

## **The Humble Way of Jesus**

### *Mark 10:35-45*

Henri Nouwen was born in the Netherlands in 1932. His father was a prominent tax expert and a professor who encouraged Henri to excel and to become a successful person, which Nouwen did. Some of you have read one of his 40 some books that he authored during this lifetime.

Nouwen was ordained as a Catholic Priest in 1957. He received his training in psychology. In fact, he spent time studying at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka in the early 60s. In 1966, he accepted an invitation to teach Psychology at Notre Dame. In 1971, Yale Divinity School approached him with an invitation to teach. He agreed to on the condition that Yale would never require him to write a dissertation, that he would receive tenure in 3 years, that within 5 years he would become a full professor, and that his writings would not be required to adhere to any outside criteria. Yale accepted and he taught there for 10 years. Then, in the early 80s he taught for 2 years at Harvard.

By all measures, he was successful. He wrote books, he traveled the world on speaking engagements and taught at some of the most prestigious institutions. But in 1986, Nouwen took another appointment. He went to live and minister at a L'Arche community first in France and then later in Toronto, Canada. L'Arche is an international movement of communities that serve people with developmental disabilities. He lived there for the final 10 years of his life. With that move, he gave up the prestige that his career had earned to live with people that knew nothing of his fame.

How could anyone make that move? How could anyone step away from the success and prestige that he had experienced to live with such severely wounded people? In one of my favorite books of his entitled, *In the Name of Jesus*, Nouwen says that he was compelled to make the move in order to follow the **humble way of Jesus** (pg. 62).

The humble way of Jesus is a path that each of us is called to walk as believers. It is the path of putting others first. It is the path of servanthood. It was that path that Nouwen followed.

This week and next we are going to look at the topic of serving. Next week we will look at how God has designed us to serve in the context of the local church, but before we talk about that, today we are going to talk about something that is even more foundational and that is our basic identity as believers. We are called to follow the humble way of Jesus into a life of servanthood.

Today, we are going to look at two passages that express the humble way of Jesus. We are going to spend most of our time looking at a conversation that Jesus had with his disciples in Mark chapter 10, but we will also look briefly at Philippians 2. In Mark 10, we see that in entering into human history, Jesus came to serve.

### **I. The Humble Way of Jesus: He Came to Serve (Mark 10:35-45)**

We are told in Mark 10:32 that Jesus and his disciples are on a journey to Jerusalem. As they are traveling Jesus tells his disciples that once there he will be killed. It is on this journey that we find James and John posing a question to Jesus.

*<sup>35</sup> And James and John, the two sons of Zebedee, came up to Him, saying to Him, "Teacher, we want You to do for us whatever we ask of You."*

*<sup>36</sup> And He said to them, "What do you want Me to do for you?" <sup>37</sup> And they said to Him, "Grant that we may sit in Your glory, one on Your right, and one on Your left."*

As I mentioned, Jesus had just told his disciples that they were heading to Jerusalem. It seems that James and John keyed in on that part and they believed that Jesus was getting ready to establish His kingdom. And so, if that was the case, they wanted to have the best seats in the kingdom.

Now, you might wonder why they would even be thinking about such a thing. But it makes sense in light of what Jesus had also recently told them. In Matthew 19:28, Jesus had said:

*<sup>28</sup> And Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."*

Jesus had told them that they would be seated on thrones. And so, it wasn't crazy that they had this idea in their minds. But James and John aren't interested in any thrones; they want to be in the place of highest privilege and power and honor – on Jesus' right and left side.

*<sup>38</sup> But Jesus said to them, "You do not know what you are asking for. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?"*

Jesus' point is that the path to what they are seeking is totally different than what they think. It is a path of suffering. And so Jesus is asking them if they are *able to drink the cup that [He will] drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which [He will be] baptized?*

*<sup>39</sup> And they said to Him, "We are able." And Jesus said to them, "The cup that I drink you shall drink; and you shall be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized. <sup>40</sup> "But to sit on My right or on My left, this is not Mine to give; but it is for those for whom it has been prepared."*

James ultimately will be martyred and John will be banished to live out his days on the Isle of Patmos. They will drink the cup of suffering. But ultimately, Jesus says that it is

not His to grant to them to sit on his right and left. That privilege is something that only the Father determines.

