

Putting the needs of others before your own is not necessarily easy, or natural, but leadership as practised by Jesus Christ often included service to others. In Philippians (2:3–10) we receive some idea of what’s required to be a ‘servant leader’.

‘Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another...you must have the same attitude that Christ Jesus had.

‘Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form, he humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross. Therefore, God exalted him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names.’

Jesus himself said that ‘the first shall be last and the last shall be first’ (Matthew 20:16), while his brother wrote, ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honour’ (James 4:10).

The lessons we learn from the passage from Philippians are to place the needs of others in front of our own needs and entitlements, and to cede our own privileges for the benefit of others. To be honest, that hurts. Humility is hard and many people are not up for the challenge.

Humility has two sides: Stepping down to serve others (Philippians 2:3–5) and stepping up to lead others (Philippians 2:9–10). Servant leadership requires the cultivation of each of these facets of humility.

GROWING HUMILITY

Humility is a challenging spiritual discipline to cultivate. So how do we grow in our humility? How can we strengthen the virtue of humility in our lives?

Philippians frames humility around certain keywords—such as valuing others, attitude, privileges, obedience and exaltation.

Attitude is the first step towards cultivating humility; the attitude of laying aside our own rights for the benefit of others. In his book *Holy Living*, Major Herbert Lahn writes that ‘[humility] is a mind focused on heavenly values’ (page 52)...a self-forgetful love, that is the hallmark of holiness’ (page 66).

But this passage in Philippians doesn’t just end with service and Christ’s obedience unto death, but ends with a proclamation of exaltation. In verse nine we read that ‘God exalted him to the place of highest honour and gave him the name above all other names.’

This is the second, lesser known, side of humility. Jesus

came to serve others, but he also came to lead others to the Father. Remember the verse from James? ‘Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you.’ It seems God would have us step down to serve, but also to step up and lead.

Accepting this call flows from humility. Cultivating the virtue of humility requires us to demonstrate Christ’s love by serving others. We are also called to be proclaimers of the truth and lead people to God through the Gospel’s message.

ESCALATOR TO HEAVEN

It can be helpful to think of humility as an escalator rather than a ladder.

‘Ladder thinking’ is often one-dimensional: up or down.

We’ve all heard stories of people who lead with an attitude that declares: ‘I’m the person at the top of the ladder’—that’s a person who cannot be touched or disturbed. But, while a leader needs to be able to cast a vision and have strategic thinking from their vantage point, they also need to be able to walk humbly with their God and their team.

Conversely, you may be able to think of someone who is so caught up in serving the needs of others that they are stuck at the bottom of the ladder.

They have lost sight of the bigger picture and are in danger of developing a slave mentality rather than a servant mentality because they say yes to everything. As servants of Christ, we want to help people along their journey, but not at the expense of the journey itself.

Escalators run on a continuous loop; they go up and down. There are times when the focus is leading others, and there will be times when the focus is on getting our hands dirty.

We step up to lead, we step down to serve.

We step down to serve, we step up to lead.

When we see potential in someone, let’s encourage them to go up higher—to step up and lead, step out in faith, or



pursue an opportunity, and to continue the loop by reminding them that our Lord would also walk among his people and serve them.

At times when people are hurting, or facing difficulty, feeling down or low, let’s come alongside them, comfort them, walk with them, pray for them, serve them, and be there in the low times as well as the high times. We can ‘continue the loop’ by reminding them of the hope that is available in Jesus.

There are opportunities all around us to step up and lead, and to step down and serve. Let’s be people who do both for the sake of the Gospel. Our communities are waiting for us to step up and serve them. People are looking for escalators.

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