I want to start out today with a question. What is the first thing that comes to mind when you think about service? Maybe you think of military service, maybe you think of things like room service and fine dining, being waited on at a fancy table. Maybe you think about things like mission trips, or serving somewhere in the church.

We’ve been talking about the Spiritual disciplines for the last several weeks, and so far the things that we have talked about like prayer, meditation, and fasting are all things that you probably would have recognized as disciplines even before we started this series. Those are things that you have at least heard about and maybe even tried to put into practice before.

But service may be one of those things that you have never thought about as a spiritual discipline. A couple weeks ago we defined the spiritual disciplines as things that help us come closer to God and bring us before him so we can be changed by Him. If we’re going by that definition, then serving others fits right in with the rest of the disciplines.

The disciplines we’ve talked about so far are what are called inward disciplines. They are things that are mostly between us and God. They are pretty private things that help us grow to be more like Jesus. But they are things that other people can’t just see unless they really know you well. You can’t tell just by looking at someone if they have been reading Scripture faithfully, praying constantly, or even if someone is fasting. In fact, as we looked at last week, Jesus told us to keep those things private, because if we do it for the praise of other people, that’s the only reward we will get.

Those disciplines serve to help the Holy Spirit do his work of developing the fruit of the Spirit in us, but they aren’t very visible. Service is a little different. Service is an outward discipline because it serves the same function as all the other disciplines, to bring us closer to God. But serving others is a very visible thing. So service is one of what are called the outward disciplines. It’s something other people can see you do, something you do for others, and it’s evident that you are practicing service because you show it through your actions.

The discipline of service is a lifestyle of serving others, a mindset of being focused on other people and doing whatever you can to meet their needs. Many people like to live their lives focused only on themselves. That’s exactly what Solomon did. He focused on himself and did whatever he wanted to do, whatever desire happened across his mind that day, and he had the means to do it. Listen to how he says that went for him:

**Ecclesiastes 2:10–11, 17 ESV — 10** And whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them. I kept my heart from no pleasure, for my heart found pleasure in all my toil, and this was my reward for all my toil. **11** Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had expended in doing it, and behold, all was vanity and a striving after wind, and there was nothing to be gained under the sun… **17** So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me, for all is vanity and a striving after wind.

If we take our cue from Solomon, focusing on ourselves is not how we ought to live our lives.If we play our cards right it might make us a lot of money. It might make us powerful in the eyes of the world. But focusing on ourselves and our desires will only bring temporary happiness and satisfaction. It will never last, and it is nothing compared to the eternal life that awaits us if we live our lives in service to God and other people. Service is all about submitting to God’s agenda instead of ours and focusing more on other people than we do on ourselves.

Living a life of service means that we take on the status of a servant instead of just doing acts of service every once in a while. I want you to see the difference in that, because it’s a really important distinction and I want to challenge the way you think about service.

Anyone can go and do specific acts of service, like serving in a soup kitchen, going on a mission trip, helping serve for a meal, any number of things. But that doesn’t mean they are living their life as a servant.

Serving like that is kind of like being a Sunday Christian. Some people come to church on Sunday, put on a nice mask, and then come Monday morning they can forget about their faith for the week and go back to life as usual. When we treat our faith like that, we aren’t really following Jesus. When we serve like that, we are just putting on a good show for a little while before we can go back to living for ourselves. It makes service into just a list of things that we do. It means that we are still in control. We can serve without really being a servant.

Having a true servants heart and allowing yourself to take on the status of a servant means that you live totally focused on other people. It means you give your life totally over to Jesus’ control and let him be Lord of your life. A life devoted to Christ is a life lived for Jesus no matter what day it is. A life that is seeking to get close to God just as much Monday-Saturday as it is on Sunday.

That’s what a true life of service means being constantly on the lookout for ways to serve other people between the big opportunities that are available. Instead of only serving when there’s an announcement that there is service needed, a true servant looks for opportunities all the time.

Instead of only serving inside the walls of the church, a person who lives a life of service will be serving others where they meet people in their everyday Monday-Saturday life. It takes service away from just a list of things to do, and makes it into a lifestyle. That’s what Jesus did. He didn’t come here to serve every once in a while. He didn’t come to check off a to-do list. He came here to make himself into a servant.

