



# ADULT STUDY

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## PARTICIPANT HANDOUT Session 4

# Qualities of Discipleship: An Adult Lenten Study

*Disciples Are Last: Lessons in Humility*

## Introduction

The Gospels tell of many instances in which Jesus taught the disciples about humility. Though becoming the disciple of a revered teacher often brought prestige and honor, this is not what Jesus' disciples were to expect. Jesus was establishing a different sort of kingdom, one in which the greatest was the servant of all.

Jesus did not meet the expectations of what a messiah was "supposed" to be, and even those closest to him did not fully understand his humility. Some of them probably wanted to help him overthrow the yoke of the Roman Empire and stand by his side as he took the throne as the anointed king of Israel. Some of them may have hoped that Jesus would root out the corruption in the religious establishment and bring Israel back to holiness before God as a priestly ruler. But instead of conducting himself like a king whose servants waited on him hand and foot, Jesus washed his disciples' feet. Instead of taking a position of authority, he emptied himself in service.

This session will explore the ways in which Jesus overturned common social conventions of who was great and who was lowly. He ate with people considered to be sinners, paid attention to crowds of common people who asked for his help, and regularly challenged the traditional views of the most revered

religious leaders. He undermined social hierarchies, challenged constructions of social class, and redefined the meaning of power: "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (Mark 10:31).

## Lording It Over

That Jesus' reordering of the status quo was difficult even for his closest followers to understand is evident when his disciples James and John ask to sit on Jesus' right and left hand when Jesus comes into his kingdom. Not long after Jesus told the disciples that he would be handed over to be flogged, mocked, and killed, and in three days rise again (Matt. 20:17–19; Mark 10:33–34), James and John, the sons of Zebedee, ask Jesus for this favor: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37; cf. Matt. 20:21, where it is their mother who requests this honor on their behalf). In the Gospel of Luke, this story takes place in the context of the Last Supper, when Jesus is about to be betrayed and arrested: "A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest" (Luke 22:24). From the perspective of the narrative, the reader might well ask: What is it about Jesus' being mocked, flogged, and killed that these two upstart disciples do not understand? That is exactly the question the Gospel writers want the reader to ask,

because asking this question means the reader comprehends what Jesus is about to do.

We read these stories through hindsight; we know what is going to happen. From a historical perspective, however, the disciples would have been asking this favor *before* Jesus' death and resurrection, before it became clear to them that Jesus' kingdom was not about earthly power and glory. We, as readers, have the advantage of being able to read about Jesus through the lens of the resurrection, a vantage point the disciples do not yet have. Before the resurrection, the disciples would have been thinking in terms of obtaining honor and power in a worldly kingdom that they believed Jesus would establish. They might have been thinking back to the time of the Maccabees, when Jews successfully overthrew their oppressors and the revolutionary leaders took seats of power in the new commonwealth. The disciples remained stuck in their preconditioned expectation of what Jesus *should* do as the Messiah of God. They had not yet fully realized that Jesus was going to die a humiliating and horrible death and that they, too, would suffer and die in his service. If they had understood these things, they might not have made the cavalier request to sit on Jesus' right and left hand.

### The Right Hand

To sit at the right hand of the host at the table or at the king's right side was a place of highest honor. At the left hand was the next highest position of honor. The resurrected Jesus stands in the place of highest honor "at the right hand of God" (Acts 7:55–56; Rom 8:34). James and John were asking to be Jesus' favorites, to be exalted above other disciples.

Jesus confirms their miscomprehension when he replies, "You do not know what you are asking" (Mark 10:38). He asks them if they can "drink the cup," and they earnestly reply that they are able. Readers can hear the irony and hubris in their claim but also perhaps can sympathize with their ignorance in what they are saying.

Jesus tells them, in effect, "Be careful what you wish for." The places on Jesus' right and left hand, to which James and John aspired, would be occupied by two thieves hanging on crosses on either side of him (Luke

23:33). James, John, and the other disciples eventually will drink from Jesus' cup and be baptized with the same baptism, and they will understand what it means to take up the cross and follow Jesus.

