

# The Habit of Service

The Power of Spiritual Habits #3 - Pastor Stephen Combs - August 31, 2025 - Matthew 20:20-28

**INTRO:** Good morning church! We're beginning a new 7-week sermon series called: "The Power of Spiritual Habits." It's a study of Christian disciplines passed down from the early church. Today, we will dive into the spiritual habit of service.

**ILL:** Phones. Incredibly powerful/smart. Have to be charged. Phone represents our potential. Cable represents the habit that determines where/if we find our power.

Spiritual habits act as a conduit that connects us to the power of the Holy Spirit. We not only open up and ask the Spirit to fill us, we create habits that give Him a conduit to fill us and use us to do God's will.

**Series Theme:** Ephesians 4:23-24 (NLT) <sup>23</sup> Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes. <sup>24</sup> Put on your new nature, created to be like God—truly righteous and holy.

This starts with a receptive heart, "letting" the Spirit change you, then leads to the action of "putting on", which is an intentional habit.

**Need:** Today's word might be the trickiest one yet. Why? You might easily be able to see why you need a habit of personal devotion to Jesus like we studied week 1 and you may see the need for fellowship as we studied last week. But service, why would service be a spiritual habit or discipline? How does a spiritual habit of service help me to connect with the Holy Spirit and grow in Christlikeness? That's the right question and the right motivation! My prayer for you is this, that you truly desire to live as Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Every Christian ought to be motivated by that ... to look more like Christ today than yesterday and to hunger for His will to be done in our lives. In that mind, service becomes an essential spiritual habit and here's why ... selfless service changes the heart in ways that can't be achieved otherwise.

**Service confronts our pride** perhaps more than any other discipline and humility is a key attribute of Christlikeness. Jesus teaches selfless service to the disciples so that they may abandon pride and live humbly.

**Service connects faith from our heads/hearts to our hands.** James 1:22 says, "Don't just listen to God's word ... do what it says." Service puts our faith into action. **Service reflects Christ visibly.**

**Trans:** I pray that you would receive the call of Jesus today to selfless service and make it a habit. As we will see today, service moves us towards Christlikeness in powerful ways.

**BODY:** In the Gospel of Matthew chapter 20, Jesus taught His disciples that the greatest among them would become servants like Him. We can follow the call of Jesus by becoming servants through the spiritual habit of service. How do we become servants like Jesus through the spiritual habit of service? The text gives us three ways to become servants like Jesus through the spiritual habit of service.

**Read text:** Matthew 20:20-28 (ESV) <sup>20</sup> Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something. <sup>21</sup> And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." <sup>22</sup> Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" They said to him, "We are able." <sup>23</sup> He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." <sup>24</sup> And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. <sup>25</sup> But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>26</sup> It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>27</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, <sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

**How to become servants like Jesus through the spiritual habit of service:**

**1. Choose Christ's definition of greatness.**

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**EXP:** (v.22) Jesus answered, “You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to **drink the cup** that I am to drink?”

“**Drink the cup**” (22) (ποτήριον, *potērion*) - a drinking vessel or cup; figuratively: one's lot or experience, whether joyous or adverse, divine appointments, whether favourable or unfavourable, are likened to a cup which God presents one to drink: so of prosperity and adversity. What is this cup in Christ for James and John? A great deal of physical suffering even death but also everlasting reward.

(v.25-26) <sup>25</sup> But Jesus **called them** to him and said, “You know that the **rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them**, and their **great ones exercise authority** over them. <sup>26</sup> It **shall not be so among you**. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant

“**Called them**” (25) (προσκαλέω, *proskaleō*) - Jesus calls all of His disciples to listen to this teaching for they are all confused on the truth of being great in the Kingdom of God. This message is for all who would truly follow after Jesus.

“**Rulers of the Gentiles**” (25) (ἄρχων *árchōn*, ar'-khone) - a first (in rank or power):—chief (ruler), magistrate, prince, ruler. The Romans are in view.

“**Lord it over them**” (25) (κατακυριεύω, *katakurieuō*) - control, subjugate; exercise dominion over (lordship), be lord over, overcome.

“**Great ones**” (25) (μέγας, *megas*) - great or big; of persons eminent for ability, virtue, authority, power.

“**Exercise authority**” (25) (κατεξουσιάζω, *katexousiazō*) - to have (wield) full privilege over:—exercise authority; to wield power.

“**Shall not be so among you**” (26) - Jesus flips the script here with what would have been and still is a very paradoxical statement. Christians are not great because of Lordship but rather service.

**ARG:** Christ redefines true greatness as being last and serving:

Mark 9:35 (ESV) And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”

**Christ redefines greatness as humility:**

Matthew 18:1-4 (ESV) <sup>1</sup> At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” <sup>2</sup> And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them <sup>3</sup> and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>4</sup> Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

**Even at the Last Supper Jesus is having to explain true greatness in the Kingdom of God:**

Luke 22:27 (NLT) Who is more important, the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? The one who sits at the table, of course. But not here! For I am among you as one who serves.

**ILL:** The Parable of the Wedding Feast (Seek the lowest place)

Luke 14:7-11 (ESV) <sup>7</sup> Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, <sup>8</sup> “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, <sup>9</sup> and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. <sup>10</sup> But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. <sup>11</sup> For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

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**APP:** Do I measure greatness by position, recognition, and influence by faithfulness and humility? Is your drive for promotion about serving others or self-advancement? Seek unseen service. Guard against comparison. Choose the lower seat. When I serve at work, church, and home, “Am I lording over them or lifting them up?” Pray, “Lord, strip away my craving to be seen, and help me to serve for Your eyes alone.”