We see service in several places throughout the Bible, but the two I want to highlight today are Paul, and of course, Jesus. Paul considered himself a servant of Jesus, not just a worker for the sake of the Gospel, not just an apostle. Paul identified himself as a servant.

**Philippians 1:1 ESV — 1** Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

**Titus 1:1 ESV — 1** Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God’s elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness,

Now we tend to tone it down, but the word Paul uses there is the Greek word δουλος (doulos) which doesn’t just mean servant, it means slave. That term didn’t speak of one who worked for pay or who was an employee of someone as we think of servants. This spoke of someone who was owned by another person, who had a master to obey. A slave, not a servant.

A slave has no say over what tasks he does, where he goes to serve, or who he serves. He only serves at the beck and call of his master. That’s how Paul saw himself: as a slave or servant of Jesus Christ. If we are serious about service, that’s how we will begin to see ourselves as well.

Why would we want to do that? Why would we want to put ourselves under the rule of someone else? To us slavery and servitude is a pretty repulsive thing, so why would we want that?

The short answer is we make ourselves servants because Jesus was a servant. The whole point of practicing the spiritual disciplines is to become more like Jesus, to get closer to him. Involuntary slavery is cruel and dehumanizing. But when we freely choose to be a servant, it changes everything. Voluntary service is a joy, not oppression. Jesus is our greatest example of this. Jesus stepped down, not just into acts of service, but into the very position of a servant.

**Philippians 2:5–8 ESV — 5** Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, **6** who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, **7** but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. **8** And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Paul ties in Jesus’ humility with being a servant because service is one of the best ways that we can gain humility in our lives. Humility is one of those things that we can’t get by going straight after it. If your goal is to be humble, then one of the best ways to accomplish that is to serve others. Work for the good of other people and not yourself.

When we do something for the good of others and don’t seek any recognition or reward for it, when our motives are solely for the other person, it changes something inside our spirits. Serving others plants a seed of humility in us. Every time our human nature cries out that we want attention for that good deed we just did, and we quiet our human nature and allow that deed to remain hidden and out of sight, we are disciplining our flesh and transforming our desires. Paul calls this crucifying the flesh with its passions and desires in Galatians 5:24.

Practicing the discipline of service to others in our lives is one of the best ways to do that. If we let ourselves be driven by our flesh, by our passions and desires, we become slaves to them. We practice the spiritual disciplines to keep our sinful human nature under control and keep our focus on Jesus where it should be.

Jesus said in Matthew 6 that no one can serve two masters. He said that about money, but it holds true with any passion or desire that is not of God. If we are slaves to our sinful desires, then we are under their control. That means we are taking control away from the one who should be the Lord of our lives.

Jesus called us to service by being our example and acting as a servant himself.

**John 13:3–5 ESV — 3** Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, **4** rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. **5** Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples’ feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Did you catch what John said there? Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power. He knew his position. He knew his status. He knew his authority. Most of us in his situation wouldn’t be caught dead doing something so lowly as washing other people’s feet. It was the task reserved for the lowest of servants. Yet Jesus willingly put himself in that position. None of the disciples were willing to put themselves in the position of a servant, but Jesus did and he is our example of how we ought to serve others as well.

That all sounds great, and it’s easy to talk about, but truly acting as a servant is really difficult to put into practice. There are a lot of things that keep us from practicing service properly or even at all sometimes

The first is pride. Pride is exactly what the disciples were struggling with at the Last Supper. We don’t want to be put in the position of a servant, do we?. We don’t have to be the greatest, but we certainly don’t want to be the least. We don’t have to be Michael Jordan, but we also don’t want to be on the bench.

If you watch a group of people you’ll realize that people can’t be together in a group for very long before some sort of pecking order is established. You quickly find out who’s in charge, who’s going to take over.

Sometimes it’s not who you expect. When I was young, my sister and I went and picked out two puppies from a litter that had just been weaned. My sister picked one of the bigger puppies that was happy and playing. I picked the runt of the litter who walked over and started untying my shoelaces. That should have been my first clue.

