

THE SERVANTHOOD SERIES

**Bible
Studies
For Small Groups**

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THE SERVANTHOOD SERIES

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Beth Crawford, General Editor
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Introduction to *The Servanthood Series*

Dear Small Group Leaders,

The opening of our new Community Center reminds us that there are hundreds of ways our congregation can serve others around us. Because volunteers are key to fulfilling God's purposes for the Center and its role in our community, this study series examines Jesus' call on us to be servants. We hope your small group will use the series to explore God's love, the foundation of true service; Jesus' sacrificial life, our model and message of servanthood; and the Holy Spirit's power, our means for serving God and others. We designed these studies to help your members more readily adopt an attitude of servanthood and anticipate greater joy in serving.

If your group participates in service opportunities through the Vineyard Church of Columbus, please continue to do so. If your group doesn't participate in service opportunities, please select service projects to help apply what you learn as you discuss the Servanthood texts. You may also want to serve people in your own group or friends and neighbors that group members already know. Serving together is not only Biblical but helps build healthy, other-centered community (Foster, p. 113) and often increases appreciation for the variety of abilities, gifts, and temperaments the Lord has given your group. Leaders can check for service opportunities in the "Small Group Leaders' Newsletter" and in "The Mix" [our monthly guide to events].

Before you lead the studies in this series, please review the following sections:

- Overview of Biblical Servanthood
- Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies
- People First Language

Overview of Biblical Servanthood

This section of information is intended to clarify the Biblical meaning of servanthood, help you recognize barriers to servanthood, and provide responses to help overcome barriers to servanthood.

What is Servanthood?

When we talk about *servanthood*, we mean more than just doing work for someone else. After all, people who aren't connected with Jesus can *serve*. People can do good deeds for others, but that is not what we mean by servanthood. People can also serve out of wrong motives—to gain self-worth, to call attention to themselves, to assuage guilt, etc. Serving from wrong motives is not servanthood.

Servanthood is a humble, obedient reliance on the Father, birthed by an awareness of His unconditional love, which is expressed by action to benefit others, and carried out in the power of the Holy Spirit. Servanthood may involve a menial or hidden task, but it may also involve a very public deed done without concern for one's reputation or gain (Willard, p. 183).

Siang-Yang Tan describes true servanthood more fully (pp. 44–45):

True servanthood flows out of a deep friendship with Jesus. True servanthood is empowered by the Holy Spirit as a result of abiding or remaining in Christ (John 15:5), producing spiritual, eternal fruit in becoming more like Jesus and touching many lives for Jesus by drawing people to him. True servanthood is characterized by loving obedience to the Lord, and compassionate ministry to others. True servanthood enables us to grow up mature and real in Christ, with authenticity. True servanthood is not about imitating Jesus or trying to be like him through our own self-efforts. It is about living in Jesus and Jesus living in us by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is about Jesus then living through us to reach out to a broken world with love and friendship, centered in our loving friendship with him first. True servanthood focuses on God and not the individual.

Is Servanthood Optional?

Serving is not an optional component of Christianity. “A non-serving Christian is a contradiction in terms” (Warren, p. 229). “As Christians, it is our nature to serve. We are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, that same Spirit who lived through Jesus while he walked the earth” (Sjogren, p. 111). Rick Warren writes, “We were created to serve God” referring to Ephesians 2:10 (p. 227). We are saved to serve God and others. We are called to serve, commanded to serve, and evaluated at the end of life based on how well we have served (Warren, pp. 227–230). If we follow Jesus in His lifestyle, we will discover that “service is the pathway to real significance” (Warren, p. 232).

God saved us to conform us to the image of His Son, Jesus (Romans 8:28–29). In order to do that, we must learn to serve and to give just as He did (Swindoll, pp. 17–18). It is often as people are serving that they become more aware of their need to have a closer relationship with Jesus and to know more about how to share Him with others (Nathan). In fact, serving is a critical component in the life of a healthy Christian. If a person attends church but does not begin to serve Christ, statistics show that nominal attendee will drop out within a year (McManus, qtd. in Nathan).

Central to Jesus’ service was a deep awareness of the Father’s love and approval even before beginning His ministry. Throughout His time on earth, Jesus continued to spend intimate time alone with His Father. From that interaction with His Father, Jesus understood what to do and what not to do, and how to say no to many demands in order to fulfill His Father’s will. We who are eager to serve as Jesus did often forget that God wants us to “be” with Him before we “do” for Him. Oswald Chambers summarizes the challenge faced by Christians who want to make a difference for God (qtd. in Payne, p. 145): “The greatest competitor of devotion to Jesus is service for Him.” Leanne Payne reminds us that serving Christ is not based on mere mental agreement but allowing His *real presence* to live in and work through us (p. 145).

All of us who call Jesus Christ “Lord and Savior” are His servants. After all, that’s what Lordship implies: “Jesus is our master, and we are to do what He asks of us” (John Wimber, qtd. in C. Wimber, p. 20). But most of us don’t want to embrace this attitude. Richard Foster expresses some of our inner thoughts: “Most of us know we will never be the greatest; just don’t let us be the least” (p. 110).

Barriers to Servanthood

A major barrier to serving like Jesus is our sinful nature that hates to give up control. “It hates being off the center stage” (John Wimber, qtd. in C. Wimber, p. 31). Lorne Sanny, who founded the Navigator’s discipleship ministry, once said that you could tell if you were a servant “By how you act when you’re treated like one” (qtd. in Buchanan, p. 212). Leonard Bernstein, the great American composer, conductor, and educator, once said that the hardest orchestral instrument to play is the second position in any section. Everyone wants to be in the lead, “And yet if no one plays second, we have no harmony” (qtd. in Buchanan, p. 213). But when we surrender our lives to Christ, we also surrender the right to call the shots. That means we don’t get to pick and choose whom and when we serve (Foster, p. 115).

Another barrier to imitating Jesus is pride. Christ-like serving does not have an attitude of superiority. Jesus said that to love God and to love others is the core of eternal life. But when we look down on others or assume we are better than they are, we exclude them and God from our hearts. “Pride moves us to exclude instead of to embrace. ... Pride moves us to judge rather than to serve” (Ortberg, p. 110). It doesn’t take long to discern self-righteous people from humble servants. The former want others to notice the assistance they are providing to someone (Foster, p. 115), while the true servant focuses on what the Father is saying and what others’ needs are. Those with Christ’s humility “have nothing to prove and nothing to lose” (Swindoll, p. 25).

Overcoming Barriers to Servanthood

So how do we win the battle over our selfish inclinations? *Why* should we humble ourselves and do what we might otherwise despise? Consider the following ideas, some of which are contained in Chad Brainard’s document “Christian Service” on our web site:

- As the Creator, Sustainer, and King of the Universe, God deserves our submission.
- God has always expected His called/chosen people to respond to Him by loving, obeying, and serving Him (Genesis 1:26–28; Deuteronomy 10:12).
- Jesus has shown us the proper response to our Lord and Father: to love and serve Him with all our whole being and to love and serve our neighbors (Matthew 22:37–40).
- Jesus has *modeled* our calling to serve God and others (Philippians 2:5–7).
- Jesus has commanded us to imitate Him as we go into the world and make disciples who will love, worship, and serve Him, too (Matthew 28:18–20).

Chad Brainard also has given us a list to reflect on *how* we should serve the Lord and others (“Christian Service”):

- Motivated by obedience (Deuteronomy 13:40)
- Motivated by gratitude (1 Samuel 12:24)
- Motivated by gladness (Psalm 100:2)
- Motivated by forgiveness, not guilt (Isaiah 6:6–8)
- Motivated by humility (Philippians 2:3–4)
- Motivated by love (2 Corinthians 5:14–15; Galatians 5:13).

Swindoll points out that we don’t have to be brilliant or gifted to serve; we just need to be willing (p. 13). “Real servants make themselves available to serve” and permit God to “mess up their schedule” (Warren, pp. 258–259). Our willingness to do even small, hidden, or routine tasks reveals a lot about our maturity (Warren, pp. 258–263). “Small tasks often show a big heart”

(Warren, p. 261). So encourage your group members each day to offer to the Lord whatever He has given them, including their strengths and weaknesses, since we don't have to be perfect or fully mature in order for God to use us (Warren, p. 260).

As we consistently serve Christ in the world, His love is displayed and we may gain an opening to share Jesus with others. Steve Sjogren points out “our credibility grows as we walk in servanthood” (p. 114), and that serving others can help us bypass intellectual objections and touch people at a heart level (p. 113).

Emerging churches that consist largely of postmodern young adults make a point to “participate in relationships with those they serve, and do not treat them as objects” [of their pity or charity]. Because of this shared relationship, conversations inevitably turn to God” (Gibbs and Bolger, p. 152). One community in California was told by the police that they could not feed the homeless in a park without a permit; the group replied, “We are not feeding the homeless. We are having a picnic. We are eating with them” (Burke, qtd. in Gibbs and Bolger, p. 135). Karen Ward, from Seattle, relates, “Taking care of the sick and needy creates all the evangelism we need” (qtd. in Gibbs and Bolger, p. 135).

Kirbyjon Caldwell, who pastors a large congregation impacting the Houston, Texas area, reminds us, “the church exists to equip people in order to release them back into the world, grounded in truth and community, dangerous for the gospel” (p. 9). In order to get there, we need to help our members remain centered in Jesus, recognize their connectedness to the Lord and one another, and respond to their call to serve others in the church and in the world (Mallory, pp. 132–133). Ultimately, we want to be “an equipping church where people serve together to transform lives” (Caldwell, p. 9). Our prayer is that these studies will help you and your small group discover more of what God desires to express through you to a needy world.

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Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies

These Bible studies are written as Inductive Bible Study Discussions. "Inductive" means you begin with a text and ask a series of questions to discover the truth in that passage. The leader encourages the group members to find answers in the Scripture and then apply God's truth to their lives. Usually the leader poses to the group a series of questions that ask the following:

1. What can I detect in the text about the people, their situation, and events that take place? What kind of literature is this? What words or ideas stand out or are repeated?
2. What did the text mean when it was written? Why were certain themes addressed in it? How would this text impact the original audience?
3. How does the meaning of the text apply to me today? What is God saying to me personally from this passage of Scripture? How should I respond to Him?

The authors of this series suggest you read over the notes on "How to Teach the Bible in Small Group" and "Some Practical Suggestions for Leading a Small Group Discussion" in Vineyard Church of Columbus' Small Group Leadership Training Manual if you feel your inductive study skills are rusty. Or, you could visit our web site:

<http://www.vineyardcolumbus.org/resources/sgresources/PDFs/HowToTeach.pdf>

Before you go over the Scripture text, pray that God will teach you something relevant for your group. Then, read through the passage, keeping an open heart and ear to the Lord. Finally, work through the Bible study notes and questions below.

These studies contain more background material and information on the passages than your group will cover in a meeting. Therefore, use each written Bible study as a framework for the discussion you lead in your small group meeting. This means you will need to:

1. Go over the questions and **choose** those you want to emphasize and those you might eliminate since your time is limited.
2. The application questions are now marked with a **smiling light bulb symbol!** Rather than leaving all of the application activity until the end of the study, ask one or two of these questions as you work through the passage. This will help people develop the habit of reflecting on and applying God's Word to their lives.
3. Pace yourself. If you find you are falling behind schedule and need to move ahead, you could **summarize** some of the passage and then go to the final questions.
4. Select **one** application question you will use with your group at the end. The question may have more than one part, but focus on the vital Biblical truth you want to encourage your group to implement in your final question.
5. Feel free to suggest that your group **continue** a discussion at the next meeting or at another informal get together. Depending on the kind of meeting you are leading, you might want to leave time for worship, listening to God, and prayer ministry, so don't feel you must cover every nugget of truth in a passage or allow each group member to share a mini-sermon on every question!
6. You may want to create your own **introduction** by using a personal example or current event that illustrates the point of the study. Your introduction and any background material shared should help lead the group members' thoughts from the present moment into the text.

The authors of this series are providing these questions and accompanying material for the leader's benefit—to help reduce your study and preparation time; to supply resources for possible questions group members may raise; and to clarify some gray areas of doctrine that may be in your mind as you prepare. Obviously, we cannot exhaust any one subject in a document like this, so you may want to do further reading and discuss doctrine with your pastor.

We highly recommend *The New Bible Dictionary* or *The New Bible Commentary* as excellent resources for further study.

Also note that some studies advise the leaders to make copies of a handout or bring some helpful communication tool, etc.

People First Language

In several of these studies, Jesus meets people with different physical needs. Some words, used in the past to label individuals with various disabilities, are now considered offensive. In order to remove any barriers to persons coming to know Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, we want to show sensitivity and respect to everyone. It is good to remind ourselves that sin has made all of us less-abled than God originally intended for us to be; thus we all struggle in life. Because some have “invisible” or not readily noticeable disabilities or illnesses, we may unknowingly offend someone if we are not considerate at all times.

Please use language that models the following principle: speak about the person first, and then refer to the disability second, if the disability even needs to be noted. For example, rather than saying “the blind man,” use “the man who was blind,” or “the man who was visually impaired,” or “the man who could not see clearly.” This will help remove some of the offense and labeling that can occur when discussing any form of disability. Also, the word “mute” should never be used. Replace it with “speech impairment,” “inability to speak clearly,” etc. You may even need to politely suggest alternatives to anyone in your group who might unknowingly use inappropriate terminology. Additionally, ask yourself if an individual’s condition needs to be mentioned at all. Try to communicate what has to be said without referring to anything that makes the person seem different. At the same time, recognize that language usage varies and changes, so we may offend people no matter how careful we are.

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SERVANTHOOD

Study 1

GOD'S LOVE: OUR MOTIVATION FOR SERVANTHOOD

Matthew 3:13—17

By Rhodara S. Shreve

In solitude, we discover that our worth is not the same as our usefulness. In a community of faith we work hard, but we are not destroyed by the lack of results. And as a community of faith we remind one another constantly that we form a fellowship of the weak, transparent to him who speaks to us in the lonely places of our existence and says: "Do not be afraid, you are accepted."