The other ten disciples were angry with James and John for asking to be the greatest among them. This rivalry shows that they, too, were thinking in terms of earthly greatness. So Jesus lays it out for them: "You know how the Gentile rulers lord it over everyone, but you are not going to be that way. If you want to be the 'greatest' in the kingdom of God, you have to serve everyone else like a slave. I did not come to be served, but to serve. And I am going to give my very life for others" (Mark 10:41–45, paraphr.).

In an ironic twist, Mark follows this story about the disciples' spiritual blindness with the story of a Bartimaeus, a blind beggar. Bartimaeus also asks Jesus for a favor, but he does not ask to sit at Jesus' right hand. Nor does he take Jesus to one side to ask covertly for a favor, just between us guys. Bartimaeus cries out loudly: "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" (10:47). This blind man calls Jesus "Son of David," a synonym for Messiah, just after the sons of Zebedee have made a misguided assumption about who the Messiah would be. To complete the parallelism between the two stories, Jesus asks Bartimaeus the same question he just asked James and John: "What do you want me to do for you?" (10:51; compare 10:36). Instead of asking for a place of honor, the blind man says, "Let me see again." Jesus tells him that his faith has made him well, and immediately he regains his sight and follows Jesus on the way (10:51–52). He takes his place as a follower, not someone seeking glory, and thus he becomes an example of humble and grateful discipleship. No one knows if Bartimaeus later was able to "drink the cup" with Jesus, if he followed Jesus faithfully to the end and beyond, but in the world of the story, he demonstrates a kind of insightful discipleship that corrects the other disciples' blindness: he asks for mercy instead of honor. He asks to see rather than be seen.

## Honor and Shame

One of the reasons it was so difficult for the disciples to understand Jesus' teachings about humility had to do with their expectation that the Messiah would be a great warrior king or high priest (these expectations are discussed in session 1). Another reason for their steep

learning curve had to do with the “honor/shame” aspects of the culture in which they lived. Though there are drawbacks to using the sociological lens of “honor and shame” to analyze the Gospels (foremost among them is that this method tends to apply “honor/shame” categories across the board without regard for regional and historical differences), it can be helpful for understanding the magnitude of Jesus’ reversals of status and social expectations.

In the Greco-Roman and Hellenistic-Jewish cultures of Jesus’ time, honor was something a person inherited from one’s parents and shared with family members. One acquired dishonor (shame) by committing crimes or sins against social and religious norms. One could bring shame to one’s entire family by misbehaving badly. The culture of biblical peoples was communal rather than individualistic. People did not see themselves as “rugged individuals” the way modern Americans do. They identified themselves with their biological families and with their national affiliation. What happened to one person in a group affected the whole group, and what happened to the group affected the individual.

In the United States, people have a sense that the behavior of one family member can bring honor or disgrace to everyone in the family, but the attending shame is not as deeply consequential. People in the highest positions of government and religious institutions weather the shameful actions of their family members with embarrassment but often without losing power and prestige, because Americans consider themselves to be individuals. The thinking goes something like this: each person is responsible for his or her own actions, and no one can control what other people do. In the Mediterranean culture of Jesus’ time, the opposite was true. An individual was defined by family honor. This culture of honor and shame also permeated the Gentile world. A famous example is Julius Caesar’s divorcing his wife, even though she was innocent, on the basis of mere suspicion of impropriety, because Caesar’s wife must be above reproach.

The Gospel of Luke goes to great lengths to show that Jesus comes from an honorable family. Jesus’ mother, Mary, is related to a high priestly family: her cousin Elizabeth is a descendent of Aaron (Luke 1:5). Jesus’

(adoptive) father comes from the royal line of David (2:4). Jesus’ Jewish pedigree is faultless: his family represents both the priestly and kingly aspects of messianic expectation. Moreover, his family exhibits exemplary righteousness that upholds the family’s honor. They follow covenant law by circumcising their son (2:21), taking him to the temple to dedicate him (2:22–24), and taking him again when he is twelve, near the age of becoming a *bar mitzvaah* (“son of the covenant”), at which time he dazzles the elders with his knowledge of Scripture (2:41–51).

After Luke gives this careful portrayal of Jesus’ origins in an honorable and righteous family, Luke then documents how Jesus systemically redefines honor and shame. Jesus pleases the members of his home synagogue in Nazareth. The congregation members are impressed: “Is this Joseph’s son?” they ask as they admire Jesus’ reading. Jesus has brought honor to his family. But then Jesus enrages them by claiming that Israel’s promise is being fulfilled among the Gentiles (Luke 4:14–30). The shame of it! The congregation is so angry that they try to throw him off a cliff.

