

Servant of All

*Status, Ambition,
and the Way of Jesus*

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*Jesus sat down, called the twelve, and said to them,
“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.”*

MARK 9:35

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CHAPTER THREE

The Example of Jesus

Now before the festival of the Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. . . . And during supper Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, got up from the table, took off his outer robe, and tied a towel around himself. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the feet of the disciples and to wipe them with the towel that was tied around him.

(JOHN 13:1, 3–5)

Living in a culture in which a pair of Giuseppe Zanotti sandals sells for two thousand dollars, today's readers might well overlook the context assumed by this story. It would be more apparent to those living in the Arab world, where the foot is considered unclean. To show one's heel is an act of disrespect, and striking someone with a shoe is a sign of contempt.¹ Hence, recall the televised pictures in 2003 of crowds striking the fallen statue of Saddam Hussein with their footwear, followed five years later by the in-

1. Margo DeMello, *Feet and Footwear: A Cultural Encyclopedia* (Santa Barbara, CA: Macmillan, 2009), 205.

cident in which an Iraqi journalist threw his shoe at President George W. Bush.

In Jesus's day, social class was marked and reinforced in countless ways,² one of which was foot washing. It was a menial and dirty job, typically reserved for the lowest-ranking person in the house.

Ordinarily, the feet of guests would have been washed at their arrival, and so prior to a meal. That this had not happened in this story is telling. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus's disciples jostled with each other for position. It appears that they expected Jesus to go up to Jerusalem and be enthroned, fulfilling his messianic destiny. Like persons working in the inner circle of a presidential campaign, they imagined a day in the near future when they would ride the boss's coattails into high office. In consequence, they were inclined to see each other as rivals. So, for example, Mark 9:33–34:

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he [Jesus] was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.

And Mark 10:35–37:

James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." And he said to them, "What is it you want me to do for you?" And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."

The glory James and John sought was not of the heavenly variety. Perhaps earthly advancement was neither their initial nor their sole motive in following Jesus. Yet, it was a close companion on the journey and disunited them just as it disunites so many churches today.

2. On the issue of status in the Old Testament, see Ferdinand E. Deist, *The Material Culture of the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 260–75.

We shall look at the disciples more closely in chapter 5, but for now it is enough to understand that each had a strategic reason not to become the designated foot washer. The one who did so would reinforce the others' good opinion of themselves and ensure his own inferior and servile status. The fact that Jesus's act occurred during supper, another breach of protocol, meant that it was a deliberate sign, a prophetic enactment, meant to make a point.

Most conspicuous is the use of the verb "to know." "Jesus *knew* that his hour had come to depart from this world and go to the Father . . . Jesus, *knowing* that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God" took up a towel. Jesus was the only one in the room who knew who he was, and thus the only one who was free to serve.

This story is followed in John 13:34–35 by the command to "love one another, even as I have loved you. . . . By this will all people know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." The kind of love Jesus required was modeled in the foot washing and would soon be fully demonstrated in his sacrificial death, which the foot washing foreshadowed (John 13:7).³ As we shall see, the command to love and the call to serve heedless of social cost are often mentioned in the New Testament as evidence of the church's faithfulness and conditions of its fruitfulness. This short story contains a wealth of instruction on Christian living. Among other things, it shows how one might be attached to yet misaligned with Jesus. Like the disciples, we may be tempted to use Jesus as a new means to a decidedly old set of ends. It shows how fundamentally different was Jesus's own mindset, and it offers instruction on how his community of followers might emulate their master and, in so doing, get along with each other.

There is nothing in the Gospels about which scholars will ever agree fully—indeed, scholars make their living by disagreeing with

3. "It is not by chance that the washing of the feet comes at the beginning of the farewell discourses, since it points to Jesus's laying down his life." Reinhard Feldmeier, *Power, Service, Humility: A New Testament Ethic*, trans. Brian McNeil (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014), 48.

each other—and the jot-and-tittle historicity of this account is no exception. For example, there is dispute as to whether the original point of the story was to teach about humility (John 13:12–17) or the meaning of Jesus’s death (cleansing from sin; John 13:6–11)—or both. Thankfully, such controversies need not occupy us here. The essential datum: this is how the early church remembered Jesus. Indeed, one matter about which the New Testament authors are most fully and firmly in agreement is the character of Jesus, concerning which John is only one vocalist in a chorus of witnesses.