Henri Nouwen

Jesus gives an unmodified call to us to be servants—serving God and serving one another. Along the way, God may also call us into specific roles of leadership. ... Our ambition is not leadership, but servanthood. Our task is not to grow leaders but to make disciples who will follow Jesus. Our goal is not to get out there and get things done, but to listen and obey. Our call is not to exercise power but to be faithful to our Lord and the way of the servant.

How God chooses to use His servants is His concern. We may be called to lead or to follow, to exert authority or to submit, to turn our God-given gifts in one direction or another. But that is God's business. Our identity, our meaning in life, our sense of significance, and our self-worth are not to be based on the roles we fill, the power we wield, or the numbers we lead. We play to an audience of one, who loves us, affirms us, and uses us. Whether we are called to perform the handstand or simply watch and clap from the sidelines, we should long to hear from our God the words, "Well done, you good and faithful servant!"

Steve Hayner

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AIM OF STUDY

- To understand that our motivation for service is God's love, not things such as guilt, ego, or human logic.

KEY VERSE

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.”

Matthew 3:16–17

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Servanthood Series*”:

1. *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
2. *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

This study is divided into two parts. The first series of questions studies the Matthew passage to provide the basis for servanthood—God's love. The second series of questions discusses an experience from John Wimber's life to gain more insight into the connection between God's love and service.

Please review the study in advance and be prepared to pace your time during the Matthew study so you have an adequate amount of time to spend on the Wimber story and discussion questions.

OPENER

Have you ever been concerned that you were performing acts of service for the wrong reasons? Have you ever felt you were serving only out of a need to look good, a desire to feel important, an attempt to avoid guilt, or as a result of peer pressure?

Allow group members to respond briefly. Then please share the following with your group.

None of us will have perfect motives this side of heaven. But we can learn from Jesus the right motives for serving. And there is no better place to study His servanthood than Matthew 3:13–17. (Parallel texts are Mark 1:9–11 and Luke 3:21–22.) In a simple declaration of love, we find the source for all the things that flow from the life of Jesus, especially His servanthood. Without understanding His starting point, we might serve for the wrong reasons, drawing our identity from what we do instead of who we are.

Before Jesus did something, He was someone. Jesus was the Son before He became the Servant. Even though both of these roles defined His identity, because He was the Son, all that He did flowed from the context of His relationship with His Father. This was a relationship totally defined by love and acceptance.

In Christ, you, too, are *someone* before you do *something*. All we do will never come close to the value we have simply because our Heavenly Father loves us. His love gives us infinite worth. Our service is meant to come as our response to His love. Love is often defined as faith in action, but sometimes our action can become devoid of love.

We are a society of doers. We pride ourselves on our “doing” way of life. So, why is this so bad? Isn’t it right to do all we can for God? As we study this first passage about serving, let’s see how understanding the starting point of the public ministry of Jesus can help us answer this question.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

The following material is derived from John Cook’s notes in “Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew” and from pages 904–907 of the *New Bible Commentary*.

Matthew is the first Gospel in the New Testament, but many Bible scholars credit Mark as being the first written Gospel. Matthew’s date of writing and authorship are not clear from the text, but scholars generally agree that the book was written in the second half of the first century—between 60 and 80 AD. The early church consistently attributed the book’s authorship to Matthew. Jesus’ call to Matthew, a Jewish tax collector, is recorded in Matthew 9:9.

The Gospel of Matthew is written from a Jewish viewpoint. As a result, a key theme of the book is “fulfillment”—namely the fulfillment of Old Testament promises, prophecies, and themes in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Matthew goes to great detail in tying together Jesus’ sayings and Old Testament passages to illustrate how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament images:

- Jesus is the Messiah.
- Jesus is the King descended from the line of David.

Another key aspect of the Gospel is that Matthew provides details that don’t appear in parallel passages in Mark. Matthew tends to reduce the amount of narrative text, compared to Mark, while providing much more of the text of Jesus’ sayings. As a result, Matthew is about 60% longer than Mark.

The *New Bible Commentary* provides the following outline of Matthew (Wenham, p. 907):

1:1–4:16, Introducing Jesus

4:17–16:20, Public ministry in and around Galilee

16:21–18:35, Private ministry in Galilee; preparing the disciples

19:1–25:46, Ministry in Judea

26:1–28:20, The death and resurrection of Jesus

Matthew includes five discourses—Jesus’ extended teaching sessions:

1. Discipleship, Matthew 5:1–7:29
2. Disciples’ mission, Matthew 9:35–10:42
3. Teaching in parables, Matthew 13:1–52
4. Relationships among disciples, Matthew 18:1–35
5. Judgment, Matthew 24:1–25:46

This study focuses on the account of Jesus' baptism as recorded in Matthew 3:13—17. Baptism was an act of repentance usually required of Gentiles [non-Jews] when they converted to Judaism. So John publicly calling Jews to get cleaned up as if they were pagans was a startling message. It would be even more incongruous for the sinless Son of God to undergo baptism since He did not need to repent.

The issues associated with Jesus' baptism provide additional support for the reliability of the text. For example, Craig Keener writes:

Given the embarrassment of some early Christian traditions that Jesus accepted baptism from one of lower status than himself, it is now inconceivable that early Christians made up the story of John baptizing Jesus (E. Sanders 1985:11; 1993:94; Meier 1994:100-105; pace Bultmann 1968:251, qtd. in Keener, p. 84).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 3:13—17

Pray that group members will understand that God's love is the proper motivation for service, and that they will be motivated to serve on the basis of who they are in Christ.

1. What public act does Jesus participate in at the start of His ministry (v. 13)?

2. To whom does Jesus come for baptism?

John the Baptist was well known in the surrounding area. Matthew describes John's ministry and message in Ch. 3:1—12. John was related to Jesus (Luke 1:5—80).

3. How does John react to Jesus' request to be baptized by him (v. 14)?

John had preeminent status as a prophet, similar to Elijah's. Many in Israel were coming to the river to be baptized by John in order to get right with God. In recognizing Jesus as the one who should be baptizing him, John acknowledges the role Jesus would play as the Messiah. "Jesus had come to bestow the Spirit in a fuller measure than even he as a prophet had received, and he desired this baptism" (Mt 3:11; compare 11:11-13, Keener, p. 84). John realizes that his baptism will be secondary to the baptism of the Holy Spirit. He wants to be baptized with this fuller measure of the Spirit, which he knows is greater than anything the Old Testament prophets had been given.

4. How does Jesus respond to John's concerns (v. 15)?

Jesus sets the tone for His ministry in this public display of humility. He wants to submit Himself to the mission of John and says so. In this way, "Jesus' baptism... is vicarious, embraced on behalf of others with whom the Father has called him to identify" (Lampe 1951:39, qtd. in Keener, p. 85). Here the wonderful demonstration of servanthood and Sonship plays out in the baptism of Jesus as He surrenders to do whatever His Father asks.

5. What happens after John baptizes Jesus (v. 16–17)?

This is God's public declaration of His Fatherly approval of Jesus. "*Heaven was opened*" [reflects] "...biblical language for God's revelation or future deliverance" (Is 64:1 [LXX 63:19]; Ezek 1:1; Kingsbury 1983:64; Schweitzer 1970:37; compare Joseph and Asenath 14:2/3, Keener, p. 85). "*The Spirit descending like a dove and lighting on him*" seems to indicate a symbolic likeness to the dove in Genesis 8:8-12 which "appears as the harbinger of the new world after the flood.... Jesus is the inaugurator of the kingdom era that John has been proclaiming" (Keener, p. 86).

6. What is the significance of the voice from heaven? What does the voice from heaven speak over Jesus?

Leaders, your group members may not be aware of the rich significance of the Father's words in verse 17. At face value, you can recognize the love and approval the Father has for the Son. Do not gloss over the relational warmth between them if you want to convey the deeper meaning of the spoken phrases. And judge how much of this significance your group can appreciate before you lead this study.

A *voice from heaven* was a concept the Jewish audience understood well. Jewish teachers believed the *voice from heaven* was "the primary source of revelation apart from Scripture exposition while the Spirit of prophecy was quenched" (Keener, p. 86). "The fact of the voice is important, but what the voice says is most important" (Keener, p. 86).

"This is my Son" would remind them of Psalm 2:7 in which God calls the king of Israel His son. This psalm was used in Israel's enthronement ceremonies, and points to Jesus as King and the coming Messiah (Keener, p. 86).

In the phrase, "with him I am well pleased," Matthew also sees a reference to Isaiah 42:1, where the Lord says this about His "Servant" (Keener, p. 86). Israel was called to be "the Servant of God" by displaying to the world a deep love and trust in Him (Oswalt, p. 7). They did not always live up to this role, so the Lord had to find someone to complete this task. The "Servant" also refers to the pagan leader, Cyrus, whom God used to free Israel from exile (Isaiah 45; Oswalt, pp. 200–201). But ultimately, the "Servant of the Lord" means the One, described in Isaiah 42, 49, 50, 52 and 53, who will suffer as a sacrifice to free Israel from her sins before the Lord vindicates Him (Oswalt, pp. 107–112).

Thus in Matthew 3, the Father lovingly affirms His Son, as any good father should do. But He also signals that His Son is destined for much more. The Father points to Jesus as the One who will fulfill the role of the obedient Son, Servant, and King. Jesus will exemplify perfect trust in the Father so that the world might see the relationship intended for all God's sons and daughters. Keener points to three principles that Matthew's readers would grasp (p.87):

- Jesus is central "to the Father's heart and plan; no one can reject Jesus and simultaneously please the Father." Jesus reveals the Father and has His Father's loving approval before any ministry begins. He is *His beloved Son* [emphasis added].
- "Second, the Father's acclamation reveals that the meek Jesus is also the ultimate ruler who will usher in justice and peace." He will bring God's kingdom in and right every wrong.

- “Finally, the voice reveals Jesus as the Son obedient to the point of death, who willingly divests himself of His proper honor by identifying with us in baptism and death.”

7. Why do you think this declaration of love spoken over Jesus was important enough for Matthew to include as part of this story?

The Father spoke aloud His love and affirmation at least three times in Jesus’ life: at His baptism (Matthew 3:17); at His Transfiguration (Matthew 17:5); and in the Temple shortly before His crucifixion (John 12:28). Each time must have strengthened Jesus’ sense of Himself, His worth and His calling. Frank Lake, Christian psychiatrist and theologian, explains four dynamics in the Father-Son relationship that shaped Jesus’ personhood. Two seemed to flow out of the Father into the Son; two seemed to flow out of the Son into the world. Stephen Seamands cites Lake’s points (pp. 63–64):

1. *Acceptance.* Jesus knows from the beginning of His ministry that the Father accepts Him and affirms Him as His Son. God does not require Jesus to earn or win His favor; He gives the Son His love freely and fully.
2. *Sustenance.* The Father loves the Son (John 5:19) and is pleased with Him (Mark 1:11). This gives Jesus a deep sense of well-being.
3. *Status.* Jesus knows that He came from Heaven to do God’s work on earth (John 8:23; John 7:18, 28). The Father has entrusted everything to Jesus, which also speaks of His authority and responsibility (John 13:3).
4. *Achievement.* The Son is able to carry out and complete the Father’s work through the indwelling Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18–19). His work is purposeful and fulfilling as He serves people in the unique way God planned for Him.

Seamands summarizes (p. 64):

Lake’s model clearly demonstrates that Christ’s ministry is rooted in his grace-given identity. Jesus is declared to be the Father’s beloved Son in whom he is well pleased *before* he begins to preach, teach and heal. His mighty works and laying his life down are not motivated by a need to earn acceptance or status from his Father or to fill up anything lacking in his sense of being. Instead they flow out of his fullness of being, rooted and sustained by his joyful, intimate love relationship with his Father.

Because God made us and Christ saved us to carry on their work in the world, we can and should enter the same dynamic evident in the Father-Son relationship. We, too, need to have God pour out His love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) and accept the purpose for which He saved us (Seamands, p. 64). Seamands writes (p. 65):

Too often persons enter ministry without this proper foundation firmly established. Consequently they make their achievement, their work for God, the foundation of their ministry, rather than their acceptance and approval by God. Wanting to *do* something in order to *be* someone, they view themselves, in Mike Bickle’s words, “as *loving workers*,” [emphasis added] instead of as God intends,

as “*working lovers*” [emphasis added]. Bickle ... maintains, “God wants us to be something *before* He wants us to do something. ... God wants us to be lovers so that we do work.” So Jesus asks Peter “Do you love me?” before he commands him to “Feed my sheep” (John 21:15-17). The order is significant.

FOR MORE DISCUSSION:

Read the following aloud with the group. Let people share their reactions to this story and then use the questions following this story to further your discussion.

The following is an excerpt from Christy Wimber’s book about John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement. Here is John’s version of his own struggle with ministry (pp. 26–27):

I live in Southern California, and in that part of the country there is no more fitting time to have a dialogue with God and learn important spiritual truths [than] while sitting in traffic on the freeway. That’s the place where I learned about the status of my conversion to Christ. This dialogue occurred while I was struggling with the new ministry I wanted, but also which the Lord was keeping me from. As I was driving, God began to show me all the conversions I had experienced in my life. The first was my conversion to Pall Mall cigarettes when I was 13. There was a succession of others: to music, to several styles of life, to groups of people, to an ideal of success, and to a certain pattern of relationships.

A common thread linked each conversion. I had done each out of the desire to be successful. I wanted to be known and become someone. A terrible thought surfaced: Did I convert to Jesus Christ for the same reason? Because I thought maybe it would make me feel like I had become someone?

Then I heard the Lord speak to me.

“John, when are you going to believe that you are someone? I made you someone. I purchased you with My blood, and I’ve called you to be mine. Stop worrying about who you are.”

I was so overcome with emotion that I pulled to the side of the road and opened my Bible. I opened to John’s gospel, chapter two—the story of the Baptism of Jesus. My finger fell right on the words, “This is my Son, in whom I am well pleased.” I was puzzled.

“I don’t understand, Lord.”

“That’s the point, John,” I heard the Lord say. “You don’t understand. How much service had I given my Father up to that point?”

“None, Lord.”

“That’s right, John, and already He was well pleased.”

This instance was a reality check. I had already known the Lord for fourteen years and had always been looking for approval from Him. Now I realized that approval came as the Father saw His Son in me, not from the work I did. The key is the relationship. Jesus has relationship with the Father, and I have relationship with Jesus.

