

Jesus' Spiritual Secret – Matthew 20:24–28

As a business leader and politician, he had great power and influence. His home was opulent. His multi-national corporations were into everything from agriculture to manufacturing to commerce. He could influence world leaders to do what he wanted them to do. He was amazingly talented in art, literature, science, business and politics. Some would say that he was the most powerful and successful person in the world.

But this most unusual leader wanted something more. He wanted to do something that would go beyond the typical definitions of success. He wanted to impact the lives of others for good. He wanted to leave a mark that would last for generations. He wanted to be truly great.

So he left his home. He abandoned his job, his money, his titles and his perks. He traveled to a place where he could not be recognized and would not be known. He got a job as a semi-skilled craftsman and worked at it for years. It was a stunning switch from his old life back home. He did okay but eventually he quit his job to take another demotion. He became a servant. He performed menial tasks that only the poorest unskilled laborers would do. It turned out to be a tougher job than anyone would have predicted – so tough that it killed him. He died and was buried as a nobody. Others had no idea who he really was.

No one would say that he wasn't great in his old job, but that greatness was most powerfully seen in his new job.

His name is Jesus. Saint Paul described him saying that Jesus, "who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death

— even death on a cross." This was Jesus' spiritual secret. It's not that he didn't tell it, but rather that most could not understand. His approach to life, ambition and success was radically upside down from common wisdom and practice.

Jesus' secret was revealed in a conversation and controversy triggered by the request of Mrs. Zebedee. She came to him one day to ask Jesus for a favor. She fell on her knees and begged that

her sons, James and John, be granted the most favorable relationship with Jesus on his left and right. She was severely criticized by the rest of Jesus' followers, probably because they wanted those positions for themselves.

She's had her critics throughout the years since she first asked. Personally, I see her positively. Mrs. Zebedee wanted what every godly mother wants – she wanted her children to be as close as possible to Jesus.

The story led to a great teaching moment when Jesus first explained the surprise principle of discipleship. Let's see what it says in Matthew 20:20-27:

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom."

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?"

"We can," they answered.

Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father."

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When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.”

Jesus observed the obvious. We live in a world where people want to be the boss. Those who become rulers like to tell other people what to do. We enjoy the head of the line, receiving deference from subordinates and expecting others to listen to our stories, laugh at our jokes and go along with our ideas. Titles are important. We want to have everyone at the high school reunion be impressed with our success.

Jesus said that his disciples are to live by a totally different principle: “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave.” Now who would have guessed? Who would have ever known?

Compare what Jesus was saying to the difference between the U.S. dollar and the Italian lira. Say the exchange rate is 2,100 lira to one dollar. But suppose you don’t know that. You think one million lira is a fortune. You sell everything you have and do everything you can do to become a lira millionaire, never realizing that is only \$500. You give up everything for almost nothing.

Jesus was saying that the currency of worldly importance has very little value. The real value is in servanthood. So if you really want to be rich, if you want to succeed, if you really want to be great - become a slave. The surprise principle of discipleship is that greatness comes through service.

This principle led to the telling of Jesus’ spiritual secret. Jesus said that he “did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Have you ever had the boss come to your office? You thought you were in trouble. You wondered what the boss wanted you to do. You feared

you might be fired. Then the boss gave you a promotion, offered you a raise or asked about your family or what he could do to help you. Afterwards you thought, “Now that’s a great boss!”

Jesus came to our world – not to judge, not to condemn, not to demand. He came to serve. He washed the feet of his friends. He fed the hungry. He healed the sick. He helped the poor. He forgave sinners. He volunteered and gave his life to save others from sin and hell. Afterwards we think, “That Jesus is really great!”

So what was Jesus’ secret? How did he maintain his dignity when people mocked him and spit in his face? How did he resist temptation when Satan tried to convince him to sin? How did he convince billions of people to believe in him? How did he remain so faithful to God the Father? The secret is service. “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve.”

Remember that to be a Christian is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ; to be a disciple is to be like Jesus; to be like Jesus is to become a servant. Jesus’ secret must become our attitude, an attitude of service.

