Lesson 11  
PRINCIPLE OF SERVANTHOOD

Lesson Text
Matthew 24:45-51
45 Who then is a faithful and wise servant, whom his lord hath made ruler over his household, to give them meat in due season?
46 Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing.
47 Verily I say unto you, That he shall make him ruler over all his goods.
48 But and if that evil servant shall say in his heart, My lord delayeth his coming;
49 And shall begin to smite his fellowservants, and to eat and drink with the drunken;
50 The lord of that servant shall come in a day when he looketh not for him, and in an hour that he is not aware of,
51 And shall cut him asunder, and appoint him his portion with the hypocrites: there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Philippians 2:5-8
5 Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:
6 Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:
7 But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:
8 And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

Focus Verse
Philippians 2:7
But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.

Focus Thought
The King of Heaven and earth took the position of a servant, and by so doing left us an example we should follow.

CULTURE CONNECTION
Every Believer Is Called to Be a Minister!
by Richard M. Davis

It is incorrect to assume that only preachers who speak from behind pulpits are ministers. Every believer is called to be a minister, or servant for Jesus Christ.

We learn this truth from the definition of the New Testament word minister, which means essentially “a servant” or “to serve.” The Lord Jesus has called every believer to serve Him and to serve others within the body of Christ.

What a joy it would be to experience in the church a revival of ministry through “small things.” That is not to minimize ministry or suggest that we do not need ministry
that touches the “large areas” of life. Rather, it is just to point out what a difference in people’s lives the little things can sometimes make.

For instance, how awesome it is to receive a small card from a brother or sister just letting us know he or she was thinking of us and praying for us. Perhaps it could arrive as a plate of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies with a note that you are praying for someone. You might give a $25 gift card to someone going through financial difficulties or invite him to lunch. Or it could be just a word spoken in kindness and concern when one is experiencing a trial.

Little things can mean a lot. If you don’t know what your place of service is within the church, why not start with some little acts of kindness? Little things can become very large for those who receive them.

CONTEMPLATING THE TOPIC

There is no higher place in the kingdom of Heaven than to be a servant. Jesus Himself established the lofty nature of this lowly position when He said, “And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” (Mark 10:44). Not only did our Lord express this maxim, but His life was the perfect example of this truth in action. In spite of being the exalted King of kings, Jesus was willing for our sakes to become a servant who was obedient even to death.

Having observed and benefited from a life so lived, the call now rests on us to offer ourselves as servants to Christ. In the course of this lesson, we will discuss both the example of Christ’s servanthood, His commandment to be a servant, and the benefits of being His servant.

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. EXAMPLES OF SERVANTHOOD

The process of transformation from sinner to believer is paradoxically both the work of a moment and the work of a lifetime. We are instantly changed when we are born again of the water and of the Spirit, but we are progressively fashioned into the likeness of Jesus Christ through the combined effects of preaching and teaching, the direction of godly leaders, the influence of the family of God, quiet times with Him, and other invaluable Christian disciplines.

Much of how Jesus Christ calls us to live is completely contrary to human nature, so we find ourselves sometimes grasping to understand how to weave the principles of Christianity into our daily lives as Christians. The idea of living as a servant in the midst of a “me first” culture is certainly one such challenge. To better help us grasp what this entails, the Scriptures have provided numerous examples that demonstrate what we are called to be.

A. Jesus

Any discussion of a life lived for others must begin with the examination of the life of Jesus Christ on earth. If ever there were one who could claim the right not to serve, it would have been Jesus. To the uninformed, He may have appeared to be nothing special. After all, from the natural perspective, He was merely the son of a nondescript carpenter from a village of such disdain that people immediately held its inhabitants
suspect. “Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?” were the taunting words of derision that surrounded Jesus early in His ministry. (See John 1:46.)

However, we understand that Jesus was much more than just a man. He was the great God of Heaven living among mankind in flesh. He was the Creator of all things! “Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created” (Revelation 4:11). “And he is before all things, and by him all things consist” (Colossians 1:17). Further, Jesus is singular in His exalted position. There is no other God but Him, and He will not share His glory with another.

Clearly, Jesus had the right to demand obeisance and service from all of creation. He is worthy to be served in the highest measure possible. Instead, Jesus presented the perfect example of a life lived in consideration of others. He was a servant. He even surrendered His life in death from a pure motivation of what it would provide for others. In examining His life, nowhere do we detect even the slightest measure of selfish motive. He subjugated His own comfort and pleasure for the good of those around Him and the good of generations to come. He was a servant. Many are the moments during His earthly life that illustrate His servanthood, but perhaps none demonstrate it more clearly than His encounter with the disciples at what we commonly refer to as the Last Supper.