8. What was John Wimber struggling with in this story?

 **Have you ever struggled with this?**

9. What do you think of the Lord's word to John Wimber?

 **Is this a word you need to hear in your own life?**

10. At the beginning of this study, the question posed was, "Isn't it right to do all we can for God?" How would you answer that now?

APPLICATION

 **What is the important message from the Matthew passage and the Wimber story that you can apply as you serve in the church, in your community, at work, or among those with whom you live?**

Take some time at the end of the study for ministry time. Pray for people who are feeling the struggle to perform for their identity instead of gaining it from Christ. Pray for people to begin to reflect on their attitudes towards serving. Pray for a fresh experience of God's love for each person. Over the course of this series, ask and trust that God will lead your group to the places where they can express God's love to others.

WRAPPING IT UP

People who are willing to serve God must always fight the temptation to do things *for* God at the expense of relationship *with* God. Jesus served out of deep connection with His Father. He relied on His Father's love, affirmation, and direction.

Also, His life and work cannot be explained apart from the Holy Spirit's anointing and empowering. We must live and serve as Jesus did—surrendering our wills and abandoning ourselves to God and asking His Holy Spirit to fill and guide us (Seamands, pp. 25–28).

This week, take time to worship and wait on the Father. Let Him pour out His love on you in a fresh filling of His Spirit. Receive His love and approval simply because you are joined to His Beloved Son. And, then serve Him as a response to His love.

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SERVANTHOOD

Study 2

JESUS: OUR MODEL OF SERVANTHOOD

John 13:1—17

By John Ebert

But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.

Luke 22:26

Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Mark 10:43–45

When Jesus came in the form of servant, he was not disguising who God is. He was revealing who God is. ... God is the Infinite Servant. God is the most humble being in all the universe. Jesus did not come as a servant in spite of the fact that he is God; he came precisely because of the fact that he is God.

John Ortberg

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AIM

- To see how Jesus chose the way of humble servanthood so that we can choose that way too.

KEY VERSE

“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet.”

John 13:14

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Servanthood Series*”:

1. *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
2. *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

Which great person from modern times do you most admire? Many people would answer this question, “Mother Teresa.” As winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, she attained worldwide fame for her life dedicated to serving the poor and the destitute. Truly she served others like Jesus: sacrificially, in love and humility. Let’s consider a few of Mother Teresa’s quotes that reveal her attitude about servanthood and true greatness.

“To show great love for God and our neighbor we need not do great things. It is how much love we put in the doing that makes our offering something beautiful for God” (“Mother Teresa,” *World of Quotes*).

“Little things are indeed little, but to be faithful in little things is a great thing” (“Her Words,” *EWTN*).

“Intense love does not measure, it just gives” (“Mother Teresa,” *Brainy Quote*).

“Give yourself fully to God. He will use you to accomplish great things on the condition that you believe much more in His love than in your own weakness” (“Her Words,” *EWTN*).

Who inspired Mother Teresa to care for the least and the last? It was Jesus—the ultimate Servant of God. This study examines His example and words about servanthood and their meaning for us today.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

Chapters 1–12 in the Gospel of John describe Jesus’ public ministry. He performs various miracles and explains their significance to crowds of people. Some who hear Him have faith in Him. But many others reject and even want to kill Him (Fee, p. 305).

In chapters 13–17, the focus narrows to Jesus’ private ministry with His disciples, those closest to Him. In the intimate setting of the Passover meal, Jesus discusses His ministry: what has happened, what will happen, and what it all means. Jesus uses this time to prepare His disciples for His upcoming crucifixion and resurrection so they will be able to understand it afterwards (Barrett, p. 363; Burge, p. 363).

STUDY THE PASSAGE: JOHN 13:1—17

Pray that the Holy Spirit will reveal the servant heart of Jesus to us so we will be inspired and empowered to be more like Jesus in serving one another.

1. In verses 1–3, what things does Jesus know? What is He aware of?

These verses reveal Jesus’ state of mind as He prepares His disciples for what He knows is coming next in God’s plan for Him (Beasley-Murray, p. 232). He knows a number of things:

- Jesus knows His time on earth is ending soon. He will leave this world and go to the Father (v. 1). Typically we think leaving this world just means dying. However, Jesus knows that besides dying an agonizing death on the cross, He will be raised from the dead and ascend to be with the Father (John 16:16–22; Wright, p. 44). These remaining hours with His disciples are His last chance to prepare them for what He is about to endure.
- Jesus has always loved His disciples. Though He knows they will all abandon Him in a few hours, He still loves them “to the end” (v. 1, TNIV). [The NIV has “He now showed them the full extent of His love.”] This phrase, “to the end,” is the Greek word *telos*. It can also be translated as “to the maximum.” In this verse, it probably means both: Jesus loves His disciples until His last moment and He loves them completely (Barrett, p. 365; Carson, p. 461).
- Apparently Jesus knows Judas Iscariot is planning to betray Him (v.2). He alludes to this earlier (John 6:70–71) and will make it more obvious later during the meal (John 13:18–30).
- Finally, Jesus knows who He is. He knows God has sent Him to this world and that He will return to be with God. He knows all things are under His power and that the Father gave Him this authority (v. 3, Barrett, p. 366; Carson, p. 462).

2. In verses 4–5, what does Jesus do for His disciples? Is there something unusual about this? In Jesus’ culture, who would be expected to do this task?

Jesus lays aside His normal clothing and puts on a servant’s garb. Then He washes His disciples’ feet. According to social customs in Jesus’ time, washing feet was something that servants did, not leaders, teachers, rabbis, or kings (Burge, p. 369). Jesus’ foot washing would be unthinkable in first century society (Burge p. 369). A great man or leader would never do a servant’s work. That would be beneath his status. He would have more

important things to do. Some Jewish teachers said that washing feet was even too menial a task for a Jewish slave. Only Gentile (non-Jewish) slaves were considered low enough to wash feet (Beasley-Murray, p. 233; Barrett, p. 366; Carson, p. 462).

Our more egalitarian society makes it hard for us to imagine the enormity of Jesus' action. It would be like the President of the United States coming to our house, emptying our garbage, and cleaning our toilets (Burge, p. 381). We could not fathom that he would do such a thing, much less why!

Jesus washes His disciples' feet, but not out of weakness or inferiority. As He says later, He is the Lord and the Teacher (v.13). He is their leader. Even more, He is the King, the Ruler over all things. Yet His action demonstrates how leaders and rulers should act (Mark 10:42–45; Luke 22:24–27). He washes the disciples' feet because He is God. Jesus came to show us what God is like. Both his foot washing and crucifixion demonstrate how lavishly God loves us (Wright, p. 45).

3. In verses 6–9, how does Peter react to Jesus washing their feet? Why does he react that way? How do you think he feels?

Peter tells Jesus He shouldn't wash His disciples' feet. Given his culture, Peter's reaction is completely understandable. He probably thinks Jesus should behave like teachers or leaders are expected to (Carson, p. 462). Maybe he thinks Jesus should not embarrass Himself by doing the work of a slave or Gentile. Or perhaps Peter feels embarrassed by Jesus' behavior.

Peter's reaction is like John the Baptist's response when Jesus came to John to be baptized. John the Baptist said he was not worthy to baptize Jesus or even untie His sandals (Matthew 3:11–15). Peter may feel unworthy for Jesus to wash his feet; he thinks he should be washing Jesus' feet instead.

The other disciples may feel the same as Peter, but are too stunned to say or do anything. They are probably wondering, "Where is that servant who should be washing our feet?" Maybe some are wishing, "I should have washed everyone's feet and avoided this embarrassment of our Master doing it" (Carson, p. 462–463).

Luke's account (Luke 22:24–27) reveals that during the Last Supper the disciples were also arguing about which of them was the greatest. As Jesus responds to their argument, He makes His choice of the lesser, servant role explicit, "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (v. 27). Jesus assumes the role of "the one who serves" and each disciple is "the one who is at the table." Perhaps Jesus washes their feet in response to their argument about who was the greatest. If so, the disciples may feel convicted or ashamed about their argument.

In John 13:7–9, Peter tells Jesus, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answers that Peter has no part with Him unless He washes Peter's feet. Suddenly Peter completely reverses his attitude: he wants to be washed all over, not just his feet! He wants to be part of Jesus as much as possible (Burge, p. 370; Carson, p. 464).

Jesus replies to Peter, "Those who have had a bath need only to wash their feet; their whole body is clean." His meaning seems unclear at first. Ordinarily, we think that to be clean, we must be washed all over, not just our feet. And, after bathing, we think we are completely clean; so our feet do not need any rewashing! However, Jesus is not washing

the disciples' feet just so they will be clean externally. His washing also symbolizes the cleansing Jesus accomplishes through His death on the cross. This once-for-all cleansing is sufficient to cleanse us from sin and never needs repeating (Hebrews 7:27, 9:12, 9:26, 10:10; Barrett, p. 368; Carson, pp. 464–465).

💡 **How would you feel if you were Peter? How would you react to Jesus washing your feet?**

💡 **How do you react when someone tries to do something menial for you?**

💡 **How do you want others to react when you do something for them?**

4. In verses 10–11, why does Jesus say that “not every one of you” is clean? Who is not clean? How does Jesus treat that person?

Because Judas will betray Jesus to His enemies, he is the one that is not clean. Even though Jesus washes Judas' feet, Judas is not cleansed from sin (Barrett, pp. 364, 369). Jesus' washing does not force someone to be clean inwardly. Each person must receive the washing and allow Jesus to cleanse his or her heart (Beasley-Murray, p. 234).

We think of Judas primarily as Jesus' betrayer. Therefore, it may be hard to grasp that he was one of the twelve key disciples that God told Jesus to appoint. Judas was not some outsider who infiltrated Jesus' circle. He lived with and taught them throughout His ministry (Mark 3:13–19; Luke 6:12–16). Jesus gave them all, including Judas, authority to cast out demons and heal sickness (Matthew 10:1–4; Mark 6:7–13; Luke 9:1–2). Judas was included among these men closest to Jesus who would become the church's first leaders. Perplexed, we ask, “How could someone who walked with Jesus, performed miracles in His name, and was so close to Him, turn away to Satan?” (Matthew 7:21–23; Beasley-Murray, p. 233; Burge, p. 385). Judas' betrayal and fall warn us that we are never immune to sin, no matter how righteous or close to Jesus we think we are. We continually need to rely on Jesus to wash away our sin.

Amazingly, Jesus already knows Judas will betray Him. He knows Judas will not be clean after Jesus washes his feet (John 13:11, 18, 21, 25–27; Carson, p. 466). If we knew a traitor was in our midst, we would expose him and drive him out! Before exposing Judas (John 13:25–27), Jesus first serves him by washing his feet. Jesus demonstrates He loves Judas in spite of what Judas will do (Burge, p. 368). Jesus does not even drive Judas out. Once exposed, Judas decides to leave. By humbly serving His traitor, Jesus vividly shows us how to obey His command: Love your enemies (Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:35).

 **Are you willing to serve those who treat you badly? How have you responded in the past? Why?**

5. In verse 12 Jesus asks, “Do you understand what I have done for you?” As we consider the symbolic meaning of His actions, how would you answer Him?

The most obvious meaning of Jesus’ foot washing is to demonstrate Christian love and servanthood (Beasley-Murray, p. 231). As our leader and teacher, Jesus not only tells us what to do, He shows us. He gives us a pattern to copy (Wright, p. 47).

Jesus’ washing feet like a servant also has a symbolic meaning (Carson, pp. 458—459). Jesus provides an interpretation of His upcoming crucifixion. By suffering on the cross, He humbles Himself as a servant to all. In dying, He cleanses from sin all who receive Him (Beasley Murray, p. 231; Barrett, p. 363—364). Although we are to follow Jesus’ example of servanthood and love, we must realize that only Jesus can cleanse someone from sin (Burge, pp. 368, 371).

6. In verses 12—17, what does Jesus say we should do? Why should we do it?

Jesus tells the disciples, “You should also wash one another’s feet” (v. 14). Occasionally in church history, His command has been implemented as a ritual: Christians literally wash one another’s feet or church leaders wash others’ feet. However, Jesus’ command is usually understood to encompass any kind of service, not just washing feet (Burge, p. 379).

Since Jesus is our Lord and our Teacher, we should obey whatever He asks. Jesus shows that even though He is greater than everyone, He is willing to humble Himself and serve everyone. Since no one is greater than Jesus, no one can claim, “I am too great to serve others.” Just as He took the lowest position and served His disciples, we should look for opportunities to serve one another, even if it means humbling ourselves (Carson, p. 468).

Jesus demonstrated His love by washing His disciples’ feet but even more so by dying on the cross for everyone. Therefore, His death should motivate us even more to love and serve one another (1 John 4:10—11, Burge, p. 381).

 **Why is it hard for us to follow Jesus’ pattern of servanthood?**

Our pride makes it hard to serve others. Like the disciples, we want to be the greatest, not the least—therefore we do not serve. Or when we do serve, we serve so others will notice; we want them to see what great servants we are. This attitude fuels our pride! However, true humility is doing “the little, annoying, messy things” that no one wants to do. Examples are: staying late after a meeting to clean up or taking out the garbage—even when no one notices (Wright, pp. 47—48).

Besides the temptations of pride and flaunting our humility, servanthood provides other opportunities for self-deception. We might serve in little, easy ways to avoid doing something costly. While serving, we need to embrace what matters to our Heavenly Father. True servanthood requires looking away from ourselves to the

world around us and the people in it. With the Father's love, we can take on any task, big or small, that God gives us to do. The "challenge [is] to follow Jesus all the way to the cross, to lay down life itself in the service of God and the world he came to save." This means not only dying for others to serve them, but also giving up what we want to do. We can lay down our lives and pride in obedient service like this. Then we may find Jesus working via the Holy Spirit through our words and deeds, thus showing His love to others (Wright, p. 49).

Jesus can serve the disciples knowing He will die for us all precisely because He is confident of His relationship with God. He knows He has come from God and is returning to God (John 13:3, Burge, p. 368). The key to imitating Jesus' servanthood is being in relationship with God. This includes knowing God created us, loves us, and will resurrect us to Himself. We need to spend time daily listening for God's direction and then obey Him by serving others (John 5:19–20; Wimber, pp. 18–32). As Jesus teaches and demonstrates in this passage, it is not enough to merely know you should serve others. Actually serving is what brings you blessing (John 13:17; Beasley-Murray, p. 236).

