

## **TOPIC: PATTERNS**—SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR ORDINARY PEOPLE

### **TITLE: “The Practice of Servanthood”**

Let me set this message up today by asking you a question, which you don't have to answer out loud. If someone compliments you on the way you look, how do you respond? Granted, this probably happens to gals more than it does guys. Nevertheless, how do you respond to a comment like that?

Are you direct and to the point, saying, “You are giving me a big head. Get behind me, Satan!” Or do you look down at the ground, shuffle your feet and say, “I don't really look that good. It's just that the light in here is pretty dim.”

Or do you say, “That's very interesting. Tell me more, and let us celebrate this good news together.” Or, maybe you quote Prov.11:22 in order to correct the other person's wrongful focus on physical appearance: “Like a gold ring in a pig's snout is a beautiful woman without good sense.” Or do you simply thank the person, and say nothing more?

I ask you that question because we are going to talk today about the subject of humility and servanthood---not in the context of physical beauty or talent, but rather in the context of helpful spiritual disciplines in our lives as a follower of Christ.

Humility is not about putting ourselves down, or trying to make ourselves nothing.

If God had wanted to do that, He could have easily accomplished that feat. Rather, true humility has to do with the submission of our will. It involves a healthy self-forgetfulness.

It is the freedom to quit trying to be something that we are not, and just let God be God in our lives. This kind of humility very naturally lends itself to serving others, and servanthood is a discipline that reflects Christ in our lives.

What is the opposite of humility? Pride. This is what so often gets in the way of our servanthood, along with a few other factors like time, desires, prejudice, etc.

John Ortberg tells this story in his book, "The Life You've Always Wanted." Leon, Joseph and Clyde all suffered from a Messiah complex. It was not just a touch of narcissism or a dash of grandiosity.

They were three chronic psychiatric patients at a hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, all diagnosed with psychotic delusional disorder, grandiose type. Each one maintained he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Each one believed he was the central figure around whom the world revolved: the three little messiahs.

Psychologist Milton Rokeach wrote "The Three Christs of Ypsilanti" about his attempts to help these men come to grips with the truth about themselves and learn to be just Leon, Joseph, and Clyde. Rokeach spent two years working with the men, but

change came hard. It was as if they were not sure they could bear to live if they were not who they thought they were. They could be very rational in other aspects of life, but they held tightly to their messianic delusions.

With little to lose, Rokeach decided to try an experiment. He put the three men into one small group. For 2 years the 3 delusional messiahs were assigned adjacent beds, ate every meal together, worked together at the same job, and met daily for group discussions.

Rokeach wanted to see if rubbing up against other would-be messiahs might diminish their delusion---a kind of messianic twelve-step recovery group. The experiment led to some interesting conversations.

One of the men would claim, "I'm the messiah, the Son of God. I am on a mission. I was sent here to save the earth." "How do you know that?" Rokeach would ask. "God told me." And one of the other patients would counter, "I never told you any such thing."

The bitter irony is, the very delusion to which they clung so tenaciously is what cut them off from life. To stop being the messiah sounded terrifying. But it would have been their salvation, if they could only have tried.

If Leon, Joseph and Clyde could have stopped competing to see who gets to be the messiah, they could have become simply Leon

and Joseph and Clyde. Every once in a while, one of the men would get a glimmer of reality. Leon eventually decided that he wasn't actually married to the virgin Mary after all---she was his sister-in-law.

What little progress they made resulted from their togetherness. But that change was only a glimmer, and the light of reality never shone very bright or lasted very long.

We chuckle at their situation, but the truth is that both you and I have our own share of a messiah complex. It may not get us sent to Ypsilanti, but in its own way is just as serious and irrational as the dilemma of Leon, Joseph, and Clyde.

This complex manifests itself in the sin of pride, which is the oldest sin in the Bible. When Satan tempted Eve with the forbidden fruit, he told her that if she would eat it, she would become like God. And we all, in our own way, have been trying to take God's place ever since.

But, how do we recognize pride in ourselves? Let me start with a milder form of pride. We call it **vanity**. It is a preoccupation with my appearance or image. If you do all your exercising dressed in spandex and in front of a mirror, you may well have this problem. It is an irritating and silly form of pride, but fortunately not the most dangerous.