Now remember, Jesus is traveling with the twelve disciples and so at this point we see their reaction to all of this in verse 41:

<sup>41</sup> *And hearing this, the ten began to feel indignant with James and John.*

They don't like that James and John had tried to call dibs on the place of honor in Jesus' kingdom. And so the other *ten began to feel indignant*. And the reason they were indignant it seems was because they too shared a similar spirit of ambition for prominence and power and honor. And so Jesus has a teachable moment with the disciples.

<sup>42</sup> *And calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> "But it is not so among you,*

In the world, Jesus says, the people who are viewed as great are those who attain positions of power over others and having attained such positions they then are able to use those positions to *lord it over* those under them; they *exercise authority over* others. In other words, in the world's system it's all about getting to the top and then when you do, making those under you feel the weight of your authority.

But, Jesus says, *it is not so among you*. Jesus' path to greatness is a very different path. He says:

*. . . but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; <sup>44</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.*

Jesus turns the world's system totally upside down. The way to greatness is by being a *servant*. If you want to be first, you get there by being a *slave of all*. For Jesus, greatness consists of self-giving, self-sacrificing for others. That is how he lived his life. In verse 45, Jesus says:

<sup>45</sup> *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*

If there was ever anyone who deserved to be served in all of history, it was Jesus. He is the eternally existing God, the Creator and Ruler over all creation. But Jesus' way was not the way of the world. The humble way of Jesus was to serve others. And the ultimate act of his service was that He gave *His life a ransom for many*. Jesus came to serve.

Now, I want to look briefly at one other passage. In Philippians 2, Paul makes the point that Jesus didn't act like a servant; He was a servant.

## II. The Humble Way of Jesus: He Took the Form of a Bond-Servant (Philippians 2:5-8)

Starting in verse 5, Paul writes:

*<sup>5</sup> Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Paul makes the point the Jesus took *the form of a bond-servant*. The word, *form*, is the same word used in verse 6 where it says that *He existed in the form of God*. It is a word that refers to the character or nature of something. Jesus didn't just appear to be God; He was God; He was *in the form of God*. It was His character; His nature. That's the sense of *form* in verse 7. Jesus didn't just take on an external appearance of a servant. He took on the substance of a servant. It was His character; His nature. And so Jesus didn't just act like a servant; He was a servant. In His incarnation, Jesus, He took the form of a bond-servant and out of that identity, He served mankind.

And Paul's point here, which is the same as the one that Jesus made with His disciples in Mark 10, is that we are to take up this identity of a servant. He says, *have this attitude in yourselves with was also in Jesus*. We are to take on this humble attitude of Jesus and serve.

This is who we are called to be. And so the question for you today is, are you following the humble way of Jesus? Are you a servant? Am I?

Jesus is not asking you to act like a servant at times and for certain people, He is asking you to actually be a servant. He is asking you to take this up as your basic identity. He is asking you to walk a very different path than the world does.

I'm sure for all of us there is a need for growth in this. I know there is in my own life. There is something in me that bristles at times at the idea of being a servant. And yet, if I want to be like Jesus, then I need to take this as my basic identity. And so do you. And so, let me offer some thoughts about how you can grow in being a servant.

**First, meditate on the example of Jesus.** He gave us an example that we should follow it. Read the Gospels. Pay attention to how Jesus served and served and served. Meditated on the reality that God took on human flesh to serve His creation even to the point of dying for sinful man. Meditate on the example of Jesus. He totally flips the world's idea about greatness.

**Second, ask God to develop within you a heart of a servant.** This idea is so contrary to our culture and it is so contrary to our own sinful flesh. We need God's help. And

so ask Him for it. I have no doubt that that is a prayer that God wants to answer because it is totally according to his will.