APPLICATION

 **In our society, typically we do not wash other people's feet. What are some relevant, practical ways we can serve one another in our group?**

 **Jesus chose one of the lowliest tasks in His culture. How can we follow His example?**

Consider some lowly tasks your group can do. Think of things that few people enjoy or find gratifying (such as changing diapers or cleaning gutters).

 **How might we serve people outside our group?**

Consider serving marginalized or neglected people (such as those in prison, in nursing homes, or the homeless).

WRAPPING IT UP

According to John's gospel, the night before Jesus was crucified, He commanded His disciples to love one another (John 13:34, 15:12, 15:17). He said others would recognize that they were His disciples by their love for one another (John 13:35). He prayed they would be one so that the world would believe in Him (John 17:20–23). Before telling them to love one another, He first showed them how, by washing their feet like a servant. This humble act foreshadowed His ultimate act of service—dying on the cross to save us from our sin. We are to follow Jesus' pattern of humble service. We are to lay down our lives for our friends and others (John 15:13) by considering their needs and serving them.

We conclude our study with an extraordinary example of how to serve like Jesus. In his commentary on John's Gospel, Gary Burge describes a man who served his wife lovingly, humbly, and sacrificially (R. McQuilkin, "Living by Vows," *Christianity Today* 35 (Oct. 8, 1990): 38–40; the full story is now in a book, *A Promise Kept* (Carol Stream, Ill.; Tyndale, 1998; qtd. in Burge, pp. 382–383):

To serve *as Jesus served* requires humility. It requires sacrifice. It means taking up the "lesser role" for the benefit of someone else. Many stories illustrate this point, but one always comes to my mind. Dr. Robertson McQuilkin was for many years the president of Columbia Bible College and Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. In about 1980 Dr. McQuilkin began to see signs of memory loss in his wife, Muriel. For the next decade he watched as his wife's career of conference speaking, radio shows, and television began to erode and disappear. In the mid-1980s she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's and her deterioration continued to advance rapidly.

This situation naturally posed a crisis for Dr. McQuilkin. As president of a thriving college and graduate school, how could he meet the needs of both his wife and his job? Many Christian friends encouraged him to give Muriel over to professional care (i.e., a nursing home), but he could not bear the thought. As her condition worsened, he made a decision that was "a matter of integrity" (his words). He resigned from Columbia to care for his wife full time. "It was a choice between two loves," he writes. Columbia wisely and compassionately supported his decision and began seeking his replacement.

The striking thing about McQuilkin's personal story is its theological underpinnings. For some, he was choosing a task at remarkable social and professional cost. He was throwing away his career. Not so. His decision was grounded in God's love for him, experienced also through Muriel's unselfish forty-two-year love for him. This made his service a joy.

"It is more than keeping promises and being fair. As I watch her brave descent into oblivion, Muriel is the joy of my life. Daily I discern new manifestations of the kind of person she is, the wife I always loved. I also see fresh manifestations of God's love – the God I long to love more fully."

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SERVANTHOOD

Study 3

LOVING AND OBEYING GOD: OUR METHOD FOR SERVANTHOOD

John 5:16—30

By Duane Anderson

[Jesus], being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to advantage; rather made himself nothing taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

Philippians 2:6—7

The Father is God sending and commanding, the Son is God sent and obedient.

C. K. Barrett

In my own daily walk with Jesus in over thirty-seven years now as a Christian ... my daily quiet time with him has been a crucial, foundational part of my friendship with him. He is my best friend. And through Jesus, I have come to know the Triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as my best friend, having been drawn into the eternal community of love, the eternal community of the Trinity. ... And out of this deep, intimate, loving friendship, with him and in him, he has led me, by the power of the Holy Spirit, into true servanthood in loving ministry to others. I am serving my best friend who loves me more than I can ever realize this side of the kingdom. My ultimate identity is as a friend of Jesus, a friend of God, and a beloved child of God (John 1:12). True servanthood is not slavery to others or doormat servitude. True servanthood is relational. It starts with passionately longing for and loving Jesus with full surrender or the sweet ache of letting go. There is deep joy, comfort, and fulfillment in knowing Jesus so intimately. True servanthood is founded on deep friendship with Jesus: Walking with Jesus daily. True servanthood is all about serving our best friend.

Siang-Yang Tan

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AIM OF STUDY

- To comprehend that God loves us so much that He wants to show us what He is doing and invite us to participate fully and unconditionally, knowing that it will bless others and us.

KEY VERSE

“For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed.”

John 5:20

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Servanthood Series*”:

1. *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
2. *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

What are some mannerisms that you have picked up from your parents (for good or bad)? How do you suppose you picked up those mannerisms? As the years go by, do you find yourself becoming more, or less, like your parents?

Leaders may use their own examples or draw on the author’s given here.

When I was a kid, I often noticed mannerisms of my parents—the way my mother would hold her head when she watched television, or the way my father furrowed his brow when he was confused or was focusing on a problem. Later I started to notice that I was beginning to display some of these same mannerisms, and wondered how it had happened. Was it genetic? Was it conditioning? Or was it something more?

(Yes, I hold my head like my mother while watching television, and I furrow my brow much the same way as my father when confused or focused.)

This study looks at an event in Jesus’ life that illustrates how He is like His Father, and helps us understand how we can be more like Him.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

John writes his gospel from a post-resurrection perspective in order to reassure believers and to convince unbelievers. He wants us to know that eternal God has come in human form to reveal the Father and display His love. John indicates that the long awaited Jewish Messiah has come, but He is also the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice of God, who takes away the sin of our world. John presents Jesus as the full revelation of God who brings the foretaste of God’s kingdom (Fee and Stuart, pp. 304–305).

In Chapters 1–4, John describes the incarnation and presentation of Christ (Wilkinson and Boa, pp. 335, 339). Without telling much of the birth narrative, John helps us see the Son of God arrive on earth. Throughout Chapters 2–12, John refers to various feasts of the Jewish calendar. The feast references move the story along chronologically and introduce imagery from the ceremonies that become the backdrop for Jesus’ self-revelation in signs and discourses. But Jesus’ statements and conversations provoke disputes with His opponents (Reid, p. 572). Chapter 5 begins the description of the Jewish leaders’ rejection of Christ and opposition to the Son of God (Whitacre, p. 124; Wilkinson and Boa, pp. 335, 339). John is building evidence to convince the reader about who Jesus is, in order “that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

Chapter 5 is a crucial juncture in John’s gospel. He selects a pivotal question about Jesus that will echo throughout the rest of the gospel, and indeed throughout the rest of history: Who is Jesus? Is He God—to be worshipped and followed? Is He an evil, proud man wanting inordinate honor, or a lunatic to be locked up? C.S. Lewis describes the possible answers we have in his classic book, *Mere Christianity* (pp. 55–56):

In the mouth of any speaker who is not God, these words would imply what I can only regard as silliness and conceit unrivalled by any character in history. ... You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God.

The choice about His identity we each make and the actions resulting from our decision will ultimately determine His view of us on Judgment Day.

In chapter 5, John confronts us with the very question, “Who is Jesus?” And by extension, “How will we respond to His and the Father’s purposes and plans in the world?”

STUDY THE PASSAGE: JOHN 5:16—30

Pray that we will grow in our capacity to serve others because we are increasingly able to see what God is doing, to obey Him, and to comprehend His love for us and others.

1. What “things” referred to in verse 16 is Jesus doing on the Sabbath that result in the Jewish leaders persecuting Him?

There is only one specific account immediately preceding verse 16—the healing of the man at the Pool of Bethesda. However, the language suggests that Jesus has a pattern of “working” on the Sabbath (and, in this case, commanding another to work by picking up his mat). What the Jewish leaders identify as Sabbath-breaking results in their decision to persecute Him (Carson, pp. 246–247). It is curious and revealing that the Jewish leaders focus on what they consider to be Jesus’ Sabbath-breaking, rather than on the amazing nature of the healing miracle itself.

2. Why do the Jewish leaders begin to persecute Jesus (vv. 17–18)? Why does their persecution escalate so quickly?

At first it seems that they begin to persecute Him simply because He is working on the Sabbath, breaking the law God gave Moses in the Ten Commandments. However, Jesus' answer in verses 17–18 inflames them to the point of wanting to kill Him! We may wonder why they would become so angry. Jewish belief is that only God could work on the Sabbath. It is bad enough to be found working on the Sabbath, but Jesus is also claiming special relationship with the Father (Whitacre, p. 125). Notice how Jesus wisely phrases His answer to include Himself in the work that His Father is doing, rather than claiming to be undertaking His own work, which would have set Him up as a rival to God rather than an ally.

Until this point in the gospel of John, Jesus has not upset the elite circles of Jewish leaders. However, their question, “Who is this fellow...?” (v. 12) shows their alarm that someone would defy the prohibition against working on the Sabbath. Of course, they have taken the Old Testament law to rest on the Sabbath to mean that 39 categories of work could not be done! Now they see their rules being contradicted, and this makes Jesus a threat to their power (Carson, pp. 244–245). They do not want to permit the 10 Commandments to be so blatantly disregarded. They also may not want to relinquish their sense of being closer to God and higher than any other religious authority.

3. Do Jesus' answers satisfy the Jewish leaders? Should Jesus try to satisfy them? Why or why not?

Jesus' answers assume “the divine prerogative of ‘work’ on the Sabbath (giving life and judging [taking life])” (Fee and Stuart, p. 310). Thus, He is indirectly claiming divinity, which deeply offends His audience (Carson, p. 349). Jesus' claim is clear to the Jewish leaders, and they react accordingly, extreme as it may seem to today's reader. Jesus' use of the pronoun “my” in “my Father” emphasizes His uniqueness and differentiates the more intimate Father/Son relationship He is claiming as His own from the general understanding that God is the Father of all. Jews would sometimes pray corporately to God as “our Father,” but an individual Jew would never use such language (Carson, p. 349).

4. According to verses 17–23, how does Jesus know what to do?

The key to Jesus' ability is not in a *method* of listening (such as listening prayer, Bible study, observing the world around Him, etc.), but a close *relationship* with the Father. The Father's intimacy with the Son allows Jesus to see what the Father is doing. This closeness and identification with the Father's work is expressed here in the Father and Son phrases.

5. Why does the Father show Jesus what He is doing (vv. 19–20)?

The Father reveals Himself because He loves Jesus. Milne writes (p. 98):

This unique inter-relationship of revealing and imitating (19) is rooted in the mutual love of Father and Son. Thus the revelation of God in the Son is finally grounded, not only in the love of God for the world (3:16)—a love which moves the Father to impart himself to sinners, but also in the eternal love of the Father for the Son—a love which moves the Father to reveal his deeds to the Son. The Father loves the Son and shows him all he does (20). This is holy ground indeed.

How can we “see” what the Father is doing? How can our closeness to God give us not only the capacity to see, but also the desire to participate in our Father’s work?

You might want to read the quote by Siang-Yang Tan on the cover page of this study and ask the group to reflect on developing a friendship with Jesus and serving in that context. Jesus served God out of their intimate relationship. We are invited to share in this, too. This question could also tie in with a final application question about how to listen to the Father this week for direction in serving.

Describe a time in your life when you saw what God was doing and you participated. How did participating make you feel about God, about yourself, and about others?

6. How many times does Jesus use the terms “judge” or “judgment” in this passage (vv. 22–30)? Explain in your own words what Jesus is communicating.

Jesus uses “judge” or “judgment” a total of six times (vv. 22 twice, 24, 27, & 30 twice).

God has stated that He is Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25b; 1 Samuel 2:7–10; 1 Chronicles 16:33; Psalm 50:3–4; Ecclesiastes 3:17). He judges His people in the Old Testament and through His prophets proclaims judgment on the nations. His judgment against sin flows from His holy character. While He maintains His holy standards, He also demonstrates love and mercy when He repeatedly forgives those who turn to Him. The New Testament confirms that at the end of the age, there will be a final judgment when all will be judged, both great and small (Matthew 25:31–32; Acts 17:30–31; 2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5; Revelation 6:10).

Jesus makes it clear that the office of Judge has been entrusted to Him, whether in the present or at the last day (Carson, p. 254). Furthermore, given John’s post-resurrection perspective, Jesus is not only (to be) judge, but also our salvation and substitute. It is like the old story of the man before the judge, condemned to death by his actions, indictment, and conviction. When the judge pronounces the death sentence, he then steps from his bench, removes his robe, stands on the courtroom floor, and offers to die in place of the guilty man. The sentenced man has to choose whether to receive the gift or not. Our judge and substitute are one and the same—Jesus. How amazing is what Jesus is claiming in this

passage! God has paid our death sentence and welcomed us to come to Him simply through faith in His Son, Jesus!

Note: The term “Son of Man” (v. 27) is probably a simplified term that refers to three factors that uniquely qualify Jesus to be judge. First is the allusion to the apocalyptic Son of Man in Daniel (Daniel 7:13–14), who receives the prerogatives of deity. Second is that Jesus Himself became a man; He understands what it is like to be human. Third is that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God; those who reject this revelation are subject to judgment (Carson, pp. 257-258; Milne, pp. 99–100).

7. Since Jesus is to serve the Father as judge, what is His motive in judgment (v. 30)? Compare His motive to the motive of the Jewish leaders?

Clearly Jesus’ motive is to please the Father (“him who sent me”). The motive of the Jewish leaders is quite possibly a mixture of a genuine desire to honor God and a hidden (possibly even to them) desire to maintain power in the community.



What motivates you when you attempt to serve God?

Our motives are usually a mixture as well. This would be a good opportunity in the study to reveal and confess our mixed motives for serving, and to pray for one another if needed or desired. Leaders could use this as part of the final application question. However, it would be good to encourage some practical step to take through the week as members become aware of selfish motives when they serve.

APPLICATION


Remember you cannot answer every question, so select one that best suits your group.



How can the intimacy of Jesus and the Father inspire our relationship with God and our quest to serve? Or... How does the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father, which is imparted to us, affect our love for God and our love for others?