As it turns out, my dog was always the smaller one, but she was also the one with the attitude. Whenever we would feed them, the bigger stronger dog would come grab a mouthful and then go off by herself to eat while my dog sat and guarded the food dish. There was a pecking order established from day one, until the day that dog died.

But Jesus did away with that kind of order based on dominance and status. It wasn’t just a reversal of the order either, as if now the low man on the totem pole becomes the one in charge. On high school mission trips we would all line up for dinner, and then to illustrate the point of the first being last, our youth minister would reverse the line, let the last ones in line go first. That’s a reversal. Jesus did something different altogether.

**Matthew 20:25–28 ESV — 25** 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. **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, **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.”

Jesus was not doing away with leadership, only the pride that so often goes along with it. The authority that Jesus talked about was solely about function, not status. Remember, we said service grows humility in our lives? The result of humility in us is that we no longer care about status. We care about the people themselves. This is not just leadership, it’s servant leadership. Leading like Jesus did by acting as a servant.

Another thing that hinders us from practicing service the way we should is doing service to be recognized for it. If we are doing service as a spiritual discipline, there is no glory in it. We are doing it solely to be more like Jesus and serve other people. True service has be distinguished from self righteous service.

Self righteous service is drawn toward the big service. The places they can get the most recognition. True service is drawn toward the smaller tasks, the more mundane. True servants see those things as the most important.

Self righteous service needs external rewards. It needs to know that people see what they do and appreciate their effort. It seeks recognition by humans with a kind of false modesty that we’ve probably all seen before. True service is not done for recognition. It is content to be behind the scenes, never noticed, never recognized. Recognition from God is all that they seek.

Self righteous service is concerned about the results. Whether or not the person they served will reciprocate. They tend to get burned out if they never get served in return. They are always concerned with getting taken advantage of. What happens is that they end up only serving those who will recognize them the way they want to be recognized.

True service doesn’t care about what happens afterward. True servants were only there to serve anyway. It doesn’t matter to them who they serve. It can be their enemy as well as their friend, they will still gladly serve them. Because true service is about serving wherever God calls, and whoever God calls you to serve, not whoever will get you the best rewards. They don’t care if they are taken advantage of, they just care about the people they are serving.

Self righteous service picks and chooses who to serve or where to serve based on the result they want. They might serve the poor and humble if it will earn them the reputation they want. But at the same time, they might avoid serving certain types of people that would give them a bad reputation. True service is indiscriminate. It doesn’t care what the person is like, how much money or influence they have, what kind of clothes they wear, or even what their reputation is. They are only there because they care, and they can meet a need. True service is just like Jesus. He ate with the outcasts of his culture, the prostitutes and tax collectors, because they were the ones who needed him most.

Self righteous service is temporary. These people serve for a while, while the acts of service they want to do are being done, but if something comes up that they find distasteful, they will be nowhere to be seen. True service is not something that is done for a while, and then stops. True service is a lifestyle.

Another that sometimes keeps us from serving is thinking that service has to be planned out or that it will take too much work. A few years ago a bunch of churches in Lincoln, IL started a program called Together for Lincoln. They join together and do service projects throughout the community all day, it’s a really awesome event where a lot of service happens. But it takes a lot of coordination, a lot of planning. They are gearing up for the next year as soon as the last one was over.

Here’s the thing: service doesn’t have to be like that. True service that we are talking about comes when we are listening to the voice of God and he prompts us to go and serve someone else.

It doesn’t have to be planned out, it doesn’t have to take a lot of time. I was very blessed because I grew up with a really good examples of that in both of my parents. My Dad was always doing things like taking carts in for people after they loaded their groceries in their car, paying for someone’s dinner at a restaurant and then leaving before they found out, or taking care of maintenance issues that the older folks in our church needed help with.

My mom is one of those people who does service behind the scenes, she sees a need and she just quietly goes to work. I can’t tell you how many times she has been at our house to visit and I’ll go in later to find something she did that I didn’t even know about until after she left. A sink full of dishes has been washed, or a basket of laundry was folded. One day when we were renting an apartment in Lincoln, my parents came to stay, and Beth and I woke up to my mom making breakfast and cleaning in our kitchen while my dad was fixing the exhaust fan in our bathroom. That’s practicing service, when there is a need that you can meet, and you do it with no expectation of recognition or reward.