As the days of the Lord’s physical life were drawing to a close, Jesus gathered His twelve disciples into a room to partake of the passover meal with them. At that gathering, perhaps with a sense that monumental events were looming, the disciples began to grapple over their relative importance in God’s economy. “And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest” (Luke 22:24). Seeming to understand that His teaching had largely fallen on ears deafened by ambitions of grandeur, Jesus chose at that moment to illustrate true greatness to these twelve and by the record of Scripture to all.

“He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples’ feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded” (John 13:4-5).

To fully grasp the significance of Christ’s action of washing the disciples’ feet, one would have to possess some understanding of the cultural norms of that time. Travel was naturally constrained to modes of transport that entailed dust and dirt. Most journeyed on foot while those who were well off often rode a beast of burden. In either instance, the sandal-clad traveler was destined to arrive at his destination with feet covered in the dust of the journey. It was common practice that a gesture of courtesy be extended to arriving guests by washing their feet. As this was an unenviable task, the homeowner generally assigned the job to the lowest-ranking servant in the household. It was not a sought-after responsibility. Yet Jesus Christ, the sovereign Lord of Glory, willingly wrapped a towel around Himself and condescended to the position of a lowly servant to wash His disciples’ feet.

Jesus demonstrated servanthood in action. It is hard to envision a clearer picture of the desired attitude of a Christian. Christ’s actions that night were not merely a glimpse into His nature, but they were a call to action for all believers who would subsequently follow Him. Jesus stated, “If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed
your feet; ye also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

The characteristic of servanthood demonstrated in the life of Jesus Christ cannot be forced on anyone. One can force lowly tasks upon a slave, but an attitude of servanthood comes about only through intentional submission. It is a role we willingly take on or willfully reject. Jesus is our example in this, for no one forced Him to serve. He chose to be a servant, and if we are to follow Him, so also must we. (See Philippians 2:5-7.)

Although He had the right to refuse to do so, Jesus became a servant for all mankind. He accepted that role with all its attendant costs and consequences. Certainly we can do no less!

B. Paul—Servant to All

Although He was the perfect servant, Jesus was not the only example of servanthood in Scripture. Were His the only pattern of servanthood we could see, we might surmise that such a life is beyond us to live and was attainable only by the Son of God. The apostle Paul, however, also afforded us a glimpse into the life that Christ would have us live for Him. Further, Paul provided the testimony that each of us can ascend to if we desire to with all our heart.

Paul too had a claim to privilege and position. His spiritual pedigree was quite impressive. “Though I might also have confidence in the flesh. If any other man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more: Circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, an Hebrew of the Hebrews; as touching the law, a Pharisee; concerning zeal, persecuting the church; touching the righteousness which is in the law, blameless” (Philippians 3:4-6).

Paul could have lived a life of luxury and self-indulgence, but instead he willingly and even gladly forfeited his self-serving opportunities for the privilege of serving Christ. “But what things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ” (Philippians 3:7-8).

Paul testified that he was “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God” (Romans 1:1). However, His commitment to serve Jesus Christ and his new spiritual identity as a servant of Christ were not merely the results of an ethereal, philosophical quest for divine knowledge. Rather, Paul manifested his desire to serve Christ through his willingness to serve others. He endured hardship, suffering, persecution, and deprivation to reach people with the gospel of Jesus Christ. One of the greatest accolades of the apostle’s life appears in his writing to the church of Corinth: “For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant unto all, that I might gain the more” (I Corinthians 9:19).

Paul provided a wonderful example of a man whose commitment to serving Jesus Christ entered the arena of practicality in his willingness to serve all mankind. He did not simply serve those who treated him well. He did not limit his service to those who expressed appreciation. His service had no caveats or conditions. Paul followed the pattern of Jesus Christ and served all people. We must do so as well.
C. Ministers as Servants

Examples of servanthood are not limited to the pages of Scripture. The church today also provides us with lives after whom we would be wise to pattern our own. If one chooses to notice them, the body of Christ is populated with individuals who replicate Christ’s servanthood and Paul’s servanthood week after week in a variety of settings.

Every true minister demonstrates servanthood. In this context, it is important to understand that the word “minister” is not synonymous with “preacher.” Not everyone is called to a pulpit ministry of preaching, but all are called to be ministers, for everyone who serves in the kingdom of God is a minister. The word minister in the Greek language of the New Testament means “to attend” or “to wait upon.” Ministers are by definition servants.

Those who clean the church are ministers. Those who watch children in the nursery are ministers. Those who visit the sick and the shut-ins are ministers. Those who send notes of encouragement are ministers. They may never occupy a pulpit, but their service to others makes them a minister. As we take note of those around us who serve, our own desire and commitment to serve should grow as well.

II. DUTIES OF SERVANTHOOD

Service involves the willingness to forgo our own way in order to satisfy the wishes of our Master. Those who would serve will be required to surrender their will and to seek wholeheartedly to please the One who has dispatched them to do His work. The job details may vary for every individual, but at least two of the duties of a servant will be consistent no matter what specific role he or she is filling.

