**“Lead by Serving”**
**Godly Servant Leadership**
Following the pattern of Christ, we will put the needs of others
before our own and serve them with love and compassion.
**Matthew 20:25-28, Philippians 2:1-11**
**September 21, 2025**
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**Matthew 20: 25-28**

***25*** *Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.* ***26*** *Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,* ***27*** *and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—* ***28*** *just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

**Philippians 2:1-11**

*If, then, there is any comfort in Christ, any consolation from love, any partnership in the Spirit, any tender affection and sympathy,* ***2*** *make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.* ***3*** *Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.* ***4*** *Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.* ***5*** *Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,*

***6*** *who, though he existed in the form of God,*
*did not regard equality with God*
*as something to be grasped,*
***7*** *but emptied himself,*
*taking the form of a slave,*
*assuming human likeness.*
*And being found in appearance as a human,*
***8*** *he humbled himself*
*and became obedient to the point of death—*
*even death on a cross.*
***9*** *Therefore God exalted him even more highly*
*and gave him the name*
*that is above every other name,*
***10*** *so that at the name given to Jesus*
*every knee should bend,*
*in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*
***11*** *and every tongue should confess*

*that Jesus Christ is Lord,*
*to the glory of God the Father.*

**Introduction**

When a group of Americans visited Mother Teresa in Calcutta, they asked for some counsel to take home to their families. She gave some homey advice: "Husbands, smile at your wives; wives, smile at your husbands." Somewhat disappointed with the simplistic advice, one of them sarcastically asked, "Are you married?" Surprisingly, she replied, "Yes, I am, and I find it hard sometimes to smile at Jesus. He can be very demanding."

Jesus can be very demanding. He calls us to a way of life that is not only counter-cultural but that also goes against human nature. We might find the origin of our difficulty in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were intrigued with the idea of being like God, getting to choose for themselves what was right or wrong. John Macarthur once quipped, "Some people get so caught up in their own holiness that they look at the Trinity for a possible vacancy."[1]

Sometimes we get caught up in a desire for recognition. We want our efforts, our sacrifices, to be rewarded. This was certainly the case with James and John and their mother, who asks if her boys can be seated to Jesus' left and right in his coming kingdom. Maybe she was trying to get the word in to get their places ahead of Peter, the other one of the "Big Three" who Jesus regularly singled out for special opportunities, such as being with him on the Mount of Transfiguration.

"You don't know what you're asking for," Jesus says. You don't know how demanding the path is to receive that honor. So he asks, "Can you drink from the same cup?" Can you go through the kind of experiences I am about to face and endure to the end? For he knows it is the cross that lies before him.

Jesus then uses this as a teaching moment. They will know soon enough what it will mean to endure their own suffering. But leadership in his kingdom, one way we receive honor and recognition, works completely differently than the way leadership operates in human society. Because the way to go up requires that we go down. As John the Baptist said, "he must increase, but I must decrease."

**What We Have from Christ**

Paul will explain this further in his letter to the Philippians. The church in Philippi is dealing with some issues. Imagine that! There are some bumps along the road as they try to follow the call of God. And churches are made up of people, and any group of people is vulnerable to becoming myopic, at looking at things through their own lens and for their own purposes. But Paul will dare to tell them that the church is unlike any other organization. In fact, it is so

[1] *Source: John MacArthur, Leadership, Vol. 7, no. 2.*

different that the word organization isn't even the right one. It is an organism, elsewhere called the body of Christ, as the individuals are connected to Christ and through Christ are connected to one another. One of the things we teach the new elders every year is that on Session, you are not there to represent different issue groups within the congregation or fulfill your own agenda. You are called together to discern the will of Christ. And Christ can be very demanding.

But he also gives us everything we need for the work to which he calls us. Paul gives us a list of four elements at the beginning of chapter two. He introduces them with the conjunction "if," not to introduce a conditional clause that may or may not be true, but as a rhetorical device to emphasize that this is, of course, the case – if you have any of these things…But of course you do. Paul begins here because he wants us to understand that how he is calling us to live is not based on our efforts but on our connections, our connection with Christ and with his Spirit.

