



## **“A New Kind of Greatness”**

**March 7, 2021**

*Mark 10:42-43, 45*

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The first two weeks of our Habitology series focused on the first two practices of faithful discipleship. We *worship* God. We *grow* in our faith. Unfortunately, for many Christians, the first two practices are where they stop. Christianity is sometimes distorted to become a personal faith, all about individual relationship with God. As important as it is for each of us to have a healthy relationship with God, focusing on the personal aspects alone ignores critical dimensions of the faith we claim to practice and the ministry of Jesus we want to follow.

The opening chapter of the biblical Book of Isaiah addresses this topic head-on. Isaiah, speaking for God, says:

Why do I need your sacrifices? I'm fed up with them. Your festivals and days of worship are meaningless celebrations until you learn to do good. Seek justice: help the oppressed; defend the orphan; plead for the widow. (Isaiah 1:11, 13, 17; my paraphrase)

Jesus would later echo this expectation in the 25<sup>th</sup> chapter of Matthew. He said that when we serve others, we serve him. And those who fail to meet the needs of others fail him and aren't part of the kingdom. *Serving is an expectation of discipleship.* Followers of Jesus aren't satisfied with mere ceremony or personal development. Genuine faith always turns us outward – to see the needs of the world and to do something about them.

Serving is baked into the DNA of the people called Methodist. John and Charles Wesley, who founded the Methodist movement in 18<sup>th</sup> century England, were considered radicals because of their passionate commitment to a faith that balanced personal holiness with social holiness. In addition to regular worship, prayer, and study, they and those who joined with them regularly visited prisons and poor houses. They formed clinics and founded orphanages. Their legacy of commitment led to the establishment of hundreds of hospitals and universities and schools. John Wesley is often quoted as saying:

*Do all the good you can,  
By all the means you can,  
In all the ways you can,  
In all the places you can,  
At all the times you can,  
To all the people you can,  
As long as ever you can.<sup>1</sup>*

Even though we know we are called to serve, the Church must constantly guard against the danger of focusing too much on inward matters – our own culture, care, and comfort. We live in a consumer-oriented society. Surrounded by churches of every style, shape, identity, and branding, we can easily see the church as just another commodity, simply choosing the one the “feels right” or “feeds me.” But William Temple,

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<sup>1</sup> Did John Wesley ever say this? Probably not in this exact phrasing. It's a bit too pithy for his style. But it is consistent at least with the sentiment of his preaching and is close to some of the wording he used. See <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2016/09/24/all-good/>

Archbishop of Canterbury during World War II, once wrote: “The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.”<sup>2</sup> *The Church isn't here for us.* I've often thought Temple's words should be etched above the doorway of every church, visible reminders both as we enter and as we leave.

On at least two occasions, Jesus caught the disciples in the act of arguing about positions of privilege, putting their personal ambition ahead of the mission. One of those instances is just before the passage that forms our Gospel Lesson this morning. Jesus didn't yell or tell them to get lost, that he would find some more deserving followers. He used the occasion as instead to instruct the disciples about what it means to be a leader:

“You know that the ones who are considered the rulers by the Gentiles show off their authority over them and their high-ranking officials order them around. But that's not the way it will be with you. Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. For the Human One didn't come to be served but rather to serve and to give his life to liberate many people.”

Instead of a head-on rebuke of the disciples' ambition, Jesus *redefined* greatness. It was a lesson he would demonstrate later by his actions in the Upper Room on the final night of his life. Rather than having a house servant wash everyone's feet as was the custom, Jesus wrapped a towel around his waist and washed the disciples' feet himself.

At Church of the Saviour, we take Jesus's teaching seriously and strive to live it out through serving. You may know that we have mission connections in several places around the world, but you may not know what they do. In Cambodia, we support women's empowerment through entrepreneurship to establish their own livelihood and lead others. In Zimbabwe, students are taught agricultural methods that provide sustainable, self-sufficient farming, lessons carried back to villages across the continent. In Liberia, marketplace ministry raises up leaders through education and hospitality. In Haiti, we work directly with teachers and leaders to provide quality, affordable education to children, including scholarships that make secondary school possible for some that could not afford it on their own. In partnership with the North Coast Haiti Mission, we also invest in the wider community, providing a well and solar-powered pump to provide clean, safe drinking water and are currently working to replace a leaking corrugated metal roof on the Methodist Church in the town of Dondon.

Closer to home, our Luke 3:11 ministry provides food and basic necessities to people living without shelter in Cleveland. Our East Cleveland Hospitality Outreach supplies diapers and toiletries for distribution along with food and other necessities. We feed the hungry by supporting the Hunger Network of Greater Cleveland and providing hot meals to the City Mission and Abington Arms senior living. We provide financial and material support to refugees seeking a new life. We help raise up local leaders through education and empowerment at Scranton Road Ministries. Kairos Prison Ministry shares Christ's love and words of encouragement for incarcerated individuals in Northeast Ohio. International students at Cleveland State and Case Western are welcomed and supported through our partnership with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. Cleanup kits are prepared and distributed for people recovering from natural disasters. In the past year, we've provided hundreds of masks to anyone who needed them when masks were not easily available, hosted blood drives through the Red Cross that collected 1,195 pints of blood that saved up to 3,585 lives, and welcomed over 900 people who received the COVID vaccine through Signature Health.