A. Serve Others

Everyone who offers himself to God will in short order understand that serving Him involves serving others. No person lives a life unto himself in the kingdom of God. We are automatically interconnected within the body of Christ, and in addition, God has commissioned us to connect purposefully with those who are outside the body of Christ. Only by serving others do we completely serve Him. (See Matthew 25:34-40.)

We become the hands and feet of Jesus Christ on this earth. He uses us as His front line to touch and minister to those whose lives are broken, frightened, or lonely. Often, we have to touch them before He is able to touch them. Further, He has chosen to use humans to preach the saving gospel. The duty of a servant is to serve others. Absent that component, our service to God is only theoretical.

B. Be Hospitable

The second duty of a servant is to have a right attitude in whatever capacity he occupies. A person gains little if he does the work of serving Christ by serving others, but demonstrates by his countenance and spirit that he considers his particular activity to be beneath him and unworthy of his talents, time, and treasure. Further, if a person does the work of Christ without the Spirit of Christ, he seeks only the applause of others for appearing to be religious.

The true servant of Jesus will mirror the attitude of his Master. Jesus always made the person being served feel special. The woman at the well in John 4 had His undivided
attention in spite of her dubious past. The religious people would have pushed aside the children who sought to be near Jesus, but He embraced them and drew them near. He touched the lepers who were social outcasts. He dined with tax collectors and sinners. He had time for people whom others had discarded or given up on. Such is the nature of our Master, and such should be the duty and nature of His servants.

III. REQUIREMENTS OF SERVANTHOOD

What characteristics are required in those who would serve Jesus Christ well? What traits equip them for His service? How can the believer prepare himself for service to the King of kings?

A. Willing

To be a servant of Christ, an individual must be willing to serve. There is no conscription or draft in God’s economy. He does not force people to offer their lives to Him, but He invites and recruits servants into His work. He provides the opportunity to serve, and He instructs believers to serve; but ultimately, the choice belongs to each person.

Paul wrote to the Corinthian church regarding their giving of finances, which also is generally a good barometer of a person’s willingness to serve in other ways. Paul emphasized willingness first. “For if there be first a willing mind, it is accepted according to that a man hath, and not according to that he hath not” (II Corinthians 8:12). There first must be a willing mind before one can serve Christ and others effectively. Ability is useless without availability—willingness to serve the Master.

B. Faithful

A valuable servant of Jesus Christ is faithful. “Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (I Corinthians 4:2). The Master should never have to wonder if His instructions and wishes will be carried out. The servant best fitted for His work is that one who, when given a job, will without excuse and without exception complete his assignment.

A natural example of faithfulness appears in the autobiography of John Kenneth Galbraith, A Life in Our Times. He wrote of the faithfulness of his family’s housekeeper, Emily Wilson, whom he instructed one day to hold his calls as he was going to take a nap. No sooner had he gotten to sleep than the phone rang. Upon answering she was somewhat taken aback by the words, “Get me Ken Galbraith. This is Lyndon Johnson.” Upon recovering her composure she replied, “He is sleeping, Mr. President. He said not to disturb him.” “Well, wake him up. I want to talk to him,” the somewhat irritated chief executive replied. Emily’s reply was a model of faithfulness in servants as she said, “No, Mr. President. I work for him, not you.”

When focused on the One for whom we work, we are better able to sift through priorities, to ignore voices and temptations that would lure us off task, and to demonstrate the kind of faithfulness the Master expects. Jesus is worthy of our best!

C. Wise

Someone once said, “Wisdom is the ability to see life from God’s point of view.” A valuable servant must be able to see life and all its attendant decisions through the lens
of his Master’s perspective. Wisdom in servanthood allows us to do the Master’s will in every circumstance of life.

Some years ago, the letters WWJD—an abbreviation of “What Would Jesus Do?”—inundated the Christian culture in North America. This phrase came from the 1896 novel by Charles M. Sheldon titled In His Steps. In the story, a pastor challenged his church for a period of one year to face every decision with the question, “What would Jesus do?” and then to act accordingly. That question is a grand one for servants to consider. Wisdom is the ability to answer the question properly; servanthood is the willingness to live out the answer.

D. Humble

Inherent in the role of a servant is the necessity to yield our will in favor of the Lord’s will. Our designs and His seldom overlap. Our goals and His are rarely in harmony. Our priorities and His are infrequently the same. Thus it is a requirement of His servants that humility mark their path.

In the book Christ in His Church, William Temple wrote, “Humility does not mean thinking less of yourself than of other people, nor does it mean having a low opinion of your own gifts. It means freedom from thinking about yourself one way or the other at all.” Christ’s servant simply does not think of himself, but instead thinks of what benefits his Master. This humble nature allows all the glory for accomplishment to reside where it should: at the feet of Jesus Christ.