The Mind of Jesus

Let’s return briefly to the passage from Paul’s letter to the church at Philippi mentioned in the Introduction:

If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited [“grasped”], but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2:1–11)

Commentators focus on two issues in this passage: 1) did Paul believe in Christ’s “pre-existence” (that Christ existed prior to his

human birth; compare John 1:1–18); 2) is some or all of the second paragraph—known as the “Christ hymn” (Phil 2:5–11)—pre-Pauline, specifically, a piece of Christian poetry or hymnody quoted by Paul? The answer to both questions is probably “Yes,” although neither conclusion is essential to our present study. However Paul imagined Christ’s earlier life in God, it is obvious that he regarded his presence on Earth “in human form” as an act of self-emptying, which was perfected in a life of obedience and, ultimately, self-sacrifice. The addendum, “even death on a cross,” is significant. Death by crucifixion was shameful and had been regarded by the pre-Christian Paul himself as evidence that Jesus was a false messiah, cursed by God (Gal 3:13). As we shall see in chapter 6, what had once been the center of Paul’s unbelief became in time the very heart of his Christian faith. The cross gave Paul a fundamentally different understanding of God’s presence in the world and so a fundamentally different way of evaluating his own life and calling.

Whether or not the Philippians already knew the words of the Christ hymn, Paul assumed that its characterization of Jesus would be accepted by them and so would validate his conclusion, namely, that his readers should behave humbly toward one another, not acting out of “selfish ambition or conceit,” not prioritizing their own material self-interest.

The Love of Jesus

Echoing John 13, Paul in Phil 2 twice mentions love as the counter to these destructive impulses. For Paul, such love was exemplified in the cross: “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). A close parallel is 2 Cor 8:8b–9:

I am testing the genuineness of your love. . . . For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

Again, the self-emptying of Jesus is the model of love. Paul has in mind here a specific application. He is asking the Corinthians to give generously to meet the needs of the churches in Judea. Like Christ, the Judean Christians had shared their abundant spiritual riches with the Corinthians, so it was only right that the Corinthians should now share their material wealth as an act of self-giving love toward “the saints” in Judea (9:1). Jesus’s example is cited by Paul in a similar way in Rom 15:1–3:

We who are strong ought to put up with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. For Christ did not please himself; but, as it is written, “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.”⁴

Much the same logic is found in 1 John 3:16–17:

We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

“Laying down one’s life” can occur in small acts of kindness as well as large acts of heroism. The great may even become the enemy of the good if we think that self-emptying for the sake of others is attainable only by the most saintly or only under the most extreme circumstances. Instead, it is a discipline to be practiced daily, habitually, even or especially in small matters, which are the training ground of character (Luke 16:10).

First John 4:19 puts the matter succinctly: “We love because he first loved us.” Note that we are equipped to love others by first being loved ourselves. This leads to a crucial distinction. *It is only in a specific and limited sense that the New Testament authors ask us to deny ourselves.* They do not teach self-abnegation, that is, the loss or destruction of self. Christianity is not masochistic, and

4. The quotation is from Ps 69:9.

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it should not promote, much less require, self-loathing. We are asked to give out of the abundance we have received, and for every loss, there is a corresponding, even greater gain. It is essential to understand, however, that this is not necessarily a gain *in kind*. There is no guarantee that finding our identity in God is going to make us famous or wealthy. Indeed, it is overwhelmingly likely to have the opposite effect.

The hard part is not doing what Jesus commands. The hard part is believing in the reality in which Jesus himself believed. If we do that, what he commands is perfectly sensible. What is impossible, and yet what most of us attempt most of the time, is to direct ourselves toward conventional goals while simultaneously trying to follow Jesus. We cannot serve God and worldly status any more than we can serve God and money. Indeed, a major part of what makes wealth so attractive is the status it and the things it buys convey. We do not need God to tell us we matter if our stuff already does the job.

It is worth emphasizing again that this is self-emptying of a particular sort. What follows “death on a cross” in Phil 2? Not destruction. “Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name.” Jesus became nothing in this world, but he did not thereby become nothing. Indeed, the result was quite the opposite, but it took an act of immense faith and courage for him to take the downward step into God’s exaltation. Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and then again in the garden to find an easier way, as we all are tempted to hedge our bets and locate our identity in something immediately tangible and self-evidently gratifying. The perspective of Heb 12:1–3 is similar:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who en-

dured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart.

Once again, Jesus is the example, the “pioneer and perfecter,” who disregarded human shame, endured the cross, and was ultimately exalted to the highest place of honor. Jesus was able to do this, not because he abandoned meaning, but “for the sake of the joy set before him.” Loss in one reality meant gain in another. Likewise, “the joy set before us” ought to encourage us to lay aside those encumbrances that make us less effective disciples, even if that results in hostility from others. In short, self-denial is not the denial of self. It is trading meaning in one reality for meaning in another.

A final illustration is 1 Pet 2:21–23. Jesus was able to endure the world’s abuse because he did not subject himself to the world’s judgment.

For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you should follow in his steps. “He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.” When he was abused, he did not return abuse; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he entrusted himself to the one who judges justly.

Instead, “he entrusted himself” to God. To return to a phrase from the previous chapter, God the Father was Jesus’s “significant other,” the one whose opinion of him he believed.

Jesus knew who he was, and thus he was free to serve.

The Pattern of Jesus

Has anyone but Jesus lived with such utter disregard for social status?