**Third, choose to serve someone everyday.** Service is actually one of the spiritual disciplines. It can become one of the practices that you pursue for spiritual growth. And so find ways to serve someone in your family or at work or in your neighborhood or at school. Do this every day. Find hidden things that you can do that no one will ever know about except God. Choose to go last. Give others the better spot. Do the task no one wants to do. Clean up the mess. Do the small, mundane tasks. Jan Johnson suggests this: “Look at the people you interact with everyday. Observe what menial, foot-washing type tasks they bemoan. Then quietly do one of these tasks for them when they are not looking.” Choose to serve someone everyday.

As you meditate on Jesus’ example and ask God to develop this within you and then choose to serve someone every day, you will find a heart of servanthood growing in you. And as you increasingly walk in this humble way of Jesus, as a servant, you will find an increasing joy in being a servant.

Today, we are celebrating communion. In preparation for this time, I want to think about what happened that night when Jesus instituted this practice as something His followers would observe throughout time. This was on the night before Jesus was crucified. If there was ever a time when someone deserved to be served it was on this night. But on this night, true to His character, Jesus served.

Before I read a portion of John 13, I want to share how Bill Hybels writes about this encounter:

In that time and place, where people often walked in sandals down dusty roads and then reclined at low tables with their feet not far from the faces of other guests, custom required that a servant at the door should wash dirty feet. But not so at this dinner. Something went wrong. The foot-washer didn’t show up.

Imagine you’re standing behind a pane of glass watching this scene. The first disciple enters the upper room and discovers there’s no foot-washer. Suddenly, for him, it’s decision time. Does he wash his own feet? Does he take off his garment and become like a rank-and-file servant and wash everyone else’s feet? Look into his eyes. He’s thinking, *Not me. That’s not my job. I’m not a slave. I’m no foot-washer.*

He tries to size up where Jesus will sit and chooses an advantageous position at the table.

The second disciple enters, realizes there’s no foot-washer and sees his friend already seated at the table. *Well*, he thinks, *if he’s not going to*

*stoop to the level of foot-washer, neither am I.* And he heads toward the second-best seat in the house.

All the disciples do the same thing. They file in. Walk past the water basin. Choose the best remaining seat at the table. Recline. Stick their dirty feet in each other's laps.

Last, Jesus enters. Watch him. He looks at the water. He looks at the filthy feet of the disciples. You can see it in his eyes. Three years, sermon after sermon, illustration after illustration, confrontation after confrontation. Can you see it? It looks a lot like failure.

He walks to the table and reclines. He just sits there, silently. *Maybe someone will at least have the humility to wash the feet of their master.* But no, nobody moves.

Now watch him. He gets up from the table, walks to the water basin and starts to take off his outer garment. Carefully he picks up the towel and slips it through his belt, exactly the way a common servant would. Then he pours the water into the basin.

Now look at the eyes of the disciples. Disbelief. Embarrassment. Then as Jesus begins to wash the feet of the first disciple, you see something deeper in their eyes: agony, regret, maybe tears. *What is the matter with me? How did I miss this? My whole world revolves around me. It's bad enough I wasn't humble enough to wash the brothers' feet. But I wouldn't even wash my Savior's feet! How could I have done this? What's the matter with me?*

. . . When he finishes his task, Jesus folds the towel and puts it back. He slips on his robe, walks back to the table and reclines.

*(Volunteer Revolution, 39-41)*

And then we read what Jesus said in John 13:12-15:

<sup>12</sup> . . . *"Do you know what I have done to you?"* <sup>13</sup> *"You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am."* <sup>14</sup> *"If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."* <sup>15</sup> *"For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you."*

The only time it is recorded in Scripture that Jesus said that He was giving us an example to follow was this example – the example of being a servant. We are called to follow the humble way of Jesus.

Today, as we celebrate the Lord's Table, reflect on Jesus example. Take this time to confess pride and self-focus that wants to be first. And invite God to help you to take up the heart of a servant and to walk after Jesus' example – the humble way of Jesus.