Did you know Church of the Saviour does all those things? We don't intend to keep our work a secret, though we don't spend time patting ourselves on the back. I'm proud of what we accomplish as a church, but that isn't cause to boast. We know this is what we're called to do and we're only scratching the surface of what we could accomplish for Christ. We always have room for more people to serve and new ways to serve.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780191826719.001.0001/q-oro-ed4-00010671>

If you'd like to learn more about any of our ministries, visit our website or contact us. We'd be happy to get you plugged in.

The point of sharing all of that is that there are lots of ways to serve. Now, our hands serve as visual reminders of our five practices. Let me show you two more related to our third practice: *serve*. Two hands remind us that, at Church of the Saviour, we challenge everyone to commit at *least* two times a year to rolling up our sleeves and getting involved in hands-on mission beyond serving each other: helping at a Habitat build or the Re-store, serving a meal, participating in our East Cleveland Serving Days, or any of the many opportunities we have to serve. During the pandemic, that's been harder, requiring more creativity and determination, though there are still many opportunities to serve. But serving isn't just about the big stuff. Opening our hands, we see five fingers. That's a reminder for each of us to practice five simple acts of kindness every week. Call a friend. Help a neighbor. Offer a word of encouragement to a store cashier. Say hello to the person you pass walking on the other side of the street. Little acts of kindness make a difference, and they can add up fast. Think about this: what would happen if each one of us performed five simple acts of kindness every week? If the 400+ people who regularly worship with us did that, we would collectively offer over 2,000 acts of kindness a week. In a year, that would total over 100,000. Do you think 100,000 acts of kindness could make a difference in our communities? I sure do.

Now, those are a lot of activities and some pretty impressive numbers. Admittedly, we can get a little sidetracked by numbers, even when our intentions are good. We live in an achievement-oriented society. We don't just do something or even just set out to do it *well*. We are conditioned to strive to be *the best* at whatever we do. I feel that tug as pastor, and I'll bet you do in your job and neighborhood and school and sports and lots of other things. Serving isn't about being the best or trying to impress anybody. That's why it's so important to remember how Jesus reframed greatness. Leadership is demonstrated through serving. If we want recognition or honor, then our heart is not in the right place. But true greatness is measured differently. I love how Dr. King put it in his sermon, "Drum Major Instinct:"

Jesus gave us a new norm of greatness. If you want to be important—wonderful. If you want to be recognized—wonderful. If you want to be great—wonderful. But recognize that he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. That's a new definition of greatness.

(This is) the thing that I like about it: by giving that definition of greatness, it means that everybody can be great, because everybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato and Aristotle to serve. You don't have to know Einstein's theory of relativity to serve. You don't have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. And you can be that servant.<sup>3</sup>

A heart full of grace, a soul generated by love. That's it, isn't it? Love is the basic requirement for serving, maybe the *only* requirement. At the heart of all of our practices of faithful discipleship is love. We *worship* because we love God and we want to share that love with God. Love helps us *grow* through personal study that nurtures our relationship with a loving God and small groups that encourage each other through love and support. We demonstrate our love outwardly by *serving* because of the love God has for us and shows us in Christ. The First Letter of John testifies, "We love because God first loved us."

Love is our guide. Love is the force that leads us to serve. Serving isn't a magnanimous act; we are called to this. Serving isn't a chore; when we know we have been saved by God's grace, it is a natural response for us to share God's love with others. By making it intentional, serving can become a regular practice, a habit that helps us be more faithful disciples.

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<sup>3</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr. "Drum Major Instinct." Online: <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-papers/documents/drum-major-instinct-sermon-delivered-ebenezer-baptist-church> (accessed March 3, 2021).

There is a prayer that United Methodists have used for over 200 years. It was written by John Wesley, and it's often recited at the beginning of a new year as we renew our commitment as followers of Jesus. As we close out this time together today, I want to invite you to pray a version of that prayer with me, a contemporary version of the Covenant Prayer in the Wesleyan Tradition:

*I am no longer my own, but yours.*

*Put me to what you will, place me with whom you will.*

*Put me to doing, put me to suffering.*

*Let me be put to work for you or set aside for you,*

*Praised for you or criticized for you.*

*Let me be full, let me be empty.*

*Let me have all things, let me have nothing.*

*I freely and fully surrender all things to your glory and service.*

*And now, O wonderful and holy God,*

*Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer,*

*you are mine, and I am yours.*

*So be it.*

*And the covenant which I have made on earth,*

*Let it also be made in heaven. Amen.*