Another form of pride is **stubbornness**. Prov.29:1 says, "If you get more stubborn

every time you are corrected, one day you will be crushed and never recover." (TEV) Stubbornness requires you to always defend yourself. If someone points out an error or flaw, we evade or deny or blame someone else. That is simply pride manifesting itself.

At the deepest level, pride is the choice to exclude (**exclusion**) both God and other people from their rightful place in our hearts. **Jesus said that the essence of spiritual life is to love God and to love people. But pride destroys our capacity to love.**

Pride moves us to exclude instead of to embrace. Pride moves us to judge rather than to serve. Pride means not only that we want to be smart and wealthy, but also that we will not be satisfied until we are smarter and wealthier than those around us. Pride is essentially comparative in nature.

A few weeks back, John Maurer, Pastor Jeff's brother in law, spoke on the parable of the two men who went to prayer, the Pharisee and the tax collector. Listen to how this parable is set up in Luke 18: **To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men---robbers, evildoers, adulterers---or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'** But

the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 18:9-14 NIV)

The tax collector went home a different man. The Pharisee was nauseating to God because he failed to recognize his own need for God, and he failed at the command to love others. He didn't realize he was the biggest sinner in the room.

In place of pride, Jesus invites all of us to a life of humility. But we struggle here because we are not all that sure that humility is desirable. We're not even sure what a humble person looks like.

Jesus knew that his own disciples would wrestle with this issue, so he decided to form a small group with these guys. For three years they ate meals together, went everywhere together, and had daily discussions as they walked from place to place.

And sure enough, one day they find themselves arguing over which one of them is the greatest! That can happen in any gathering of human beings. Hang out with a group of people long enough and the messiah complex will rear its ugly head.

So Jesus took a little child, and had His Leons and Clydes and Josephs gather around.

He told them their job was to welcome and receive this little child. They needed to do this, not just for the child's sake, but for their own sake. For it is through servanthood that they will come to see the truth about themselves, just as we do.

Jesus calls each one of us to servanthood, not just because other people need our service, but because of what happens to us when we serve. I was reminded of this truth when we baptized people a couple of weeks ago. Several teenagers talked about the impact that their recent missions trip had on their lives. (Get your kids on these trips, and better yet, go yourself!)

We serve others out of our own weakness. We don't serve others because we are strong and they need us. We serve others because if we don't help them, we end up a dried-out spiritual prune! (pretty useless)

So, Jesus calls us to become a society of sinners helping one another. But, how do we enter into this life and discipline of servanthood? Let me wrap this message up with 4 quick points (from Ortberg).

### 1. The Ministry of the Mundane

Jesus took a little child in His arms and said to his disciples, in effect, "Here is your ministry. Give yourselves to those who can't give back, who bring you no status or clout. Just help people. You need to help this child, not just for his/her sake, but more for your sake. For if you don't your whole life will be thrown away on an

idiotic contest to see who is the greatest. But if you serve him/her, often and well and cheerfully and out of the limelight, then one day you may find yourself doing it without thinking, 'What a wonderful thing I have done.' Then you are able to serve naturally, effortlessly, for the pure joy of it. Then you will begin to understand how life in the kingdom works."

Ortberg calls this "the ministry of the mundane." We have opportunities offered to us in this arena countless times throughout the day. A co-worker needs help with a project. A neighbor needs a ride to the doctor. You pass someone stranded on the side of the road.

And perhaps the most wonderful place to practice this discipline is in our home, with our family. Just the caring for children, when you bathe it in prayer, and it is offered with as much grace and energy as we can muster, is one of the most powerful tools for transformation available to us. Or caring for an aging parent, too.

When Julie or Paula or Michelle put out the ask for help with the children's ministries, we can see it as someone else's responsibility, or we can view it as an opportunity to involve ourselves in the discipline of servanthood.

## 2. The Ministry of Being Interrupted

Sometimes servanthood means just being available, to be willing to do things that are not on our agenda. Sometimes we need to



be available to talk or pray with troubled people, even people whom we will not be able to "cure" and who can't contribute to our career success.