## 2. Embrace Christ's call to service.

**EXP:** (v.26-27) 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be **great among you** must be your **servant**, 27 and whoever would be **first among you** must be your **slave**,

“**Great among you**” (26) - same word used for great ones. Jesus is using a direct comparison to them.

“**Servant**” (26) (δῆκονος, *diakonos*) - one who executes the commands of another, esp. of a master, a servant, attendant, minister; a deacon, one who, by virtue of the office assigned to him by the church, cares for the poor and widows. Notice this is a noun not a verb. Jesus doesn't tell us to serve merely, but to be a servant. **We think of service as something we do, but Jesus frames it as something we are.**

“**First among you**” (27) (πρῶτος, *prōtos*) - first in rank: influence, honour; chief; principal

“**Slave**” (27) (δούλος, *doulos*) - a slave, bondman, man of servile condition; metaphor for one who gives himself up to another's will those whose service is used by Christ in extending and advancing his cause among men.

**ARG:** Our service should be unto the Lord and ultimately for His glory:

1 Peter 4:10-11 (ESV) <sup>10</sup> As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: <sup>11</sup> whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

**Have the same mind as your Lord Jesus who took the form of a servant:**

Philippians 2:5-7 (ESV) <sup>5</sup> Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

**As a result Jesus is given the highest place:**

Philippians 2:9-11 (ESV) <sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

**ILL:** One of the many beautiful things about walking with Jesus is that His calls to obedience are first modeled by Him. We love because He first loved us, we fellowship because He makes fellowship with us, and we serve because He first served us.

Jesus, on the same night as the last supper and the betrayal, washed His disciple's feet. This troubled them greatly because they revered Him. But He said to them, “I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you. I tell you the truth, slaves are not greater than their master. Nor is the messenger more important than the one who sends the message. Now that you know these things, God will bless you for doing them.” (John 13:15-17)

**APP:** Embrace Christ's call to service by shifting from an occasional, half-hearted willingness to help into a lifestyle where service is your default posture. We think of service as something we do, but Jesus frames it as something we are. So at home, work, in the neighborhood ask yourself: “How do I live as a servant

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here?” Selfless service often interrupts our plans, drains our energy, or gets no thanks. Embracing service means leaning into those moments instead of excusing ourselves.

## 3. Follow Christ's example of sacrifice.

**EXP:** (v.28) even as the **Son of Man** came **not to be served but to serve**, and to **give his life** as a ransom for many.”

“**The Son of Man**” (28) (ἄνθρωπος, *anthrōpos*) - this is one of Jesus's messianic titles pointing back to the OT prophets especially Daniel. Jesus is identifying with His divinity and humanity under this title and bring to their minds even further the paradox of Christian life. Even the Messiah has come to serve.

“**Not to be served but to serve**” (28) (διακονέω, *diakoneō*) - Jesus came to serve and die for our sins. His earthly mission was our for our salvation. This would have likely shocked the disciples. Jesus is essentially saying that He is not establishing an earthly throne at this point and will instead die for them/us.

“**Give his life**” (28) (δίδωμι *dídōmi*) - to bestow a gift; to grant, give to one asking, let have; to supply, furnish, necessary things; to give over, deliver; to give over to one's care, intrust, commit; to give what is due or obligatory, to pay: wages or reward. Romans 6:23 “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

“**Ransom for many**” (28) (λύτρον λύω) - the price for redeeming, ransom paid for slaves, for captives, for the ransom of a life, to liberate many from the misery and penalty of their sins

**ARG:** **We can follow Jesus's example of sacrifice by how we present ourselves to God.**

Romans 12:1 (ESV) I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

**We must die to our desire to be served.**

Luke 9:23-24 (ESV) 23 And he said to all, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. 24 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it.

**The aim of our sacrifice should be for the sake of others.**

1 John 3:16 (ESV) 16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.

**ILL:** I learned something fascinating this week: In Antarctica, the Emperor Penguin is one of the most remarkable pictures of sacrifice in the natural world. After the female lays a single egg in the middle of winter, she carefully transfers it to the male. Then she heads out to sea to feed and regain strength.

For the next two to three months, the male penguin bears the responsibility of keeping that egg alive. He balances it on top of his feet, covering it with a flap of skin called a brood pouch. Through raging blizzards, with temperatures dropping to -80°F and winds up to 100 mph, he cannot move more than a step or two at a time. He doesn't eat during this entire period, losing almost half his body weight. His only goal is to shield the egg—sacrificing his own comfort, strength, and safety so that **new life** can emerge.

When we follow Christ's sacrifice we too get to experience **new life**. New life in ourselves because we are changing into the likeness of the Lord and new life in others who get to see Jesus through our sacrifice.

**APP:** The call of Christ is not selfish gain like the world, but selfless sacrifice for His eternal Kingdom.

- **Sacrifice your comfort.** Choose to invest time in others even when you're tired or busy.

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- **Sacrifice your recognition.** Sacrifice in ways that may never be noticed or thanked.
- **Sacrifice your resources.** Jesus' ransom was costly, His own blood. Give generously, open your home, and share what you have to meet needs.
- **Sacrifice your rights.** Lay down the "I deserve" mentality—in marriage, work, friendships—and instead ask, "How can I serve?" This step might just fix your marriage today!
- **Sacrifice with joy, not resentment.** Hebrews 12:2 says Jesus endured the cross "for the joy set before Him." Our sacrifices aren't losses, but investments in eternity.

**CONCLUSION:** Do you truly desire to live as Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit? Jesus teaches us to be servants so that we might know Him, imitate Him, and experience His love and mercy pouring out to others from Him. I pray that we might aspire to the spiritual habit of service by:

- Choosing Christ's definition of greatness.
- Embracing Christ's call to service.
- Following Christ's example of sacrifice.

Let's pray. (Response) Remind the people to respond by joining a CG and learn the habit of service together.