Simply put, God the Father loves us, just as He loves Jesus. This is not because we are loveable; it’s simply because He chooses to love us and to display His love to the world through relationship with us. His love compels Him to show us what He is doing and where we can serve Him. We can count on His showing us these things because He wants us to participate in His kingdom work.


Also, just as the love the Father has for the Son and the Son for the Father are inextricable from one another, so our love for God and our love for others must be inextricable from one another. See 1 John 4:7–5:3 and James 2:14–26.

 **How is our relationship with Jesus to mimic that of Jesus and the Father?**

The Father is still at work through His Son and Spirit. We are called to participate in their kingdom work just as Jesus was carrying out His Father's work while He walked on the earth. Although our faithfulness waivers, Jesus is our model for listening to, submitting to, responding to, obeying, and loving the Father. By adopting Jesus' mindset, we can grow more consistent in each of these as we rely on His Spirit at work within us.

 **Where do our own will and decision-making fit into servanthood? What can we learn from Jesus about this?**

Jesus' and the Father's wills are perfectly aligned with one another. Although our will has been misaligned with God's will because of the Fall, the more intimate we become with God, the more our wills will coincide. If we find that our decisions are far from what God asks, we can be assured that what God desires will still be done, and that He can bring us around to what He is doing. If we persist in seeking God, repenting of sin, and watching for evidence of His work, He will show us the way of servanthood.

 **How does knowing what Jesus is doing make our path plain? How can we approach the many opportunities to serve without being overwhelmed into inaction or overworked into exhaustion? In what ways will our serving be impacted?**

By putting intimacy with God before acting for God, we can be more aware of what He is doing. This can give us more certainty, focus, energy, determination, assurance, greater love for and greater impact on those we serve. As we obey Him and carry out His work, we will also grow closer to God. We can say yes to what He is giving us to do, and no to everything else. What freedom He offers us when we stop trying to serve on our own and instead seek to know and follow Him! This lifestyle brings joy rather than feelings that serving God is slavery and drudgery!

 **In what ways can we as a group grow in hearing God and understanding how He wants us to serve?**

WRAPPING IT UP

John 5:16–30 establishes the authority and divinity of Jesus. It also reveals the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father. Their reciprocal love is key to how they relate and work. Those who have trusted Jesus for salvation and have been reconciled to God the Father can share in that love and work.

The Son of God, loved by His Father, showed love back by watching and obeying. This attentive and submitted Son is our model for servanthood. We also can listen to, watch, and obey the Triune God knowing that we are joining in His purposes and plans. Along the way our hearts will grow in love for God and others. What an all-sufficient God we love and worship!

Note to Leaders on the Trinity

Some of your group members may have questions about the Trinity, which could arise during this study. Instead of diverting the group from the topic of servanthood, please find another time to discuss the Trinity with them. You may want to consult the *New Bible Dictionary* for more information. Here are some insights we can infer from this passage about God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

“The Son is submissive to the Father. The Father initiates, sends, commands, commissions, grants; the Son responds, obeys, performs his Father’s will, receives authority” (Carson, p. 251).

The Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father. Perfect reciprocal love is characteristic of the Trinity.

The Father does not judge, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, including the giving and taking of life. The Father’s perfect judgment is assigned to the Son, and the Son’s judgment perfectly pleases the Father. The Father’s perfect judgment is carried out by the Son Who is like-minded with the Father.

Both the Father and Son receive honor. Furthermore, honoring the Son also honors the Father. Jesus is not merely an ambassador, but is equal to the Father in honor and authority (Carson, pp. 254–255).

Both the Father and the Son have life in Themselves. This is a particularity of all persons in the Trinity. The triune nature of one God defies analogies and comparisons; it is wholly in its own category—a mystery difficult for the fallen human mind to comprehend. God is Three Persons, but One.

Out of love for the Son, the Father shows the Son all He does. And out of love for the Father, the Son obeys the Father perfectly. By sending the Son, the Father perfectly reveals the Son. By perfect obedience, Jesus perfectly reveals the Father.

The Son does nothing by Himself; He does only what the Father does.

The Son seeks to please the Father.

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SERVANTHOOD SERIES

Study 4

JESUS' SACRIFICE: OUR MESSAGE IN SERVANTHOOD

Matthew 20: 17—28

By Michael Karoly

If you don't understand what it means to be a servant, or if you do understand and fail to act that way, be consoled. You are in the best company. Jesus taught His apprentices, or disciples, how to serve by word and example during His three years of personal contact with them. Yet they were ordinary like you and me. They so thoroughly and so consistently failed to grasp what He meant that the spectacle is almost comical.

John Wimber

The servants in God's household treat everyone else as if they had a higher status in the kingdom. A servant takes care of others first, then himself. The essence of servanthood is to live out your life for someone else. That's the kind of life Jesus led, and that's the kind of life we are called to as believers.

John Wimber

Sacrifice is the heart of authentic Christianity.

Gary L. Thomas

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AIM

- To understand that by serving others humbly and sacrificially we are portraying Jesus' message of servanthood to those we serve and those who watch us serve.

KEY VERSE

“Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—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.”

Matthew 20: 26—28

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Servanthood Series*”:

1. *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
2. *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

**What do you think comes to mind when most people think of the term “servant”?
What value do most people in the world place on a servant?**

Allow group members to respond briefly. Then you may use the following or your own illustration to help guide group members into the passage.

A servant is someone who serves. I think of a butler or a maid first, and then maybe a waiter/waitress. In general, people may see servants as people who are at their beck and call. The person in charge gives orders and the servant carries them out. Servants do what they are told and have no choice in the matter (if they want to keep their jobs.) People may also tend to look at a servant as someone in a lower social rank, or as a second-class citizen

When I participated in a mission trip to Brazil, I served on a team that went to a local village to care for a burn wound on an elderly diabetic woman's foot. Sue (our nurse) removed dead skin from the burn wound and cleaned and dressed the woman's foot. After that, we four prayed for her. She thanked us with a big smile and we left, promising to come back in a day or two and check the wound again. She didn't ask us to do any of this, but Sue felt compassion for her and wanted to serve this woman. When we returned a couple of days later, the first thing Sue did was to clean the wound by washing the elderly woman's foot because the woman had tried to dress it herself with a green ointment which may not have been sterile. As Sue washed her foot, the image of Jesus washing the disciples' feet quickly came to my mind. She cleaned and redressed the area, teaching a family member how to care for the wound. Sue's service was very “hands-on” and, I believe, was just what God was directing her to do.

There were no television cameras to capture the moment, and no one got a “Servant of the Month” plaque for sacrificial efforts. We served, not to receive glory or honor, but out of obedience to follow Jesus' example. In contrast to a worldly manner, Jesus' method of servanthood (demonstrated in His words and actions) was to express unconditional love and concern for the needs of others. As He listened to and obeyed the Father, Jesus placed others

and their concerns over His needs. He took His orders from the Father, and by words and deeds, He brought glory to His Father. As servants of His kingdom, we are to do the same. Jesus wants us to be humble, to sacrifice, and to give God the glory for any good works we might do. In the following study, Jesus needed to remind His disciples of His model for servanthood because the disciples were looking at it from the wrong perspective.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

The Gospel of Matthew was written around the mid-50's A.D. in Palestine, Jerusalem, or Antioch. Authorship has been attributed to Matthew the apostle since the earliest days. Matthew was a tax collector whom Jesus called to be a disciple (Matthew 9:9). In the parallel accounts in Mark and Luke, his name is Levi. His gospel is primarily written for a Jewish audience and focuses on two main themes: Jesus as the fulfillment of Old Testament law, and the kingdom of heaven, which Jesus was preaching. The emphasis of Matthew's gospel is on the Jewish roots of Jesus' teaching and His call to Israel (Cook, "Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew," pp. 7–12).

In chapter 20 Jesus and His disciples are wrapping up their ministry in Judea and Perea and heading towards Jerusalem and Jesus' passion (*NIV Study Bible*, Revised, "Matthew Introduction," p. 1464). After a discourse on "kingdom life and government in the church" found in chapter 18 (Cook, "Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew," p. 13), the disciples struggle with the issue of "greatness" in the kingdom and never quite understand what Jesus is getting at. After Jesus tells them a parable about the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20: 1–16), He predicts His upcoming passion for the third and last time in the gospel of Matthew.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 20: 17—28

Pray that God would open up our hearts to receive Jesus' message of sacrifice in servanthood and that we may be inspired by the Holy Spirit to orient our hearts towards Jesus' desires for servanthood in our lives.

1. Who is Jesus speaking to in verses 18 and 19, and what does He tell them?

Large crowds are following Him, but in verses 18 and 19 Jesus speaks specifically to His disciples. So this message seems to be meant particularly for them to hear, as they will be the ones to witness to others after His resurrection (Cook, "Matthew 20–21," p. 4). Jesus tells them of His betrayal, condemnation, torture, crucifixion, and resurrection in greater detail than before. He reveals that He will be "handed over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified."

Since this is not the first time Jesus has predicted His death, why do you think Jesus is more specific this time?

Jesus had explained His death before in Matthew 16:21 and Matthew 17:22, 23. He wanted to prepare the disciples to be His witnesses. He is showing them that servanthood requires suffering and sacrifice, perhaps even martyrdom (Keener, pp. 307–308). Jesus is speaking as literally as possible so the disciples can understand what is going to happen. However, they still do not seem to understand.

2. Who approaches Jesus in verse 20? What do they do before asking Jesus for a favor?

James, John, and their mother approach Jesus in Matthew's account. Before asking for the favor, they kneel down before Jesus, which shows that they respect Him and recognize Him as the coming King (Keener, p. 309). Note that Mark only says the two brothers come to Jesus (Mark 10: 35–37). Since Matthew usually records fewer details than Mark, it seems important to Matthew to include this woman. James and John's mother appears to be part of the larger following Jesus had (Matthew 27:56). Some Bible scholars believe she is Salome, and a sister of Mary, Jesus' mother. That would make her Jesus' aunt and could mean the two disciples are trying to use their family connections to gain favor. Regardless of whether the mother or the men first voice the request, all three of them are implicated in this incident (Cook, "Matthew 20–21," p. 4).

What favor do they ask of Jesus?

The favor they ask is for James and John to be put in places of honor in the coming kingdom; they want to share His power, His authority, His rule, His status, and honor. James and John are focused on their own importance and securing their future place in the coming kingdom, not the cross (Cook, "Matthew 20–21," p. 5). Jesus has told His disciples three times about His coming passion, and in those descriptions Jesus points out that the path to kingdom servanthood requires sacrifice and suffering, even to the point of giving up one's life (as He was about to do).

Where is the disciples' focus?

Jesus has already told the disciples that those who follow Him would "also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Matthew 19:28). The idea of "greatness" and status is something the disciples had argued about before (Matthew 18:1). But they misunderstand because their focus is on themselves and not on Jesus' teaching and example of humility and sacrifice (Cook, "Matthew 20–21," pp. 4–5).

How can we avoid misunderstanding Jesus' emphasis on serving rather than being served?

3. How does Jesus respond to James, John, and their mother? What do you think He means when He mentions "the cup" in verse 22?

Jesus basically responds that they don't understand what they are asking. He then asks if they are willing to "drink the cup I am going to drink?" Specifically in this context, Jesus is asking them if they can undergo suffering and death. He asks if they could sacrifice even their very lives as servants of the kingdom of God, as He is about to do (Cook, "Matthew 20–21," p. 5). Servanthood in the kingdom of God will result in sacrifice and suffering, and the disciples are failing to grasp that point.

4. How do James and John respond?

James and John respond that they can “undergo” what Jesus is going to experience; the ironic thing is that they actually do. James will give His life as a servant of the kingdom around 44 A.D. (see Acts 12: 1, 2), and John will be exiled on Patmos (see Revelation 1:9) (Tyndale Bible Dictionary, pp. 665, 720).

5. In verse 23, what does Jesus *not* grant and why?

Verse 23 provides a good example of Jesus both as servant and leader. Although Jesus is the coming King who has absolute authority and will judge all people, He is still under the authority of His Father and will not grant what is not His to decide. Jesus does not “overstep His authority.” Jesus is clearly a leader, but He also is a servant who obeys His Father (John 5:19). So He cannot grant what James and John want (Cook, “Matthew 20—21,” p. 5).

 **Optional: Have you ever tried to overstep your authority? How does Jesus model servanthood in these verses while maintaining His authority, and what can we learn from Him?**

Leaders need to remember that there won't be enough time to use every question, so select the application questions according to what you think your group members need.

6. In verse 24, how do the other ten disciples respond when they hear what James and John are requesting?

The disciples are “indignant” or very angry! They are upset with James and John because these two are asking for something everyone in the group wants: status, authority, honor, etc. This is a topic that they have discussed and argued about in the past (Matthew 18:1; Mark 9:33—34; Luke 9:46). Here again they engage in the same conflict of who will be “greatest.”

What is the root problem all the disciples share?

The disciples express a heart attitude of selfishness and pride. They are competing for “greatness,” which is opposite of the message of servanthood that Jesus provides through His actions and words. Jesus exhorts them to change their heart attitude into one of humility and sacrifice. Note James 4:1—2 states that the causes of quarrels are our selfish desires.

💡 **Optional: Have you ever competed for recognition in the church or ever felt envious when another Christian received recognition and you didn't? What might this reveal about us? How could we imitate Jesus when someone gets recognition and we don't?**

Leaders might want to use this question if this seems to be an issue for many in the group.

7. Compare worldly leadership with kingdom (servant) leadership. How do they differ?

Worldly leadership consists of “lord(ing) it over them” and “exercising authority” (Matthew 20:25). In general, a worldly leader commands. It is leadership *apart* from those being led. It is exercising power over someone and can result in corruption and abuse. Sometimes a sense of self-importance leads to an attitude of entitlement in that type of leader.

Kingdom (servant) leadership is the opposite; it puts others and their concerns before personal gain or personal concerns. It is leadership *among* those being led, and to be a “servant” or “slave” is where the greatness lies: it lies in servanthood (*The Teacher's Commentary*, Study 88). Ideally servant leaders do not operate in terms of what they are entitled to; they have renounced their rights and follow Jesus in a sacrificial lifestyle.

How does Jesus define “greatness” according to these verses?