Sometimes servanthood involves delays and interruptions that come from following the rules everybody else follows. Muhammad Ali (aka "the Greatest") once allegedly refused to fasten his seat belt on an airplane. After repeated requests by the flight attendant to buckle up, Ali finally said, "Superman don't need no seat belt." To which the attendant is said to have replied, "Superman don't need no airplane, either."

Sometimes servanthood means doing routine tasks even if we could have someone else do them. There is a story about Abraham Lincoln that a cabinet member once saw him polishing his shoes. The cabinet member expressed surprise that the president of the U.S. was polishing his own boots. Lincoln responded, "Whose boots do you expect me to polish?"

Servanthood does not mean we will do nothing but mundane tasks, nor does it mean that our day should be filled with nothing but interruptions. Knowing when to be available for these moments takes discernment and wisdom.

### 3. The Ministry of "Holding Your Tongue"

Perhaps the least-practiced form of servanthood today is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called "the ministry of holding

ones tongue." He said, "Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words...It must be a decisive rule of every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him."

This behavior flies in the face of the conventional wisdom of our day, when saying everything that occurs to you is taken as an essential component of mental health. But sometimes keeping your mouth closed is a victory in your spiritual discipline.

Illustration: I am in a meeting when it becomes obvious that here is a chance to let everyone discover how much I know. Or, here is a chance to tell a story in a way that subtly underscores my importance around here. Or, I have a chance to correct someone and show my competence. In those situations, holding my tongue is a mark of servanthood. (A new thought---serving by keeping quiet!)

#### 4. The Ministry of "Bearing"

We are called to bear each other's burdens. Sometimes this may involve praying for someone in need, or trying to comfort someone in pain. But at times it may feel as if an entire relationship is burdensome. I may need to "bear with" people until I learn to love them.

I have caught myself falling into the habit of sizing up a group of people, and making judgments about them before I really know

them at all. "That one is a whining, immature, troubled person." "That one is pretty old-fashioned in their thinking, kind of out of it." "That one seems to be wise, successful, and someone I can really learn from." And I end up trying to connect with those who seem more to my liking and ignoring those who aren't.

Painfully, I am forced to realize that my evaluations, while maybe not totally off-base, nevertheless have more to do with me than with the people I am evaluating. More importantly, those evaluations kept me from listening to what God might want to say to me through these people.

The ministry of bearing with one another is more than simply tolerating difficult people. It is also learning to hear God speak through them. And the toughest lesson for me is learning that the difficult person I have most to deal with is me!

This means that a part of the ministry of servanthood to which you and I are called is to free people, repeatedly if necessary, from the little mental prisons to which we have consigned them.

"Bearing with someone" does not require becoming best friends, but it does mean learning to wish them well, releasing our right to hurt them back, and remembering that we have the very same standing before the Cross of Christ.

It turns out that the life we have always wanted is a life of humility, because it is

the life that Jesus modeled for us. I close with this description of Jesus in Phil.2:

*"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death---even death on a cross." Phil.2:5-8*

Humility is priceless, because it will lead us into a life of servanthood---a discipline that will help us all to become the people God has designed for us to be.

# PATTERNS

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True \_\_\_\_\_ has to do with the submission of our \_\_\_\_\_. It involves a healthy \_\_\_\_\_ - \_\_\_\_\_.

Some forms of pride:

V \_\_\_\_\_

S \_\_\_\_\_

Proverbs 29:1 (TEV) *“If you get more stubborn every time you are corrected, one day you will be crushed and never recover.”*

E \_\_\_\_\_

Jesus said that the essence of spiritual life is to love God and to love people. But \_\_\_\_\_ destroys our capacity to \_\_\_\_\_.

Jesus calls each one of us to \_\_\_\_\_, not just because other people need our service, but because of what happens to \_\_\_\_\_ when we serve.

Doorways into Servanthood:

1. The Ministry of the \_\_\_\_\_
2. The Ministry of Being \_\_\_\_\_
3. The Ministry of “Holding Your \_\_\_\_\_”
4. The Ministry of “\_\_\_\_\_”

Scripture to think on: Philippians 2:5-11