

SESSION  
FIVE



THE MINISTRY  
OF THE MUNDANE

## SESSION FIVE

### *The Ministry of the Mundane*

Reading adapted from a message by John Ortberg

Leon, Joseph, and Clyde all suffered from the Messiah complex. Not just a touch of narcissism or a dash of grandiosity. They were three chronic psychiatric patients at a hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, diagnosed with “psychotic delusional disorder, grandiose type.” Each one maintained he was the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. That he was the central figure around whom the world revolved. The three little messiahs.

A psychologist named Milton Rokeach wrote a fascinating book called *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti* about his attempts to help Leon, Joseph, and Clyde come to grips with the truth about themselves—to quit trying to be the Messiah and settle for just being Leon, Joseph, and Clyde.

With little to lose, Rokeach decided to try an experiment. He put the three men into the same small group. He wanted to see if rubbing up against others who also claimed to be the Messiah might make a dent in their delusion. This led to some interesting conversations. One of the men would claim, “I’m the Messiah. I am on a mission to save the earth.”

“How do you know?” Rokeach would ask.

“God told me.”

And then one of other men would counter, “I never told you any such thing.”

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would-be Messiahs.*

Messiahs. If you want to be your own God, you have to settle for living in a tiny universe where there is only room for one person. Their worlds could grow infinitely bigger if they would be willing to become, in the words of a friend of mine, “appropriately small.” To stop being the Messiah sounded terrifying. But it would have been their salvation, if they could have ever tried.

### The Oldest Sin

I have my own share of a Messiah complex. It is not the kind that would get me sent to Ypsilanti. But in its own way, it is just as serious and irrational as the dilemma of Leon, Joseph, and Clyde. You have a share as well. In fact, the sin of pride and grandiosity is the oldest one in the Bible. Recall the words of the serpent to Eve, “. . . when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and *you will be like God . . .*” (Gen.3:5).

Pride has many faces. Stubbornness is the pride that causes us to shun correction. It renders us unable to stop defending ourselves. Judgmentalism is the pride that moves us to criticize rather than to serve. Competitive-ness is the pride that makes us want to be not just smart and wealthy, but smarter and wealthier than those around us. Self-centeredness is the pride that keeps us, like our three Messiah friends, living in a tiny universe where there is only room for one person.

It is often pride that keeps us from accepting our limitations and weaknesses. Some time ago, I had a run of too much travel, too many meetings, too many talks, and I was fatigued. I expressed this to a friend, looking for some sympathy. He surprised me by asking *why* I choose to live like this. The only honest answer was that, more than anything else, I was running on grandiosity. I was afraid that if I declined opportunities, they would stop coming, and if opportunities stopped coming, I would be less important, and if I were less important, that would be terrible. I didn’t want to admit my limitations. I didn’t want to admit my need for rest.

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At the deepest level, pride is the choice to exclude both God and other people from their rightful place in our hearts. Jesus said that the essence of spiritual life is to love God and to love people. Pride destroys our capacity to love. It leads us to exclude rather than embrace.

### **That Confusing Thing Called Humility**

In place of pride, Jesus invites us to a life of humility: “All who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 18:14 NRSV). But we have become badly confused about humility.

Humility is not about convincing ourselves—or others—that we are unattractive or incompetent. It is not about “beating ourselves up” or trying to make ourselves nothing. If God wanted to make us nothing, he could have done it.

Humility involves a revolution of the soul, the realization that the universe does not revolve around us. In fact, it brings a kind of relief. It is an immense gift. Humility is the freedom to stop trying to be what we’re not, or pretending to be what we’re not, and accepting our “appropriate smallness.” In Martin Luther’s words, humility is the decision to “let God be God.”

But right here we meet a difficulty. How on earth can we pursue humility? It is one of those virtues that cannot be attained by trying hard to achieve it. The more we pursue it, the more elusive it becomes. We need a training exercise—a discipline—to help us do eventually what we cannot do right now, even by trying hard.

### **Following Jesus in the Practice of Servanthood**

In *Celebration of Discipline*, Richard Foster writes,

*More than any other single way the grace of humility is worked into our lives through the Discipline of service. . . . Nothing disciplines the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing transforms the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition.*

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Here, as elsewhere in the spiritual life, our teacher is Jesus. The Lord said that he did not come “to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). Many people think of this as a temporary interruption of Jesus’ normal experience, which would be to *receive* service. In fact, serving is God’s business. I remember a Christian speaker say once that pride is forbidden to human beings, but is okay in God because, after all, he is God. This is wrong. God is the Infinite Servant. Jesus did not come as a servant in spite of the fact that he is God; he came *precisely because of* the fact that he is God.

Jesus knew that his own followers would wrestle with the Messiah complex, so he decided to put them in a small group together. And sure enough, one day they “argued about who was the greatest” (Mark 9:34). Hang out with a group of people long enough, and the Messiah complex will rear its ugly head.