From these connections come these new realities we have received from Christ – encouragement and love and compassion - and they should then flow from our relationship with God into our relationships with each other. They really cannot be separated from each other, Paul is saying. John will put it this bluntly in 1 John 4:8: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

For Paul plays another relational card, his own relationship with these brothers and sisters in Christ. They have a connection with Christ, with his Spirit, and also with Paul. He has already said in 1:3-5:

> *I thank my God for every remembrance of you, **4** always in every one of my prayers for all of you, praying with joy **5** for your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

Now he appeals to them to make his joy complete and work hard to extend all these gifts from Christ and partnership with the Spirit into their relationships with each other.

It has been said that Christian living is a process. The process begins with our conscious decision to become reflections of Christ in our actions and reactions to life. Because there is a consciousness that must be brought to bear to our thoughts and our behavior. We choose what we reflect on, what we focus on. We must choose to "be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind."

You saw that word "mind" appear twice in this verse, which is a translation of the Greek word *phroneo.* But the Greek word has an additional nuance, combining the activity of the heart with the head. Paul's most dramatic use of the word will come in verse five, as we shall see. Now, I bet most of you have realized that we don't agree on everything. We don't agree on what color the carpet should be or the best worship schedule or how to use our space effectively. And it is so tempting to argue for our point of view or compete for what we see as limited resources.

But Paul calls us to a better way. A more difficult and demanding way, but the only way in which we can faithfully represent the values of the kingdom. He tells grown adults to do something

that we try to teach our children. Think of someone else's needs before you think of your own. In fact, beware of your motivations, for selfish ambition can overtake anyone. Instead, in humility, consider others as better than yourselves.
Humility was not a virtue in the Greek world. It was a sign of weakness. When Jesus tells his disciples not to lead like the Gentiles do, those with a little bit of power using it to bend others to their will, this would have been both recognized and experienced by them. And again, it is a temptation to which many are susceptible. It just seems to be the way of modern politics that when one party is in power, they wield it in such a way to go after their political enemies, who cry foul, but no sooner than they achieve power, then they resort to the same tactics.

How do we exercise power in God's kingdom? "Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others." And we do this by putting ourselves into the serving role. A rabbi was asked, "Why do we rarely see true servants today?" He replied, "Because nobody wishes to bow that low anymore." For serving one another is not usually our natural tendency. We are used to a world in which we work hard to have status and so we appreciate hierarchy when we are the ones who benefit from it. I've worked hard to get here, we may think. I deserve this honor and recognition. But there is another way. A more demanding way.

Dawson Trotman was the founder of Navigators, an organization that sent missionaries around the world who introduced thousands of people to Jesus Christ. Two of those missionaries were in Taiwan, where one had just come from a meeting with the man. "I will never forget Dawson Trotman," he said. "He was one of the most outstanding men I ever met." When asked what Dawson had said that impressed him so much, the missionary replied, "Oh, I don't remember anything he said."

"Well, what was so outstanding about him?"

"I'll never forget it," he said. "He shined my shoes." It turns out that Dawson Trotman loved doing things for people and found enjoyment in discovering little needs they had and then making it his objective to meet those needs.[2] No task was too menial.

Paul is concerned with establishing a healthy community and offering a different way for those who desire to be leaders to lead. But he will save his most compelling argument for verses 5-11. He will return to the *phroneo* or like-minded word by elaborating on how Christ's actions on our behalf should inform our actions with each other. We should have the same mind as Christ.

This Christ is the one who was in the very form of God but chose not to exploit that power and those attributes. Paul launches into a hymn that was either already known to his community or is one he created. Behind Paul's description of what Christ did as the "second Adam" is a contrast to what the first Adam did – he reached for power, whereas Christ gave it up. And what Christ did was the ultimate humiliation, because it was the farthest fall in cosmic history.

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[2] *Source: Doug Sparks, "Going Beyond Good Management," Discipleship Journal (Jan/Feb 1982)*

Genesis 1:27 tells us that human beings are made in the image of God, but Christ himself is the very ikon, the very representation of God. He *is* God, preexistent with the Father in heaven. There is no higher place to be. Elsewhere, Paul will talk about Christ being an agent through which God created the world, but what Christ is doing is not in view for him here. Neither is Paul's purpose to spell out exactly what powers Christ emptied himself of – that is left to the theologians to debate. Paul's main focus is that God descended to earth as a human being. But he didn't come as a king, he came as the least of the least, that of a *doulos*, or slave. But he doesn't even stop there, because he descends even further, to endure the most shameful death, reserved for the very worst kind of criminal, death on a cross. We are so used to the cross as a beautiful symbol of God's love for us that we forget that it was a feared and heinous image. Perhaps to get the shock value it would be like wearing an image of a plunger used to give a condemned criminal a lethal injection. The cross represented that, the way that prisoners, slaves, the worst of the worst were killed. The goal was for their death became an example, one for others to walk by, for the proud to mock, and the humble to shudder and say in their hearts, there but for the grace of God, go I.