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In a culture that so highly regarded family honor, Jesus said some rather shameful things about his family: “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple” (14:26). When his mother and brothers came to see him, he seems to dismiss them by saying, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (8:21). Jesus undermined the cultural norm of honoring biological family ties. He replaced the value of family honor with the value of a “fictive” family of unrelated people from diverse social classes and backgrounds. Honor and “doing for one’s own” was replaced with humility and service to others.

Jesus did not choose promising young scholars from Jerusalem to be his disciples (the kind of person

he showed himself to be at the temple when he was twelve). Instead, he selected lowly fishermen from Galilee (5:1–11). Instead of selecting exceedingly virtuous people to be his followers, as any honorable man would do, he chose a tax collector, one of the most hated of professions (5:27). Jesus was demonstrating that the lowliest of people in society were going to be leaders in the kingdom of God. In his teaching, Jesus turned social roles upside down by saying that the poor are the ones who will be blessed, not the rich. This must have sounded crazy to a culture that tended to believe God blesses good people with riches. Jesus says that those who are hungry will be filled and those who weep will laugh (6:20–26). He asks the crowds what they expected to see: someone dressed in soft robes who lives in a royal palace? He offers John the Baptist as an example of the greatest of men, and he follows this with the pronouncement that John is not even as good as the “least in the kingdom of God” (7:18–28).

For many people, Jesus’ words and actions lost him the honor that came with being a descendent of priests and kings, and worse, Jesus didn’t seem to care. He continued to associate with all the wrong people (the ones who have no honor). He liked to hang out in the seedy parts of town, where he ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. He cured lepers, who are among the lowliest and shameful of people. Thus, Luke skillfully illustrates how the “new honor” is humility. But it would take the disciples a long time—in fact, until after the resurrection—before they grasped the concept of humility, “the last shall be first.”

In the Gospel of Matthew, the disciples asked Jesus, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of Heaven?” Jesus called a child to him and said that the disciples must become like children to enter the kingdom. “Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:1–5). Since children were at the bottom of the social hierarchy of power and prestige, Jesus illustrates that the last shall be first is exemplified in a child, the least, or the “little ones” who believe in Jesus (18:6).

## Strength in Weakness

The ultimate moment of Jesus’ disgrace and social dishonor was, of course, being crucified. In both Roman and Jewish culture, there was no more ignoble way to

die. Being “hung on a tree” was a sign of God’s curse and therefore a symbol of deepest shame (Deut. 21:23). The Romans designed crucifixion to be a spectacle of humiliation and a gruesome public warning: behave yourself or end up the same way. In Jesus’ social context, crucifixion was proof positive that he could *not* have been the Messiah. His disciples abandoned him and scattered when he was arrested. Some of them probably thought this was the end of everything Jesus had proclaimed, because their expectations had set them up to perceive his humiliating and horrible death as a sign of failure.

The apostle Paul found himself having to defend against the “scandal” or “stumbling block” of the cross. How could anyone proclaim as Messiah a person who was so humiliatingly executed? Surely such a dishonorable death was proof positive that Jesus could not have been the Messiah. But Paul interpreted the crucifixion as redemption (Gal. 3:13). He understood the way Jesus flipped conventional reason on its head. He recognized that true wisdom comes from what seems to the world like foolishness (1 Cor. 1:18–25; 3:18–23) and offensive (Gal. 5:11). Paul eventually understood from his own suffering that God’s strength comes through human weakness (2 Cor. 12:9–10). He explained that Jesus’ act of emptying himself on the cross and taking the form of a slave in humble obedience to God was the action that brought about his exaltation as Lord and Christ (Phil. 2:6–11).

## Conclusion

Jesus demonstrated humility by washing the disciples’ feet. He told them that they were not to aspire to greatness, but to be servants. He humbled himself even to death on a cross (Phil. 2:8). His disciples also went out into the world as servants of the Word. Tradition has it that many of them were also martyred. With these examples of humility, disciples today must examine what “greatness” means for us and how Jesus expects us to turn the tables and raise up the lowly.

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