While Jesus does exercise authority over His disciples (Matthew 10; 21: 2, 3), Jesus' point is that greatness does not come from wielding power or authority over others. Rather, greatness comes from serving—humbly placing others and their interests first (Cook, “Matthew 20–21,” pp. 5–6).

8. Thinking of verses 18–19 and verses 26–28 as bookends to this whole passage, what is Jesus' message on servanthood?

In connection with verses 17–19, Jesus is showing that “His sacrificial life culminated in His sacrificial death” (Crawford). He gave His life “as a *ransom* (Greek *lytron* denotes “a price to be paid”) for many” (Matthew 20:28; Cook, “Matthew 20–21,” p. 6). Jesus also says that we should be like Him in this regard—to seek to serve and not to be served, just as the Son of Man came to do. In other words, if Jesus is a humble servant willing to suffer and sacrifice even His own life, how much more should we as His disciples do the same thing (Keener, p. 310)?

💡 **In a world that promotes self-centeredness, how can we encourage one another to serve according to Jesus' model demonstrated in this passage?**

APPLICATION

💡 **What message do others receive when you are serving them? If someone were to ask why you were serving, how would you respond?**

💡 **How can we practice Jesus' selfless servanthood in a specific way this week?**

WRAPPING IT UP

Jesus' servanthood focused on loving and obeying the Father. Because of this, He chose to put the welfare of others first, and it eventually cost Him His life. Other apostles and disciples (like Peter, James, Paul, Stephen, etc.) ended up losing their lives as servants of the gospel while serving in sacrifice and humility. Because we are His disciples, Jesus expects us to exhibit the same heart attitudes of humility and selflessness that others before us have exhibited.

Our world promotes putting our own interests before others, urging us to exalt ourselves. In a world like this, Jesus' message of serving God and others humbly and sacrificially can get lost. Instead, we need to encourage one another and participate with one another in serving God and others as He directs us.

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SERVANTHOOD

Study 5

OUR MISSION IN SERVANTHOOD

Matthew 25:31—46

By Mike Farley

Carol and I believe that the main reason God's hand has stayed on the Vineyard is because of our commitment to the poor and needy... It is my opinion that the best way to become whole is to help others... Our mission is the work of redemption in the world today, and including the salvaging of souls and caring for the physical and social needs of those we have contact with.

John Wimber

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if people claim to have faith but have no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

James 2:14—17

May we never forget that in the service to the poor we are offered a magnificent opportunity to do something beautiful for God. In fact, when we give ourselves with all our hearts to the poor, is it Christ whom we are serving in their disfigured faces. For He Himself said, "You did it for me."

Mother Teresa

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AIM OF STUDY

- To recognize that serving others is essential for genuine followers of Jesus Christ.

KEY VERSES

“Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’

Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’

The King will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’”

Matthew 25:34–40

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Servanthood Series*”:

1. *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
2. *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

You may use this true story or one of your own to help your group think about serving others.

What would our national justice system look like if followers of Jesus regularly visited every prison, every courthouse, and every police station? What would our juvenile crime rate be like if servants of Jesus led after school programs, worked in recreation centers, and mentored youth? What would our cities look like if Christians served as salt and light in every corner of our communities? In the middle of the last century, 200 Christian men worked as Jesus’ servants in their city and state. For 15 years, they worked in the area of public institutions to improve conditions for prisoners and patients, to boost morale among public employees, and to mentor youth in hopes of reducing crime and juvenile delinquency. How did this happen? One man made Jesus’ words in Matthew 25:31–46 his “credo,” while God supplied ample ideas, people, and resources to bring more of “the Kingdom of God on earth” (Ballard).

After hearing a revivalist preach in 1895, Charles C. Stoll (1861–1943) was convinced he could no longer work for a prosperous but unscrupulous oil company. So, despite his need to support a wife, two young sons, and a mortgage, Charles resigned, obtained a small loan, and began his own company distributing petroleum products. He knew that his former employer would send men to spy on him and compete unfairly with his business, but he counted his profession of Christ and his children more valuable than worldly wealth.

George J. Stoll (1887—1982), Charles' older son, wanted to be a missionary, but his father had other ideas. When George finished college in Ohio, he went immediately to Pennsylvania and learned how to refine petroleum products firsthand. George then moved home to Kentucky to construct a simple refinery mostly out of scrap metal. Despite competition, Charles' business improved (Bolt). But when his son wanted to spread the gospel overseas, his father said, "George, you take sales!" and there was no further discussion (Ballard).

So George Stoll channeled his passion for Jesus by working in Sunday school organizations and in his local church. In 1941, he was asked to head the Committee on Institutions for the Louisville, Kentucky Council of Churches. "Convinced that every Christian should find a personal task in the service of the kingdom of God, he found the work of his committee clearly outlined in Matt. 25:31-46: 'I was sick, and ye visited me...in prison, and ye came unto me'" (Meiburg, "Editor's Preface," p. 7). Stoll asked each church participating in the ecumenical council to send pastors and a few lay people to visit the police court in town. Later they talked about what they had seen. Some were deeply touched by the tragedies and needs displayed before them. They invited employees of the court to share their concerns. Soon, conditions improved including fewer misfiled traffic tickets and fewer reports of unscrupulous bonds bailsmen (Stoll, pp. 16—18).

Another committee formed to serve in the local jail. These Christians were to read Matthew 25:36 in which Jesus said He was in prison and the righteous visited Him. The committee men were also asked to pray ten times a day, "Thy kingdom come—and let me help" (p. 23). After promising not to publicly criticize the institution, the men visited and learned firsthand how the jail operated. Later they shared with each other and the jailer what they had seen. Without threats or lawsuits, the jailer began to make changes. When two candidates campaigned for city jailer, both were invited to speak separately with the committee. The laypeople did not endorse either man but shared the improvements they hoped to see. When the next jailer took office, every one of the committee's suggestions was enacted (Stoll, pp. 22—24, 30—32).

More committees formed to visit other institutions in their area: state prisons, state hospitals, and inner city programs for kids. Their first order was to simply observe, gain information about needs in each institution, and befriend the personnel. Stoll made his number one policy to *never publicly criticize* the institution. Instead, through respect, he won the confidence of officials and learned their real needs. He then prayed and encouraged local lay people to serve their public servants and the organizations that cared for those often ignored by society (Stoll, p. 26).

Essential to the growth and results of the committees was recruiting key people for the right job. Each committee needed a chairperson who could lead others; each committee also needed a good communicator, a finance man, a recruiter, a researcher, etc. Every person was given a job that suited his God-given talents and proven skills (Stoll, pp. 73—76). These lay people developed libraries for some of the institutions, training classes for prisoners, and revived a newspaper in a penitentiary. They advised on nutrition and improved gardening at a state prison, fulfilling Jesus' words, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat." They discovered women who were bored and unhappy in jail and obtained sewing machines and fabric so that mothers in prison could make clothes for their children. This helped fulfill Jesus' words, "I needed clothes and you clothed me" (Stoll, pp. 34—37).

They lobbied for changes in parole and probation, and wrote instructional pamphlets for potential jurors. They developed motivational materials for youth and became one on one mentors for young boys at risk. Stoll encouraged women already visiting orphanages to develop a one on one relationship with the girls, too. The lay committees raised funds and provided music therapy equipment, personal hygiene packages, and newspapers for those who were confined to physical and mental hospitals. They sent settlement house boys to summer camp and offered annual appreciation banquets for public employees who often worked in difficult or thankless jobs (Stoll, pp. 39, 44, 69—70).

Stoll felt they had only begun to scratch the surface with 200 men. He stated, “Congregations have more to do than congregate. Laymen have more to do than pass the plate on Sunday and pass the buck on Monday. Each man needs a “magnificent obsession” (p. 72). “Yes, the fields are white with possibilities for service, but the age old question is, ‘Where are the laborers?’ ... It is now time to organize for the purpose of making men [and women] useful. In this task, every member becomes a minister, and the clergyman becomes a coach” (Stoll, p. 78).

Not long before His death, Jesus painted a picture of humans being rewarded or punished based on how they treated others who were in need. Jesus commended those who served fellow believers, because in serving fellow Christians, they had served Him. This Scripture was the pattern and the inspiration for George Stoll and the lay people who worked to bring God’s kingdom to earth. Service has been an important part of the Vineyard movement since its beginning, too. Service to those in need and to those who are laboring to expand the Kingdom of God is a characteristic Jesus expects to see in the members of His body. The passage we are studying illustrates the blessing of service performed as a normal outflow of a Kingdom-oriented life—and the danger of eternal punishment for those who reject the King and ignore opportunities to serve in His Name. Let’s examine Jesus’ words and see what He might say to us today.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

The following material is derived from John Cook’s notes in “Introduction to the Gospel of Matthew” and from pages 904—907 of the *New Bible Commentary*.

Matthew is the first Gospel in the New Testament, but many Bible scholars credit Mark as being the first written Gospel. Matthew’s date of writing and authorship are not clear from the text, but scholars generally agree that the book was written in the second half of the first century—between 60 and 80 AD. The early church consistently attributed the book’s authorship to Matthew. Jesus’ call to Matthew, a Jewish tax collector, is recorded in Matthew 9:9.

The Gospel of Matthew is written from a Jewish viewpoint. As a result, a key theme of the book is “fulfillment”—namely the fulfillment of Old Testament promises, prophecies, and themes in the person of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Matthew goes to great detail in tying together Jesus’ sayings and Old Testament passages to illustrate how Jesus fulfills the Old Testament images:

- Jesus is the Messiah.
- Jesus is the King descended from the line of David.

Another key aspect of the Gospel is that Matthew provides details that don't appear in parallel passages in Mark. Matthew tends to reduce the amount of narrative text, compared to Mark, while providing much more of the text of Jesus' sayings. As a result, Matthew is about 60% longer than Mark.

The *New Bible Commentary* provides the following outline of Matthew (Wenham, p. 907):

1:1—4:16, Introducing Jesus

4:17—16:20, Public ministry in and around Galilee

16:21—18:35, Private ministry in Galilee; preparing the disciples

19:1—25:46, Ministry in Judea

26:1—28:20, The death and resurrection of Jesus

Matthew includes five discourses—Jesus' extended teaching sessions:

- Discipleship, Matthew 5:1—7:29
- Disciples' mission, Matthew 9:35—10:42
- Teaching in parables, Matthew 13:1—52
- Relationships among disciples, Matthew 18:1—35
- Judgment, Matthew 24:1—25:46

This study focuses on the account of final judgment from the fifth discourse.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: MATTHEW 25:31—46

Pray that group members will recognize the importance of serving and the relationship of Christian service to the growth of the Kingdom of God.

1. Would someone volunteer to read Matthew 25:31—46 aloud? At what point in time does the event described in the passage occur?

This passage is not a parable like the other accounts of Matthew 25 (Cook, "Matthew 25," p. 7). Instead it is an account of end time judgment that includes one simile—the comparison of Jesus separating the people to a shepherd separating sheep and goats (*New Bible Commentary*, page 938). A comprehensive review of eschatology is beyond the scope of this study, but there are several key facts in this passage that place it at the very end of the age:

- Jesus returns "in His glory" and all the angels are with Him (25:31).
- Jesus is seated on His throne as Judge of all the peoples of the nations (25:31).
- The end result is a final transition to one of two eternal states (25:46).

Another important aspect of this passage is that it describes Jesus and His role as the final Judge in terms that were applied only to God the Father in the Old Testament (Cook, "Matthew 25," p. 7), making Jesus equal to God. For an Old Testament example, see Joel 3:1—2.

People in your group may have differing understandings or backgrounds regarding end times, but they should be able to study the passage based on the facts listed above. Do not allow the discussion to get stalled at this point—the group needs to move on to the remainder of the study. If people need more comprehensive information regarding end times, we suggest reading Ladd’s *The Last Things* or having an additional discussion at a later date.

Who is present at the event and how are they arranged in the scene described in Matthew 25:31–33?

- Jesus is sitting on His throne.
- The angels are “with” Him, presumably facing the nations.
- The nations—all living people—face Jesus on His throne.
- The nations are then separated into two groups, represented as “sheep” on Jesus’ right and as “goats” on His left.

Jesus’ hearers would have known that Middle Eastern shepherds separated their sheep and goats due to the animals’ needs for different levels of warmth and protection (Keener, p. 360). The more important aspect of the division is the separation of people on Jesus’ right and left. Middle Easterners still associate the right hand with blessing, while they associate the left hand with cursing. As the account continues, the people on Jesus’ right are the blessed group, sent into eternal life; people on Jesus’ left are sent to eternal punishment.

2. What is the basis for the dividing described in verse 33, and what is the ultimate result?

The basis is the way each group has responded to service opportunities to “the least of these brothers and sisters of” Jesus (v. 40). The “sheep” served those who belong to Jesus; the “goats” did not.

The ultimate result is that the people on Jesus’ right (sheep) go away to eternal life, while the people on Jesus’ left (goats) go away to eternal punishment (Matthew 25:46).

The mission Jesus requires of His brothers and sisters is serious, and has eternal consequences. If we do not participate in the mission as Jesus described in verses 35–40:

- Our faith may not be genuine.
- Lost people may not have the opportunity to receive the Gospel of the Kingdom.

3. In this account, Jesus describes our kingdom mission in terms of how we serve the least of those who are His brothers and sisters. Who are Jesus’ brothers and sisters?

There are differences of opinion among Bible teachers and interpreters about how to define “the least of the brothers and sisters of mine” (Matthew 25:40, 45):

- They are Jesus’ disciples, or they are all needy people.

The definition of “brothers and sisters” preferred in the resources used to develop this study is that they are all of Jesus’ disciples (Cook, “Matthew 25,” pp. 7–8; Keener, p. 361; Ladd, *A Theology*, p. 206; Wenham, p. 938; Wright, p. 142). Jesus made a similar definition in the context of Matthew 12:46–50 when He said, “*whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*”

With this definition, people who receive the Gospel Jesus’ brothers and sisters bring are receiving Jesus. And, those who welcome Jesus become members of His Kingdom. People, who reject the Gospel by rejecting Jesus’ brothers and sisters and their message, reject Him. According to George Eldon Ladd (*A Theology*, p. 117), there is:

solidarity between Jesus and his disciples as he sends them forth into the world with the good news of the Kingdom ... in a very real way the disciples of Jesus—his church—are custodians of the Kingdom. Through the proclamation of the gospel of the kingdom in the world will be decided who will enter into the eschatological Kingdom and who will be excluded.