An attitude of service means choosing to desire a role of serving, of helping, of blessing other people. It’s the kind of attitude that asks: What can I do for others? How can I make someone else’s life easier? What can I do to help out someone else? What could I give up to make the poor richer? How can I put others ahead of myself, especially those who are weak or sick or disadvantaged or discouraged or disabled or discriminated against? The attitude of servitude permeates everything we think and do.

Our next-door neighbor takes great care of his home and yard. He does a great job of shoveling his driveway and sidewalk when it snows. One snowstorm several years ago he shoveled his sidewalk and kept right on clearing the snow off the sidewalk in front of our house. He’s shoveled our walk every snowstorm since then. He is a Christian. He’s a disciple of Jesus. He has a servant’s heart. He has an attitude of service. That’s the kind of thing Jesus would do.

At Wooddale Church our parking lot sometimes exceeds capacity. Some observers recently went out there to count spaces and cars and to study the traffic flow. One of the recommendations was to have someone direct traffic at the point on our campus where two roads converge. The reason? Too many people are stopping their cars to let others go first. They have an attitude of service; they're helping others. It slows traffic, but I love it! It's just like Jesus!

Let me tell you about Morrie Johnson. Morrie Johnson died several years ago. He was 81 years old and suffered from Alzheimer's. His son Gary would often visit his dad at the nursing home where he spent his final years. Morrie Johnson was a lifelong disciple of Jesus Christ whose illness stole too much of his memory and too many of his life skills. Gary told me something quite wonderful about his dad. In the midst of Alzheimer's he kept helping other residents at the nursing home. He would help to feed them, care for them and serve them. As a disciple of Jesus Christ, the attitude of service was so central to his soul that he kept on serving others no matter what.

That's the way I want to be. Like Jesus! Like Morrie Johnson! Serving others. It's what a disciple of Jesus Christ is and it's what a disciple of Jesus Christ does.

As disciples of Jesus we delight to turn our attitudes of service into actions of service because we know that disciples are doers. Disciples aren't those who just think about serving others, we actually do it.

Minnesotans lead the nation in serving others. It's called "volunteerism". Sixty-six percent of Minnesotans 18 and older volunteer. That's compared to the national average of 56%. Minnesota volunteer hours are worth \$6.5 billion annually. Older Minnesotans had the largest recent increase in volunteerism – up 10% to 63%. The age group that volunteers most is 35-44 year olds (76%). Two-parent families with children volun-

teer more than any other household type (80%). Women volunteer at a higher rate than men (77% versus 60%). Education levels vary widely – 53% for less than high school to 80% for college graduates.

There are many ways for disciples to volunteer to serve. It may be in the community in social services. It may include tutoring or mentoring. It may be building homes for the poor or fixing cars or giving free professional service like physicians and nurses, dentists and accountants and others.

Maybe you're not a professional. Maybe it's simply acts of kindness like shoveling snow or mowing lawns or raking leaves or painting houses or giving rides or leaving the best parking places for someone else instead of grabbing the best parking place for ourselves. Maybe it's phoning shut-ins or the disabled or checking on the elderly. Maybe it's changing a tire for someone who is

stuck along the side of a highway. It may be cleaning up someone else's mess and simply saying, "I don't care who did it. I'll clean it up."

It might be in Christian ministries: childcare in the church

nursery, teaching Sunday school, ushering, directing traffic in the church parking lot, providing financial counsel, befriending the friendless or praying for people who need prayer. Maybe it's offering computer skills or singing in the choir or taking part in short-term missions projects. The list never ends. For a servant there is always more to do. The opportunities are infinite.

As we do these things our attitude and actions should be combined together. That means we show up on time when we serve other people and we stay until the task is finished. As servants we don't expect much, if any, praise or thanks and certainly not pay. Servants are always trying to benefit and please other people.

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Some things are easy to measure. You can easily measure your temperature. The old way used to be that you put a thermometer under your tongue. The new way is that there are marvelous electronic devices that you can put in your ear and get a reading almost immediately.

Of all the marks of discipleship, serving others is one that is easiest to measure. You can count the hours. You can list the services. You can name the people. It's easy to check and measure how we are doing as disciples, as servants, of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' spiritual secret is really not a secret anymore. It is that he came to serve and not to be served. Saint Paul wrote to the Philippians in Philippians 2:3-5, "Do nothing out of selfish am-

bition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus."

Faith Matters is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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