But here's the thing. For in this sacrifice, not only did Christ divest himself of power, but he revealed the true nature of God. That is, self-giving love. For on this issue, the Bible speaks one message with one unified voice. God continually pursues his people. In fact, he humbled himself to chase after a wayward, sinful, unrepentant people. And here's the kicker. All didn't receive him. Many rejected him, because he wasn't the kind of leader and didn't start the kind of movement that they wanted. For they were waiting for an insurrectionist, one who would stand up to their enemies and would restore their country to them. Instead, they got a crucified Savior, one who was falsely accused, and refused to defend himself. He had a greater goal in mind than a nationalistic one, and he refused to let his mission be taken over by anything lesser.

That's your model, Paul says, of how you are to be in community with one another. I'm your model, Jesus will say to his disciples: "For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

This is the one who knelt at his disciples' feet to wash them, something that truly only a servant would do. This is the one who would stand silent while false accusations were thrown at him, while human beings stripped and beat him, and who could, as the songwriter once said, have called 10,000 angels to come to his rescue. But he didn't do that.

That kind of perseverance and humility is hard to find when we look at the leaders of our day. And yet Paul dares to say, have the same mind in yourselves as Christ had. This is how you act, and this is how you lead, Jesus will say to James and John, and to all the disciples. It is not a leadership of status, or one of the bully pulpit, or one of self-promotion, or one in which shame and humiliation are applied to others. No, that is not the model for us. For we are, like Jesus Christ our Lord, to always think first of the other and their interests, putting them above any need for revenge or retribution or punishment or attack. This is the model we are to follow.

In 2017, Pope Francis gave a TED talk entitled “Why the Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone,” in which he said the following:

> The more powerful you are, the more your actions will have an impact on people, the more responsible you are to act humbly. If you don't, your power will ruin you, and you will ruin the other. There is a saying in Argentina: "Power is like drinking gin on an empty stomach." You feel dizzy, you get drunk, you lose your balance, and you will end up hurting yourself and those around you, if you don't connect your power with humility and tenderness. Through [Christ-like] humility and concrete love, on the other hand, power—the highest, the strongest one—becomes a service, a force for good.[3]

**Conclusion**

In his 2023 book *The Kingdom, The Power, And The Glory: American Evangelicals In An Age Of Extremism*, author Tim Alberta reflects on how the church is to be the church in our divided, polarized country. He spoke to Pastor Brian Zahnd of Word of Life Church in St. Joseph, Missouri. Zahnd told him:

Christianity is inherently countercultural. That's how it thrives. When it tries to become a dominant culture, it becomes corrupted. This is one major difference between Islam and Christianity. Islam has designs on running the world; it's a system of government. Christianity is nothing like that. The gospels and the epistles have no vision of Christianity being a dominant religion or culture.

The Bible, {as Zahnd pointed out), is written primarily from the perspective of the underdog: Hebrew slaves fleeing Egypt, Jews exiled to Babylon, Christians living under Roman occupation. This is why Paul implored his fellow first-century believers - especially those in Rome who lived under a brutal regime - to both submit to their governing authorities and stay loyal to the kingdom built by Christ.[4]

Godly servant leadership will pattern itself after Christ, the one who washed his disciples’ feet, the one who subjected himself to the ultimate humiliation of death on a cross. But that’s not the end of his story, nor is it the end of ours. For we have an assurance of victory, a victory that can only be designed by God. For after the crucifixion came resurrection, and after resurrection came exaltation to the highest heaven. And at a time that God selects, all will bow, they will bow their knees before Jesus the Christ, and acknowledge him as the only Lord, the only King.

Amen.

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[3] *Source: Pope Francis, "Why The Only Future Worth Building Includes Everyone," TED Talk (April 2017)*

[4] *Source: Tim Alberta, The Kingdom, The Power, And The Glory: American Evangelicals In An Age Of Extremism, (Harper Collins Publishers, 2023), p. 293*