[The term above is pronounced *es-cat´-oh-loj´-i-cull*, which means “relating to the end of time or ultimate destiny of humanity.”]

This dynamic is similar in concept to Matthew 10:8–15, where Jesus sends the 12 out as His representatives who bless or judge others based on how they are received. In other words, with this definition, the reference is to the New Testament church—the body of Christ (Ladd, *A Theology*, p. 117).

George Eldon Ladd also recognizes the possibility of defining “brothers and sisters” as all needy people. Using this definition, Ladd writes (*Last Things*, pp. 101–102):

The brethren of Jesus represent all the poor and hungry and naked and disenfranchised of the world. The blessed who inherit the Kingdom are those who have lived out the life of love which is the essential proof of discipleship to Jesus.

As with the previous definition, the people who are blessed are the people who make up the New Testament church.

While “the least of these brothers and sisters of mine” in this parable probably refers to fellow servants of the gospel, we Christians still have a very clear call to care about needy and lost people in the name of Jesus. For other Scriptures that teach or model this, see:

- Deuteronomy 15:7–8
- Isaiah 58:6–12
- Matthew 6:3–4
- Mark 10:45
- 2 Corinthians 9:1, 6–15
- Ephesians 4:28
- 1 Timothy 6:17–19
- James 1:27
- 1 John 3:16–18

4. List the ways Jesus expects us to serve the least of His brothers and sisters. What resources are needed to perform the services? What will serving in these ways cost Jesus' followers?

Matthew 25:35 and 36 list these forms of service:

- I was hungry and you gave me something to eat.
- I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink.
- I was a stranger and you invited me in.
- I needed clothes and you clothed me.
- I was sick and you looked after me.
- I was in prison and you came to visit me.

The material resources needed to perform the services are relatively small—food, water, basic clothing, etc. In contrast, the personal price of such service may seem very high, especially in our culture where we tend to see serving others as inconvenient or requiring us to leave our comfort zone (Robbins). The price of the service Jesus mentions includes:

- Personal effort, including one-on-one interaction with “the least of these.”
- Time commitments that can interfere with our preferences or commitments.
- Humbling self to serve in ways we may consider “beneath” us or people that make us feel uncomfortable.
- Personal risk which some forms of service may include.

However great the cost, note that Jesus blesses the people who give of themselves and promises them great reward.

 **Do you think it is possible, as a general pattern of living, for a person to be a Christian yet avoid serving others? Why or why not?**

5. Does this passage teach that we are saved by the good works we do? Reread Matthew 25:37 and 44. What is the significance of the fact that neither the people represented as sheep nor the people represented as goats recognize their service or lack of service as a response to Jesus?

The passage does not teach salvation by works. Neither group recognizes what they are doing as serving or rejecting Jesus. They are just living their lives. Their service or lack of service is dependent upon whether the Spirit of God or the spirit of the world is at work within them. Those who serve do not earn salvation by their works, but their works do demonstrate the grace within them—evidence that God is at work in and through them (Cook, “Matthew 25,” p. 8; Ladd, *Last Things*, pp. 101–102).

Other Bible passages which help us understand the basis for salvation and the relationship between saving grace and works include:

- Matthew 20:26–28 (be servants, as Jesus came to seek and serve).

- Ephesians 2:8–10 (saved by grace, to do good works).
- II Timothy 1:8b–9 (saved by God’s power and grace).
- Titus 3:4–6 (saved by God’s mercy through Jesus Christ).

6. For whom is “the eternal fire” prepared (Matthew 25:41)? Why are others sent there as well?

The eternal fire was prepared for the devil and his angels. God is not willing that any should perish (2 Peter 3:9), but some reject Him and His gospel messengers. Those who reject Him must share the punishment prepared for the devil and his angels.

Note that if “the least of these” are *not* all needy people but Jesus’ gospel servants, then to neglect them and their needs is not the same thing as neglecting all needy people. If this is so, then Jesus has *not* set up an impossible standard by which He will judge humanity—care for every needy person on the planet or go to hell! Misinterpreting this parable might cause us to think Jesus is being tricky [they didn’t recognize Him] or very harsh. But if Jesus is condemning the unrighteous for not responding to His disciples, it might indicate that the “cursed” were so hard hearted that they rejected those who wanted to warn them from the very doom now faced.

 **Do you believe in eternal punishment for those who reject King Jesus and others spreading the gospel? How does your belief affect your daily interactions with others?**

 **How does your set of beliefs affect your willingness to serve “the least?”**

7. From this passage, what do you learn about the mission of “the righteous?” How can we fulfill this mission?

This passage defines our mission as spreading God’s kingdom by serving others. Regardless of whether we interpret whom we are to serve as just fellow Christians or all needy people, such service is more than a way of helping people on earth. It is service to King Jesus.

However, meeting only the physical or material needs of others does not fulfill the mission of service. Recall from earlier in the study that the nations are judged on the basis of how they respond to Jesus as they respond to His representatives. Our mission of service also must bring the Good News of the Kingdom of God to those we serve.

We can fulfill our mission in any way that serves people and conveys to them the Good News of the Kingdom of God. We might volunteer in programs and ministries of our church such as the children’s ministry, community center classes, marriage mentoring, audiovisual teams, the food pantry, or the free medical clinic. We as a small group or as

individuals can try to meet others' needs by sharing our resources, time, and skills. We can make a point to listen, pray, or discuss the Gospel with others. And each of us can be a friend in a way that helps another person become aware of the King.

APPLICATION

- 💡 **What are we doing as a group to encourage Kingdom-building service, especially through ministries of our church? Should we do more?**

- 💡 **Let's each ask ourselves: Lord, how do you want me to serve Jesus through involvement in our church's ministries, through ministries supported by other organizations, or through service to individuals?**

- 💡 **Is the Lord calling you to perform a service that is inconvenient or risky? How are you responding? If you are not serving yet, what would help you respond to His call?**

WRAPPING IT UP

It may be that you have not yet made a decision to follow Jesus Christ, so His call to serve does not seem relevant to you. Please discuss your response to Jesus with your group leader or other trusted Christian. As this study pointed out, rejecting Jesus and His commands has serious consequences.

Perhaps you have been serving Jesus and others as you live out your life in dependence upon the Holy Spirit. If that's the case, praise God! Perhaps you can have a role in encouraging others in this group to serve together or to join you in a ministry you're already involved with.

It may be that you realize you haven't been serving, as you know you should. Would you like to make a prayerful commitment today to begin to serve? As a first step, consider getting involved with a service activity led by someone in our congregation. Our church offers many opportunities to serve in established ministries that are ready to help you get started. Our local congregation needs your service, and you can help bring the Gospel to our community and the world.

Leader: If your group has service opportunities scheduled, communicate them here.

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SERVANTHOOD

Study 6

SERVING WITHOUT LOSING HEART

2 Corinthians 4 & 6:3—10

By Jill L. Anderson

Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit, who has been given to us.

Romans 5:3—5

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Galatians 6:9

It is normal for Christians to serve those outside the church. As we allow Jesus to love others through us, we will find great joy in serving.

Steve Sjogren

If you are really in love with Christ, no matter how small your work, it will be done better; it will be wholehearted. ... To work without love is slavery. ... The fruit of love is service. Love leads us to say, "I want to serve."

Mother Teresa

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AIM OF STUDY

- To discover how we, like the apostle Paul, can persevere and not lose heart amidst the sometimes difficult places we serve.

KEY VERSES

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.”

2 Corinthians 4:16–18

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you lead this study, please review the following sections in “Introduction to the *Servanthood Series*”:

1. *Preparation for Leading Inductive Bible Studies*, for helpful hints on how to prepare for and lead this group of studies.
2. *People First Language*, for guidelines about using sensitive and considerate language when referring to people who are physically, mentally, or emotionally impaired.

OPENER

Many people have heard of William Wilberforce, a British Member of Parliament, who fought courageously to end the slave trade in Great Britain. Thomas Clarkson, a fellow student at Cambridge University, waged an even longer and broader campaign than Wilberforce. He pushed beyond abolishing the slave trade to abolishing slavery itself. Clarkson, born in 1760, proved to be a gifted writer. In 1785, he decided to enter an essay competition at Cambridge on the topic, “Is it right to make men slaves against their will?” (www.1911encyclopedia.org). What he learned while researching slavery troubled him. He wrote eloquently, winning the competition! More significantly, he had a spiritual experience: he felt God directing him to devote his life to ending slavery (www.Spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk). Therefore he did not enter the ministry as originally intended (www.1911encyclopedia.org).

He published his prize-winning essay in 1786. Then, for over 50 years, he promoted the end of slavery throughout Great Britain, France, and parts of Germany and Austria (www.1911encyclopedia.org). He pursued gathering first-hand accounts of the horrible conditions slaves experienced on slave ships. His drawing of the crowded conditions in the ship hold is still used today in history texts (www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com). With very little information [and no internet or phone to help him!], he persisted in tracking down a seaman who could tell him about the horrors of capturing native Africans and selling them into slavery (www.1911encyclopedia.org).

Thomas Clarkson is a great example of someone who served the Lord with perseverance. He interviewed 20,000 sailors, and collected the iron handcuffs, leg shackles, thumbscrews, branding irons, etc. used to keep slaves under control on ships. He traveled tirelessly to gather information. When his health began to fail, he wrote even more. Clarkson was key in persuading

Wilberforce to work in Parliament against the slave trade. And it was Clarkson, not Wilberforce, who championed the immediate freeing of slaves.

When the slave trade [but not slavery itself] was abolished by Parliament in 1807, William Wordsworth wrote this poem in honor of Thomas Clarkson (www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com):

“TO THOMAS CLARKSON

ON THE FINAL PASSING OF THE BILL FOR THE ABOLITION OF THE SLAVE TRADE”

MARCH 1807

CLARKSON! it was an obstinate hill to climb:
How toilsome--nay, how dire--it was, by thee
Is known; by none, perhaps, so feelingly:
But thou, who, starting in thy fervent prime,
Didst first lead forth that enterprise sublime,
Hast heard the constant Voice its charge repeat,
Which, out of thy young heart's oracular seat,
First roused thee. --O true yoke-fellow of Time,
Duty's intrepid liegeman, see, the palm
Is won, and by all Nations shall be worn!
The blood-stained Writing is for ever torn;
And thou henceforth wilt have a good man's calm,
A great man's happiness; thy zeal shall find
Repose at length, firm friend of human kind! (www.bartleby.com)

Even after this great honor, Clarkson continued to work twenty-six more years until Parliament freed all slaves in 1833! What kept Thomas Clarkson at his task for so long? Why didn't he give up when slavery traders tried to assassinate him (www.anti-slaverysociety.addr.com)? Why did he write and also form abolitionist groups, establish local committees, and travel extensively—even at the cost of his own health (www.1911encyclopedia.org)? Perhaps it was that Voice that Wordsworth alluded to in the poem, “Hast heard the constant Voice its charge repeat.” In Clarkson's own words, he experienced “a direct revelation from God ordering me to devote my life to abolishing the trade” (www.Spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk), and he never looked back nor flagged in determining to finish his call.

In the passages we are going to study on servanthood, the apostle Paul also mentions some of the hardships he endured to be true to his calling. He often mentions the revelation he received from the Lord Jesus on the Damascus Road, which led him to preach the gospel tirelessly. Let's read some of Paul's own words about why and how he could serve, but not lose heart.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This is background material for leaders. You may decide what to share with your group.

2 Corinthians is generally believed to be two separate letters written to the Corinthians (chs. 1—9 and 10—13) “dealing primarily with Paul’s tenuous relationship with the Corinthian church” (Fee, p. 333). It seems some men had come to Corinth claiming to be apostles. “They were false teachers who were challenging, among other things, Paul’s personal integrity and his authority as an apostle...” (Hughes, p. 1802). Paul also writes to let them know of his next visit to gather the collection for fellow Christians in Jerusalem. This letter is thought to be “the most intensely personal of Paul’s legacy of letters...” (Fee, p. 334). Paul was hurt by the accusations that had been brought against him from the false teachers (Barnett, p. 77). But he does not abandon his ministry to the Corinthians. In Chapter 4, Paul defends himself against these accusations.

STUDY THE PASSAGE: 2 CORINTHIANS 4 & 6:3—10

Pray that the message of 2 Corinthians would penetrate our hearts and minds as we study it and that God’s light would shine in our hearts and give us greater knowledge of God through knowing His Son Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:6).

1. **What ministry is Paul referring to in 2 Corinthians 4, verse 1? See also 2 Corinthians 3:6.**

There are notes at the end of the study if your group needs help understanding the old and new covenants.

Paul is a minister of the new covenant. God promises specific blessings about this new covenant through His prophets (Ezekiel 36:26—27; Jeremiah 31:31—34), and Jesus enacts it by His death and resurrection. God gives us both a new heart of flesh that will respond to Him and His indwelling Holy Spirit that helps us obey Him (Barnett, pp. 65—66).

Paul compares himself and his ministry to that of the false teachers (Barnett, p. 78). Their ministry represents the ministry of Moses and the old covenant “which issues in condemnation and death” (Barnett, p. 78). The old covenant lacked the power to help God’s people remain true to Him and obey Him. Thus, He condemned them and the penalty for sin was death. Paul’s ministry represents the new covenant relationship we have with God because of Jesus’ perfect life and sacrificial death—not the result of anything we could do. Righteousness, reconciliation, and the Holy Spirit characterize the new covenant (Barnett, p. 78).



Do you see yourself as a minister or servant of the new covenant? What other names might we use for our role as Jesus’ servants?

A minister is a servant, and, like it or not, all who follow Jesus are called to serve. We serve Jesus—our King, Master, and Lord. Because we also are included in the new covenant, we may call ourselves ministers as Paul did. Scripture also calls us God’s witnesses (Acts 1:8), His ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20). We are His evangelists, telling others the good news.

This is a good time to discuss that our “ministry” or service to others may not look like Paul’s ministry. For example, some Christians think they aren’t serving God unless they are in full time Christian ministry, such as being a missionary, a pastor, or church staff person. However, we ALL are full time ministers of the gospel wherever God has placed us right now. Whether you are a stay-at-home mom, cashier at a fast-food restaurant, student, bus driver, businessperson, lawyer, teacher, or counselor, you are in ministry to those around you at all times.