The pattern is established even before his birth. Both Matthew and Luke report that Mary, although a virgin, became pregnant during the time of her engagement to Joseph. This was hardly an

auspicious beginning, nor was Jesus's humble birth at the margins in Bethlehem. He grew up, not in the center of Jewish culture in Judea, but on its periphery, in "Galilee of the Gentiles" (Matt 4:15), in an insignificant town about which Nathanael later quipped, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (John 1:46).

The Synoptic Gospels mention that Jesus was tempted in the wilderness prior to his ministry.⁵ Matthew and Luke provide the more detailed account, in which Jesus is repeatedly given the opportunity to establish himself as the long-anticipated messiah.⁶ The suggestion that he turn stones into bread (Matt 4:3–7) is a temptation to recreate the miracle of the manna in the wilderness under Moses, thus giving substance to contemporary messianic expectation. The second temptation is to make a miraculous demonstration at the site of the temple, the physical center of Judaism—again, tangibly proving that he fulfills his role. The third temptation is similar:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, "All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me." (Matt 4:8–9)

Not coincidentally, the *final* scene in Matthew's Gospel occurs on a mountaintop. It is there that Jesus declares, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me" (28:18). What the devil offers him twenty-four chapters earlier is a short cut. In effect, Jesus can assume all of the power and glory presently enjoyed by the Roman emperor without any cost to himself—that is, assuming that he is willing to do it the devil's way. This, of course, he refuses to do, and so his ministry—and his journey to the cross—begins.

Most of that ministry was conducted back in Galilee, where he made a habit of associating with common folk and reaching

5. Matthew, Mark, and Luke have many common elements and thus are referred to as "Synoptic," which means "viewed together."

6. Feldmeier provides a helpful analysis of the temptation stories in *Power, Service, Humility*, 1–9.

out to the lowly and despised, including tax collectors, prostitutes, and lepers, a tendency which did not go unnoticed by his social superiors. When presented with opportunities to impress leaders, Jesus nearly always used the occasion instead to challenge them (e.g., Luke 7:36–50; Mark 10:2–9; John 8:3–11). His handpicked disciples were themselves an undistinguished lot (Mark 1:16–20). In short, Jesus cultivated relationships with those who could do him the least good and undermined relationships with those whose assistance might best advance him.

Crowds began to follow Jesus, but he seemed bent on disappointing them. According to John 6:15, as a result of the feeding of the multitude, “Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, [so] he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.” We might say that the crowd succumbed to the temptation that Jesus himself had overcome, interpreting a feeding in the wilderness as a sign that Jesus would be the long-desired king. Later in that same chapter (John 6:48–66), Jesus’s speech became so challenging and offensive that “many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (John 6:66). He was decidedly not in the business of winning friends and influencing people, at least not the sort of people whose accolades most of us cherish.

At one point, John the Baptist himself began to wonder why Jesus was not behaving in a more self-evidently messiah-like manner. From prison, he sent followers to question Jesus about his role. Matthew 11:4–6:

Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

Taking offense at Jesus appears to have been the default human response.

Job applicants are known by their references. Note in Matt 11 those whom Jesus cited as his own are the blind, the lame, lepers,

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the deaf, the dead, and the poor. Indeed, God's favor toward the humble and the marginalized is a persistent theme in the Gospels. The same sentiment is found in Jesus's most famous teaching, the Beatitudes.⁷ Matthew 5:3–5:

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

We shall focus specifically on Jesus's teaching in the next chapter. For now, it is enough to observe that Jesus's words are in concert with his actions. What he said, he did.

When Jesus went up to the seat of power in Jerusalem for the last time, he made a public demonstration (Mark 11:1–10 and parallels) in fulfillment of the prophecy of Zech 9:9:

Rejoice greatly, O daughter Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter Jerusalem! Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he, humble and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.

The irony is surely intentional. He is a king, yes, but the sort of king who enters Jerusalem on a donkey, accompanied not by an army but by a motley retinue of common folk.

In the city, he is again presented with multiple opportunities to prove himself to both religious (e.g., Mark 11:27–33 and 12:13–17) and civil (e.g., Mark 15:2–5 and Luke 23:6–16) authorities, which he repeatedly declines to do. Arrested in the night, he is then cruelly abused by Roman soldiers (Mark 15:16–20), who mock what they regard as his royal pretensions, most conspicuously by anointing him with a crown of thorns. He is then stripped and crucified between two criminals. In his agony, he is jeered at by observers and

7. There are two versions, in Matt 5:1–12 and Luke 6:20–31, which differ in significant ways.

abandoned by friends. Finally, he is hastily buried in a borrowed tomb.

One has to wonder, “How did he do it?” This is not simply an abstract theological question. If we are to follow Jesus, to emulate him especially in our character, we need to understand what made it possible for him to live as he did. How was his perspective different from ours? We cannot know enough from this distance to respond fully, but we can find a partial answer in Jesus’s teaching, the subject to which we now turn.

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