

**BIBLE PASSAGE AND READING FOR MARCH 6, 2024**  
**SERVING**

**BIBLE PASSAGE**

Philippians 2:1-11

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. 5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. What TRUTHS do I need to BELIEVE about God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), myself, or the world?
2. What SINS do I need to REPENT of doing or seek to avoid?
3. What ACTIONS will I take to OBEY the truths I have observed or learned?

## **UPSIDE-DOWN POWER (SERVING)** by Albert Shim

This week we take a look at our inborn impulse for status, greatness, and power. Now while the word power may conjure up images of politicians and CEOs, the problem of power is much more pedestrian and thereby insidious, for at its heart are the more basic questions: Do you feel superior to others? Do you compare yourself with others and seek a privileged status over them in your mind? Is there ever a task that you feel is beneath you? The regularity and humility with which we serve others will reveal our answers to those questions. It is the disciplined cultivation of a life of service that is our surest weapon against the pride that relentlessly seeks to define ourselves over-against and above others.

### **Greatness Redefined**

God surely knows how deeply ingrained this impulse for greatness is because it seems to surface over and over again in the life of Jesus with his disciples. Luke 9:46 records, “An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.” Time passes. Then again we read, “A dispute also arose among them, as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest” (Luke 22:24). It would be comical just how dense the disciples are, were it not equally true of us. Interestingly, Jesus’ answer to his disciples’ pursuit is not to dissuade them from seeking greatness. Rather, he sets about to redefine greatness. It’s not, “Squelch your ambition;” it’s “Change what you are ambitious for! Seek greatness! And seek it with all of your heart! Just seek it on my terms.” What then are his terms?

It was on the road to Jerusalem and in the shadow of the impending cross that we find the disciples again bickering about greatness. In fact, in Mark’s record Jesus has just finished saying that he will be mocked, spit upon, flogged, and killed (Mark 10:33–34) when James and John infamously request: “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory” (10:37). Upon hearing about their request, the other disciples become “indignant.” Perhaps they were upset because they were beaten to the punch! I believe we are meant to feel and hear the dissonance of this clamor for greatness as the cross looms. But it is in the midst of this fray that Jesus declares, “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” (10:43–45). Greatness is redefined as service and our model is the Lord Jesus himself.

### **The Radical Nature of Service**

In reflecting on Jesus’ call to greatness, we must be careful not to de-radicalize the nature of service. To become a servant, although never less, is not equivalent to occasional acts of service. Ours is not a call to the momentary mortification of our pride or to the measured sacrifices of our time and energies. Such a truncated understanding of service may well lead to what Richard Foster refers to as self-righteous service that: “enjoys serving, especially when the service is titanic,” “to make impressive gains on ecclesiastical scoreboards,” that “needs to know that people see and appreciate the effort,” that discriminately “picks and chooses whom to serve” to gain an advantage, and that “puts others into its debt,” becoming “one of the most subtle and destructive forms of manipulation known.”<sup>1</sup> Self-righteous service is performed on our terms, for the benefit of our reputation, and with more regard for ourselves than the dignity and humanity of those we serve.

In contrast, the true and radical nature of service is a call not to simple, occasional acts, but to an entirely new and counter-cultural pattern of seeing and living. It is to indiscriminately count others more significant than ourselves and to habitually look to the interest of others until it becomes instinct (Phil. 2:3–4). It is to learn to count greatness not by how many people we exercise authority over or how many people know our names, but rather by our ability to see and respond to the dignity and humanity of all persons. It is to less and less define ourselves as over-against or superior to, or more important than others, and to more and more define ourselves as adopted children of God,

for whom the highest worldly distinction or status is no prize by comparison. It is relentlessly other-regarding, because our regard for ourselves is secure and complete in our identity in Christ. Thus for our purposes, let us define service as the joyful and sacrificial giving of the fullness of ourselves, in being and in deed, to affirm the worth, priority, and dignity of another.

