions to local nonprofit organizations. He was great by any societal standards. In that moment, and in most others, he humbled himself and served.

Jesus' Greatness: Service

Of course, Jesus is the best example of someone great who is among us as one who serves. In Luke 4:1–13, the devil offers Jesus the glory of all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus passes up the advantage in order to be faithful to the command “Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him” (v. 8). When Jesus appears at the Nazareth synagogue, he announces that he has come to “bring good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free” (Luke 4:18–19). The Spirit of the Lord comes upon Jesus not to confer privilege but to empower service to people who are poor, imprisoned, blind, and oppressed.

Jesus uses his miraculous powers of healing to cure people from unclean spirits and demons (Luke 4:31–37; 8:26–40; 9:37–43; 11:14–26), fevers (4:38–39), leprosy (5:12–15; 17:11–19), paralysis (5:17–26), hemorrhages (8:43–48), crippled spines (13:10–17), dropsy



(14:1–6), blindness (18:35–43), a sliced-off ear (22:47–53), and even deathbed illnesses (7:1–10; 8:40–42, 49–56). Yet, when he himself is beaten (22:63), flogged (implied in 23:16, 22), and crucified (23:36–46), Jesus does not use those same miraculous powers to heal himself. Jesus does not benefit from his own miraculous healing ministry but uses that ministry to serve and benefit others.

The crossbound approach to ministry accelerates during the final week of Jesus’ pre-resurrection life. Step by step, he seeks to serve others rather than himself, demonstrating that he is, indeed, “among [us] as one who serves” (Luke 22:27).

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul sums up Jesus’ crossbound impulse to counterbalance greatness with service in the so-called Christ hymn (Philippians 2:6–11). Verses 6–8 remind us that Jesus

did not regard equality with God
as something to be exploited,
but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Jesus did not remain tucked away in heaven, safe and sound from all the messiness of earth. Instead, he gave up his privilege and divine glory and came among us humans to serve us, even though that service bound him to the cross in death.

The Greek word for Jesus’ decision to empty himself (Philippians 2:7) is *kenosis*. Morna D. Hooker explains that the phrase (translated in the NRSV as “emptied himself” and in the NIV as “made himself



nothing”) is used by Paul elsewhere to mean “to nullify.” As Hooker puts it, *kenosis* “was probably used to stress the contrast between the possibility Christ rejected, of claiming what was rightfully his, and his abandonment of his privileges.”² Throughout his life, Jesus decides again and again to embody *kenosis*: resisting the devil’s temptations to offer him glory, healing others but not himself, identifying with the poor and powerless of society, even forgiving those who seemingly deserve his condemnation. All of these actions show us that he is among us as one who serves.

Turning Our Advantages over to Service

Paul introduces the Christ Hymn with these words: “Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). In other words, have the same willingness to empty yourself as Jesus. In Jesus’ own words, “The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves” (Luke 22:26). We do not join Christ’s crossbound journey hoping that we will gain some advantage for ourselves. Instead, we empty ourselves and put others before ourselves. Doing so, we follow Jesus, who having given away his power, is among us as one who serves.

Jesus cautions us not to be like those who give in order to gain some kind of benefit. Instead, he challenges us to join him in service to the world. What might this look like for us? It means using the advantages we might experience ourselves for the goodness of others. Certainly the use of our money comes into play: How can we share what God has given us with others who have less, rather than simply taking nicer vacations, buying nicer cars, or eating out at increasingly more expensive restaurants? We might consider a graduated tithe, where we give a growing percentage of any raise we receive back to God. (For example, if you already tithe or give 10 percent of your income back to God, you might give 20 percent of the amount of your next raise.)