A lot of times we don’t serve, or we get burnt out serving, because we feel like our service didn’t matter. One day we were talking about service in the Sunday School class we were a part of in Mt. Pulaski. The minister said he thought the biggest problem with serving in the church is that we make one thing more important than another. He said he considered one of the most important services of the church the guy who came in every Sunday morning and made coffee in the kitchen.

It seems like a small task, but the fact that there was coffee there drew people together. They had a coffee time in the kitchen area before church and between services. That was when people connected that wouldn’t have if that one guy didn’t come in to make coffee. A service that he didn’t see as very important at all actually ended up being very important in the end.

So even if you think that your service is insignificant and doesn’t matter, it does. The devil wants nothing more than to convince us that the things we do are never good enough. Sometimes that keeps us from serving at all. But if we can get past that lie, we realize that no matter what it is, our service is important and every act of service is important.

Sometimes we just have no desire to serve. Changing your attitude and developing a servant’s heart takes time. Living a life of service comes from an overflow of God in your life. If you are just starting out in your faith, or if your faith has been kind of stagnant, you might not feel like living out a life of service. If that’s where you’re at, instead of trying to pursue a life of service pursue a life filled to the brim with Jesus. As you get closer to Jesus and become more like him, you will become more like Jesus in the way you serve as well.

The author Gary Smalley says he looks at it like this. Each day when he wakes up, he takes his empty cup of the day, and goes to meet with Jesus to fill it up. During the day, he empties that cup serving other people. Then the next day, he again goes to meet with Jesus to fill up that cup so he can do it all over again.

So how do we get started with a lifestyle of service? A lot of people get hung up because they just don’t know what to do. I’d like to give you some practical suggestions.

First, take a look at what you are good at and start there. Use the gifts and talents God has given you to serve others. If you’re good at working on cars, look for people who would be blessed by a free oil change or tire rotation. If you’re good at carpentry, offer up your skills to those who might need a few things done around the house. If you’re a talented cook, look for times that you can cook a meal or loaf of bread and give it to someone when they might need it most: like after the loss of a loved one or while their family is sick. Maybe you can wash someone’s car, or give someone a ride who doesn’t have a car. Maybe you are really good at sitting and talking and you can go sit with folks in the nursing home for a while. If you have the ability to help people financially, look for someone at the grocery store that you can bless by paying for their groceries. God gives us gifts and talents so we can serve others. It’s up to us to use them well.

One of the most important things we can do is to pray about opportunities to serve. Pray that God would lead you to an opportunity where you can use your gifts and talents. A large part of practicing the discipline of service in your life is listening to God when he tells you to go serve a certain person or in a certain area. Part of our prayer also needs to be asking for God to give us the humility and the boldness to respond when he calls us.

My final suggestion to you is something I struggle with as well. Sometimes you have to let other people serve you as well. This isn’t so much about practicing the discipline of service in your life, but helping them do it in theirs. Many times we are okay serving others, we are okay being behind the scenes and not being recognized for things, but when we need something we don’t want other people to help us. We would tell other people that they shouldn’t be afraid to ask for help, but we will do it by ourselves no matter how difficult it is. To ask for help is a sign of weakness, right, men? For some reason it seems men tend to struggle with this more than women.

The truth is that not allowing others to serve you is just another form of pride. We need humility to serve others without calling attention to ourselves, but we also need humility to allow others to serve us when we need help. That’s what the church is all about. Using our gifts and abilities to serve one another and build each other up.

I knew that was the case, but still often refused to ask for help. What started me down the road to that kind of humility is when I realized that refusing to let someone else serve you robs them of the opportunity to grow to become more like Jesus. When we don’t let others serve us we are letting our pride get in the way of that person practicing the spiritual discipline of service.

In order to live a life of true service we have to get ourselves and our pride out of the way. We have to have the humility of a servant at all times and let Jesus lead. As we get closer to him and allow ourselves to be filled by him we will find ourselves living more and more as true servants of his.