At Vineyard Church of Columbus, we have many other opportunities for service outside of our everyday lives: children’s ministry, small groups, the food pantry, the medical clinic, the community center, the café, or the bookstore. We encourage volunteers to do clerical work, decorate for events, do home repairs, tutor, sing, greet visitors, and chauffeur people who need rides. Not all of these “feel” like ministry. But whether you leave your home every morning or never leave it all week, you are still a minister of the new covenant!

2. Why does Paul “not lose heart” as he serves the Corinthians (v. 1)?

He does not lose heart because his focus is not on any one church but rather on the good news of our new covenant relationship with God. Paul speaks of having a ministry due to God’s mercy. He keeps his focus on the mercy God has shown us through the love and sacrifice of Jesus. Paul does not give up serving Christ because he is hurt or frustrated by the accusations he faces. “It is not that he persevered because of inborn ‘true grit’ but rather it is because ‘this ministry’ imparts forgiveness, the Spirit and the glory of God. The effects of ministry are reason enough for continuing with it” (Barnett, p. 79).

Do you lose heart as you minister to or serve others? What things cause you to lose heart when you are serving?

As a wife and mother of four children, I regularly lose heart. I forget my “higher calling” and tend to view the dishes, laundry, and runny noses as drudgery. I get discouraged when the kids fight, the bills pile up, and the laundry just never seems to get done. Remember the context for this question is *servi*ng, so keep the group on track when you ask them when they feel most discouraged while serving others.

Barnett points out (p. 79):

The need for perseverance in ministry is not confined to stipendiary [paid] ministers. The New Testament is clear that every believer is given gifts by God with a view to ministry (1 Cor. 12:7; Eph. 4:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). Times of discouragement come to everyone engaged in ministry, with the accompanying temptation to give up. Whatever our ministry may be, we do well to say with Paul: *Since...we have this ministry, we do not lose heart.*

3. In verse 2, Paul compares and contrasts himself to the false teachers among the Corinthians. How do you stand apart from non-believers serving around you?

Paul is essentially defending himself against an accusation of the false teachers (Barnett, p. 78). He does not use deception or distort the word of God. He speaks truthfully at all times. As we minister to and serve others, we need to remember that we are representing Jesus in all that we do. We can be attractive representatives or ugly ones. Are we honest? Are we hard workers? Do we cheat our employer with how we use our time? Do we speak the truth even when it may not be to our advantage? Can others trust that we will follow through when we make a commitment? Think about the ways we need to be “above board” like Paul in all that we do.

4. Even if we, like Paul, serve correctly, those we minister to still might not fully appreciate or receive our service. Why (vv. 3–4)?

Others may ignore, reject, or mistreat us because the god of this age, Satan, continues to thwart the progress of the gospel. We need to remember that our battle is not one of flesh and blood, but is a battle waged in the heavenly realms with real demonic forces that are at work to diminish the spread of the Kingdom of God on this earth. We shouldn't be surprised when our efforts meet with resistance. However, we need to remember to “serve correctly.” We should be careful to ask God if our sinful attitudes or behaviors are causing others to react negatively to us or His Gospel!

5. When we serve, whom do we serve? To whom does our service point (v. 5)?

Popular t-shirts abound with the phrase, “It's all about me.” A counter culture Christian pop song proclaims, “It all about You.” John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement, used to say, “It's not about us. It's about Him ” (Christensen). Paul did not preach himself. Who do you preach? Are you so wrapped up in your ministry that God is not obvious? An old hymn, “O the Bitter Shame and Sorrow,” sings about the believers gradual transformation in our relationship with God from “all of self, and none of Thee,” to “less of self, and more of Thee,” till the final verse:

Higher than the highest heaven
Deeper than the deepest sea
Lord, Thy love at last has conquered
Grant me now my supplication
None of self, and all of Thee!

Praise God that we are all on the pathway to “none of self and all of *Him!*” May our ministry reflect this transformation so that people encounter Jesus through us.

6. Verse 6 speaks of the “light of the knowledge of God’s glory.” Practically speaking, what is it?

Remember being little and being afraid of the dark? Our favorite stuffed animal by day can become a ferocious monster on a dark night. But when the hall light turns on and illuminates the darkness, light reveals reality. So God penetrates the darkness of our hearts and minds. He reveals who He really is and who we really are through the death and resurrection of His Son Jesus. “As we hear and submit to his word, God shines his light into our hearts, dispelling the darkness of ignorance, guilt and fear. It is a new creation (5:17) of which we are now part, achieved by the word of God” (Barnett, p. 85). This is the God who confronted Paul with His glory on the road to Damascus through the “face of Christ.” Paul already worshipped God. But he became more aware of God through Jesus and received life in His Name.

Leaders may choose one of the two application questions below based on how the discussion is going.

 **As we serve, we often encounter opposition from non-believers and the god of this age. How easily does the opposition you face intimidate you?**

Satan is limited in his power. “Satan, the petty tyrant, is capable only of removing sight; God actually restores sight, through the gospel, so that the spiritually blind can see” (Barnett, p. 85). We serve an omnipotent God who is capable of penetrating the darkness and revealing truth all around us. “The Lord is my light and my salvation—whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?” (Psalm 27:1).

 **How have you been transformed by the knowledge of God’s glory in the face of Jesus? How does this “light” affect your ministry?**

Think about Paul’s conversion. Prior to his encounter with Jesus, he had been persecuting believers. He then made an about face after the Damascus road: he threw his whole being into his new role as missionary and “herald” of the gospel. Do you think Paul went about his new tasks with joy? I do! Paul clearly knew what he once was without Christ and who he became with Him. Does the contrast of yourself “before Jesus” and “after Jesus” give you joy?

7. In New Testament times, treasures were often stored in unassuming clay jars which “had little value or beauty and did not attract attention to themselves and their contents” (Hughes, p. 1807). In verse 7, what treasure is Paul referring to? What type of vessel does God choose to hold his treasure?

The treasure Paul refers to is the “the knowledge...of God in the face of Christ.” We are the clay jars. “The earthen jar in which this treasure is contained, the human body, is subject

to decay and vulnerable to disease and injury. It is, in ultimate terms, powerless” (Barnett, p. 87).

Why does God choose a powerless human to hold his treasure?

God’s divine purpose is “to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us” (v. 7). This is no accident. God reveals His infinite power in contrast to our human frailty. This is one of the chief themes of 2 Corinthians and will be mentioned again at the end of the letter. 2 Corinthians 12:9 says, “My power is made perfect in weakness” (Barnett, p. 87). God chooses to use us weak human vessels so that all we do in His power points back to and glorifies Him.

8. Read verses 8–9 aloud again. What word is repeated throughout these verses? How does this one word give you cause for joy?

The word “but” is repeated four times. The apostle Paul experiences all of these things in his ministry BUT he is not defeated. We identify with Paul because we, too, have difficult experiences as we serve and minister to others. The word “but” gives us cause for joy because it gives us hope that through Him we cannot be overcome by our difficulties.

9. What does Paul mean in verse 10 when he says, “We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body”?

“The death of Jesus in Paul’s body is his way of speaking of the physical and emotional pain associated with his ministry of the new covenant” (Barnett, p. 89). See Paul’s lists of his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 6:3–10 and 11: 23–29. Barnett asserts there is a physical and emotional cost to all ministry (p. 89):

A Christian employee is passed over for promotion or is dismissed because he or she is a godly person who will not bend the rules. A missionary doctor loses her place in the structures of the profession because she has spent ten years in an out-of-the-way hospital. A pastor and his family pass up the security of their own home in obeying the call of God to serve, now here, now there. While there are great compensations, all ministry is costly not only in terms of what one relinquishes to pursue it but also in the accompanying misunderstanding or abuse, perhaps from friends and family.


10. How is Jesus’ life being revealed in Paul’s body (v. 11)? What does Paul mean by “death is at work in us, but life is at work in you” (v. 12)?

Not being defeated when we suffer is evidence of Jesus’ life within us. “The apostolic labours and teaching of Paul, which meant that his own life was being forfeited, were the means by which the *life* of God, through the Spirit, was *at work* within them. ... Jesus’ death, literally speaking, is the *source* of eternal life to humanity; the death of those who minister, metaphorically speaking, is the means of life for mankind” (Barnett, pp. 89–90). So, as we forfeit our lives for others, our sufferings, too, can bring about life in those we minister to or serve.

Of course our sufferings may not bless others if we become full of self-pity, if we complain, or if we draw attention to our heroic efforts as martyrs. It is only as we choose to trust God’s goodness at work in our trials and forget ourselves that we encourage others to place their faith in God or to worship Him with us.


11. In verses 16–17, compare and contrast the outward and inward life of the believer.

Outward Life	Inward Life
Wasting away.	Being renewed day by day.
Focuses on what is seen.	Focuses on what is unseen.
Experiences troubles.	Troubles seem light and momentary. Troubles achieve eternal glory that outweighs difficulties.

 **After you read these verses, do you understand again why Paul says he does not lose heart (v. 16)? When you consider the future, the eternal significance of your service on earth, how do you feel?**

Barnett points out that Paul states this twice. In verse 1, Paul is encouraged because God is working *through* him. In verse 16, Paul seems strengthened because God is at work *in* him (p. 91). In both cases, Paul does not lose heart over his troubles, and we should follow his lead. “For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all” (v. 17).

APPLICATION

 **Read 2 Corinthians 6:3–10 aloud. Again, Paul lists for us his sufferings in ministry. Name some troubles you face in your ministry or service. How has the study of this passage helped you see your difficulties or struggles differently?**

Take some time to pray about the struggles your group members are currently facing. Also spend some time “rejoicing in the Lord.”

💡 **How can we encourage each other this week to not lose heart in serving Christ and others?**

Remember Paul's focus was not on his work but on Christ's. Encourage each other to reflect on Jesus' sacrificial work on the cross, His triumph over death, and His ongoing intercession and help for us right now.

WRAPPING IT UP

Sometimes all it takes is a little change in perspective to see things more clearly. Paul gives us a glimpse of the joy, hope, and perseverance we can experience as believers in serving God and others. May God give us the ability to "fix our eyes on what is unseen."

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Notes for Leaders on the Old and New Covenants

While God's covenants are not the focus of this study, you may want to understand more about the ministry Paul refers to in II Corinthians 4:1 (which refers back to 3:6). In Scripture, a "covenant" is a sacred agreement, initiated by God, stating the terms of His relationship with His people (Grudem, p. 515). In the *covenant of grace*, God promised to be the God of Abraham and his family while requiring faith and obedience (Genesis 12:1–3; 15:1–21; 17:1–27). Since Abraham's time, God has reiterated this promise several ways (Grudem, pp. 519–520).

The *old covenant* signifies the sacred agreement between God and His people made *at Mount Sinai* hundreds of years after His initial covenant with Abraham (Exodus 19–24). God gave His people these laws to indicate how to live rightly and to help restrain their evil behavior. In this old covenant, God specified sacrifices that He would accept as atonement for the sins of the people so they might enjoy God's holy Person in their midst. God's presence was and is always a matter of His grace. So, the sacrifices really pointed to the ultimate atonement [an act that reconciles God with man based on God's terms] that Jesus Christ would make for the sins of the world (Hebrews 9:11–28, Grudem, p. 521). However, as Paul explained, God's making the old covenant did not negate the covenant of grace, based on faith, which He had previously made with Abraham and his descendents (Galatians 3:16–18, Grudem, p. 521).

In the Mount Sinai event, God asked His people to revere and obey Him. Their relationship was to be evidence to the other nations of His greatness, which might attract others to trust and worship Him as well. Sadly, Israel could not fulfill her part of the agreement and broke the old covenant many times through trying to find security in other nations and their gods [idols] (Oswalt, *Chapters 1–39*, pp. 54–60; *Chapters 40–66*, pp. 7–8). Israel's idol worship inevitably caused them to become callous towards additional laws God had given them.

Because of their continual disobedience, God ultimately condemned Israel. If Israel chose to rely on other gods, then Israel would be carried off from her homeland and live among people who worshipped other gods! Thus, God allowed Assyria to remove many of His chosen people in the north. Finally He permitted the Babylonians to overrun His temple and His capital city, Jerusalem, in the south. But, God promised that He would spare a remnant of His own and not always keep them at a distance or in exile. He pledged that He would send an anointed King to rescue them, lead them back, and rule again in their promised land. God did allow His people to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city, but they never saw a full restoration of His kingdom.

Hundreds of years later, Jesus became flesh (John 1:14). He met all the requirements of the covenant of grace and of the old covenant through His trust in and perfect obedience to the Father (John 8:28–29, 17:4; 1 Peter 2:22). Since Jesus never offended Almighty God, He was the only sinless man and the true model of how we are to live in relationship to God. He also fulfilled the purpose God had for Israel—to demonstrate to the nations how to live in perfect harmony with the God of the universe.

In order for sinful humans to be reconciled to God, someone had to remove our sinful offenses against God. So, Jesus became a perfect sacrifice for sin in our place (Hebrews 9:11–28). He gave His life so that the death penalty leveled against us would be met. The *new covenant*, prophesied by Jeremiah and others (31:31–34) was put into effect by the death of Jesus. His blood sealed the new covenant between God and humans. Jesus became the anointed King who could lead God's people out of captivity to sin and death. The new covenant is new because God empowers us obey His laws by sending the Spirit of the obedient Jesus to live in us (Grudem, pp. 521–522). While all the terms are still by grace, the new covenant surpasses the old one because the old one could not produce obedient behavior in us.

And the new covenant offers us a way to deal with any ongoing sin by permitting us to trust in the blood sacrifice Jesus made once for all. When we sin but then repent [turn back to God] and trust in Jesus' work on the cross, God looks on the death of Jesus. God sees the blood of His Son, a sign that a life was sacrificed, and determines the penalty against us has been paid. So, when we repent of sin and trust in Christ's death in our place, God forgives our sin and declares us not guilty. God now sees those who trust in Jesus as sharing in the right relationship He and Jesus enjoy (1 John 1:9–2:2; Hebrews 10:10–14).

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