E. Available

Someone has said that the greatest ability is availability. There is certainly a kernel of truth in that statement; for unless we offer our lives completely to Christ, we are not truly His servants. We are called to be ready to serve at a moment’s notice. (See II Timothy 4:2.)

The timing of our work is not in our control. The place of our labor is not ours to choose. The scope of our responsibilities is not at our discretion. We are simply to be available to Jesus Christ whenever, however, and for whatever He desires.

IV. REWARDS OF SERVANTHOOD

Believers in Christ Jesus do not serve a harsh taskmaster. He is not a tyrant before whom we cringe in fear and loathing. We are servants by choice because of our love for Him. He does not abuse or take advantage of those who serve Him. Rather, there are great rewards for those who give their lives willingly to Christ.

Certainly, we do not serve Jesus for the rewards, for then we would be hirelings. But He does promise rewards for those who give selfless service to Him. What can a servant of Jesus Christ expect? What is ahead for one who offers his or her life on the altar to Him?

A. Recognition by Master

Cynicism claims that no good deed goes unpunished, but Christianity assures that no good deed goes unrewarded! The blessing of being a servant of Jesus Christ is that He observes every act offered to Him. One need not worry that perhaps what he is doing for
the Master is being lost in the shuffle of life or that God has not noticed what the person has done for His kingdom. The Master recognizes everything offered to Him in service to His kingdom.

In Matthew 25:14-30, Jesus shared what is commonly known as the parable of the talents. The spiritual lessons to be drawn from the passage are numerous, but in the present discussion it is worthy to note that the master came to check on the work of his servants. Certainly, he noticed what they had not done, but his true purpose was to notice what they had done. God seeks out and recognizes the faithful service of His children. Paul wrote, “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord” (I Corinthians 15:58).

B. Eternal Reward

The rewards for being servants of Jesus Christ are manifold in this life. The songwriter observed well, “It’s a good life living for the Lord.” But the rewards for being a servant of God are really only fully revealed in the life to come. When the Master says, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:21), we will begin to reap the true rewards of a life lived for Him here.

The promise for Christ’s servants is ample payment here and overwhelming payment in the world to come. (See Mark 10:29-30.) This “deferred” payment plan can sometimes get lost in the work in which we are currently involved. The “sweet by and by” often is eclipsed by the “nasty now and now.” But when we step back from our disappointment or discouragement for a moment, we can once again bring eternity into focus. Our hope and expectation are found in the glorious reward awaiting us in the future. We sow today, but we reap tomorrow.

C. Self-Satisfaction

Most of us have attempted to use a tool for something other than its designed purpose. Generally, this produces humorous, if not disastrous, results. Things just perform better when they are functioning according to their created purpose. Believers are created to serve the Lord. It is woven into our very born-again nature. When we are not functioning appropriately, we become cancerous in the body of Christ. We turn inward and may become bitter. We may find fault with all those who are laboring for Him. From one’s uninvolved position in the grandstand, satisfaction seems distant and unattainable.

On the other hand, those in the dusty arena, battling in service for the Lord, find contentment and satisfaction even in the conflict. It stems from living in perfect alignment with God’s purpose for their lives. We are created to serve and called to serve. We are content only when we fulfill our purpose and serve the Lord.

INTERNALIZING THE MESSAGE

Gary Enrig relates an account in his book titled A Call to Excellence that reveals the secret of greatness in service. A large group of European pastors came to attend one of D. L. Moody’s Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. As was their custom, they placed their shoes in the hall at night expecting that the hallway
servant would shine them before morning. They were unaware that such a servant did not exist in the United States.

Walking through the hallway late the first evening of the conference, Moody recognized the problem and, determined not to embarrass his guests, he asked several students to intervene. Sadly, he was met with silence and pious excuses. Moody simply waited until everyone else had left, and then this man who was arguably the most famous evangelist in the greater Christian world at the time gathered up all the shoes, took them back to his room, and stayed up a great portion of the night shining and returning them all.

Servanthood? It is the mark of everyone who would be great for God. No one has ever been truly great in God’s sight without being willing to serve Christ by serving others. No one can claim to be like Christ without serving others as He did. No one can claim to be obeying Christ without serving others as He commanded.

It is not God’s responsibility to “make us” into servants. It is our responsibility to take on the role of servanthood. We must be willing, faithful, wise, humble, and available servants who serve others not out of obligation, but from delight. And as such we enjoy a wonderful sense of fulfillment in this life and relish with anticipation the reward that will come in the next. Our Master notes with delight each selfless act of service we offer to Him through others. “Blessed is that servant, whom his lord when he cometh shall find so doing” (Matthew 24:46).