### **The Relational Nature of Service**

Because the nature of service involves such a radical re-orienting of our perspective, we must see service as a call not primarily to do; it is a call to be that necessarily involves doing. Put another way, service belongs first to the category of relationships and not tasks, with the relationships having both vertical and horizontal dimensions.

The vertical dimension is best summarized by the apostle Paul: “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24). In every sense that matters, our service is a reflection of this relationship. It is unto God, with God as our only audience and with our status secure in Him. If this is true, then it’s easy to see why true service has difficulty distinguishing between small and large tasks. It explains why no task is beneath us. And it explains why true service thrives in hiddenness. God sees.

The horizontal dimension involves getting lower than the ones we serve. This is not just self-effacement for its own sake; it is the affirmation of the worth, priority, and dignity of the ones you serve. This is more difficult than it sounds. The trouble is never the performance of the task (i.e. washing the dishes for your roommate—again!); we may well be able to muster the sufficient goodwill to do it again. The trouble comes when there is no acknowledgement of our service and we are treated not like a thoughtful roommate, but—gasp!—as a servant, as one who was supposed to have done it anyway and as one who will be expected to do it again. This is the feel of being a servant. At the end of the day, you’ve only done your job.

### **The Discipline of Service**

So how do we get there? By faith, we must believe that we have indeed been united with Christ; there is then no greater honor or distinction to obtain and so we are free to be servants. The Holy Spirit who dwells within us is the only one who can effect this inner change to actually transform us into servants. And led by the Spirit, we must set about to intentionally cultivate a pattern of disciplined acts of service, remembering again that our efforts are not meritorious—there is nothing left for us to earn!

Thus, although the radical nature of service is never equivalent to acts of service, it is never less. Disciplined acts of service are the Holy Spirit enabled and empowered means by which he makes us servants; the acts themselves are not the end; Christ-like character is. The Spirit forms it within us through the steady, habitual re-directing of our energies, resources, and priorities away from ourselves and toward others in need. You may call these simple acts of service the training wheels whereby we learn to see others as better than ourselves, or perhaps the laboratory where we work out what we truly believe about greatness. However you conceive of them, remember that they are the place where the Holy Spirit makes us the servants we were created to be.

### **Service Hid in Christ**

When Jesus confronts the pride of his disciples and their desperate concern for status, he consistently draws their attention to himself. He isn’t so much concerned about transforming our view of ourselves and of others because it is right and virtuous and good. Neither does he establish a rule or law. The call and invitation is simply “follow me.” Be like me. Follow my example. Serve because I have served. And so, in the Upper Room, when Jesus laid aside his outer garment, took a towel, and tied it around his waist so he could perform the task reserved for the lowliest

servant, it was to be etched into their memory as an example of the radical call to serve one another: “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you” (John 13:14–15).

Our Lord was born in a manger, rode into Jerusalem on a donkey, washed dirt-caked feet, and hung on a Roman cross. Our call is to identify with that, and not with the prevailing attitudes of our day toward status and greatness. God wants us to have positions of honor and greatness, but on his terms, namely foot-washing and cross-bearing. Now these terms are not meant to be oppressive. To the contrary, they are the truest expressions of the deepest freedom that the gospel provides. It is simply madness to continue to heed the relentless call to be somebody—we are treasured children of the King! The constant demands of self-promotion and upward mobility? Where is up when we are seated “with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6)? Incidentally, there’s union again, in Christ Jesus. The Spirit of the servant Christ dwells in us and we are in him. And in self-sacrificing, other-affirming service, we actualize and live out the reality of this union. The heart of service is thus deep identification with him: “We are never more like Jesus than when we serve others.”<sup>2</sup> This is what power and greatness looks like.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. Was there anything from the reading that was particularly challenging or helpful for you?
2. In what specific and practical ways do you feel God may be calling you to serve?
3. Identify one person in your life whom you think God may be calling you to serve. In what specific ways can you sacrificially serve this person?
4. In what specific ways does the gospel free you to serve in the manner in which you’ve committed?

Notes:

1. Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 128–129.
2. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Servanthood*, 21.