Living as one who serves means working toward reconciliation—putting others before ourselves by asking forgiveness when necessary, rather than letting pride get in the way. It means extending grace even when we still hurt and those who hurt us have not asked for our forgiveness. E. L. Worthington and colleagues at Virginia Commonwealth University have distinguished between decisional and emotional forgiveness. *Decisional forgiveness* means that the person who was wronged decides not to take any retaliatory action to hurt the offender. *Emotional forgiveness*, which often comes later, means that the one hurt actually feels as if he or she has forgiven the offender in that the injured person no longer experiences anger, frustration, or hatred.³ Emptying ourselves of these emotions is one way to experience *kenosis*.

The turn toward the crossbound life to which Paul and Jesus invite us does not apply only to us as individuals, however. It also applies to churches, which do not always use the prominence or power they have in order to serve the community instead of their own members. I served a church in central Illinois that for decades had been an establishment, “country club” church. The pastor who preceded me, however, took the revolutionary, crossbound step of offering the church as a home for the city’s homeless services. As I met long-time residents of the town who did not attend the church, many told me how differently they thought about the congregation after the Compassion Center was opened. Using its great resources to serve instead of throwing its weight around, the church witnessed to the community about the crossbound life as it strove to follow Christ as one who serves.



A Crossbound Kingdom

After his cautions about the need to serve (Luke 22:24–27), Jesus moves on to a promise: “I confer on you . . . a kingdom, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom” (v. 28). Since the disciples had just finished arguing (v. 24) about which of them would be the greatest, this probably sounded promising to them. Sure, Jesus has corrected their desire for recognition with a call to service, but now he’s conferring on them a kingdom. Sitting on thrones and ruling over the twelve tribes of Israel (v. 30) must have been enticing. What’s a little self-emptying service if it results in their receiving a kingdom?

If that thought is going through their minds, however, they are missing the point once again. The kingdom over which Jesus rules is not a kingdom of power; it’s one of self-denial. It’s a kenotic kingdom where the greatest becomes like the youngest, and the leader is one who serves—a crossbound kingdom where those with benefits and advantages use them for others rather than for their own benefit.

This is the kingdom conferred upon the disciples and upon us. It is a promise that we will finally, once and for all, embody in the service we were created to offer to others rather than the self-promotion that has been our hallmark since the fall. The kingdom God confers on Jesus and on us is a counter-cultural expression where the first are last, and the last are first.

With Jesus’ death and resurrection, the kingdom has been inaugurated, but it is not yet fully represented on earth. In the time of now-and-not-yet, we wait for Christ’s return, when our desire to reap the privileges of all of our advantages will be transformed by the crossbound kingdom embodied by Jesus’ life and death.

While we wait, we get glimpses of God’s realm. On a bike ride recently, one of my tires got a flat. What’s more, it was raining. As I pushed my bike through a desolate part of town, a man named



Charlie pedaled up. Pulling a kit and pump out of his pack, he quickly fixed the flat. Not nearly handy enough to help him in any way, I made conversation while he worked.

Charlie was biking through town on his way north. He was homeless and slept most nights underneath a restaurant on the river. When he finished with my tire, he sent me on my way without asking for anything in return—other than for me to be careful. “I don’t want you to be out in this part of town after dark,” he said. “It’s not very safe, and I’d hate for something to happen to you.”

Charlie’s great mechanical ability was just what I needed. He used greatness to be one who serves, gaining no benefit for himself. The benefit he gave me, though, was the chance to see the crossbound kingdom that Christ has conferred on him.

Conclusion and Transition

The disciples heard Jesus speak of his suffering and watched him break the bread and pour the cup at the Last Supper, yet their next action was to argue about which one of them was the greatest. Jesus reframes their perspective, calling them to be servants who reflect a crossbound kingdom.

It’s a promise and a challenge, and the disciples struggle to maintain this focus. In the next chapter, we will look at whether Peter is able to keep others’ needs prominent above his own or if he is more interested in serving his own best interests.

Spiritual Practice

Practice humility and service by looking for ways to honor others above yourself. How can you draw attention away from yourself as you serve your friends, family, and strangers? How can you use the advantages and privileges that you enjoy to benefit others rather than yourself?