So Jesus took a little child, and had his Leons and Clydes and Josephs gather around. In effect, Jesus said, “Here’s your ministry. Give yourselves to those who can bring you no status or clout. You need to help this child not just for her sake but more for your sake. For if you don’t, your whole life will be thrown away on an idiotic contest to see who is the greatest. But if you serve her—often and well and cheerfully and out of the limelight—then the day may come when you do it without thinking, ‘What a wonderful thing I’ve done.’ Then you will begin serving naturally, effortlessly, for the joy of it. Then you will begin to understand how life in the kingdom works.”

### **The Ministry of the Mundane**

What Jesus described might be called the ministry of the mundane. The opportunity is offered to us countless times a day. A colleague asks for help with a project at work. Someone’s car stalls by the side of the road. This ministry can happen at home, in the middle of the night when one of the children cries. It can happen in the middle of a traffic jam when we let someone go ahead of us.

A similar form of service might be called the ministry of availability. In the Russian church certain people called *poustinikki* would devote themselves to a life of prayer, withdrawing to the desert to live in solitude, but not in isolation. By custom, the *poustinikki's* latch was always off the door as a sign of availability to his neighbors' needs.

Sometimes in our days we must be interruptible for tasks that are not on our agenda. Periodically we must live with the "latch off the door." Sometimes we need to be available to talk or pray with troubled people—people who we will not be able to "cure" and who can't contribute to our image or ministry success.

Servanthood does not mean doing only mundane tasks. Nor does it mean that our days should be filled with nothing but interruptions. Knowing when to be available takes discernment and wisdom. But, generally speaking, the higher our grandiosity and pride quotient, the greater our need for this ministry.

### Looking to the Messiah

It turns out that the life we have always wanted—when our wants are purified and true—is a life of humility. We see this most clearly in Jesus himself.

There was no pride or grandiosity in Jesus at all. That is one reason that people had such a hard time recognizing him as the Messiah. Jesus was no Superman. He did not defy his enemies with hands on his hips and bullets bouncing harmlessly off his chest. The whip of the Roman soldiers drew real blood, the thorns pressed real flesh, the nails caused mind-numbing pain, the cross led to actual death. And through it all, he bore with them, served them, forgave them, and loved them to the end.

God's great, holy joke about the Messiah complex is this: Every human being who has ever lived has suffered from it—except one. And he was the Messiah.

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## SPIRITUAL EXERCISE

**A**s we practice the ministry of the mundane, one of the great spiritual disciplines is secrecy — where we abstain from causing our good deeds to be known (see Matt. 6). In the practice of secrecy, we're given freedom from the need to be noticed, approved of, or impressive. This week, make it your prayer to be used by God, but with a twist: "Use me in secret."

- Write an anonymous note of encouragement to someone who needs it.
- Pray earnestly for someone each day this week — but don't tell them. See what happens.
- Give a gift to someone, or make a contribution to an organization without letting anyone know.
- Do a task for someone at home, work, in your neighborhood, or church, but don't tell anyone you did it.

Observe what happened to *you* in secret while serving others in secret. To what degree did your spirit yearn for some acknowledgment or recognition? How tempted were you to drop a hint? In what ways was it satisfying and joyful? How did this kind of servanthood foster humility?

NOTE: Jesus here does not make secrecy an absolute rule—in Matthew 5:16, for example, he indicates there is a time to "let your light shine before others" (NRSV). Jesus wants us to use secrecy as a tool to help overcome our need to manage others' opinions of us. It must not be practiced with rigid or legalistic attitudes, but rather—as with all disciplines—engaged in as a voluntary exercise intended for our growth and freedom in Christ.

## BIBLE STUDY

1. Consider times when you tend to think more of yourself than is accurate or healthy (and we all occasionally do!). What does that look like for you? Here are a few examples of how that might play out:

| Action or Attitude   | Possible Hidden Pride   |
|--|---|
| I'm a person of conviction and principle.                  | I know I'm right. I hate it when people challenge or correct me.                    |
| I see very clearly where those around me need improvement. | Others are never good enough for me; it's easier to criticize than to serve.        |
| I'm competitive.   | I'm not happy if I'm not better than others.  |
| I choose carefully who I spend time with.                  | I don't like to be around people who are difficult, draining, or different from me. |
| I'm often overscheduled and have a hard time saying no.    | I like to be seen as a person who can "do it all."                                  |
| I'm independent by nature.                                 | I can't depend on anyone; I don't need others.                                      |

Write down any of these (or other) prideful tendencies you have:

2. Consider this statement from the reading: “Pride destroys our capacity to love. It leads us to exclude rather than embrace.”

What kind of people do you tend to exclude or keep at arm’s length? If possible, actually bring to mind a face or recent situation when you acted with subtle (or not so subtle) attitudes of superiority or exclusivity.

In what specific way was pride at the root of that behavior?

3. Read Luke 18:9–14. Summarize the point of the story and why Jesus told it.

What was at the core of the tax collector's attitude of "appropriate smallness"?

What impact should this have when it comes to attitudes of superiority?

Which of the two men are you more like these days?

4. When you are with a group of people, how do you tend to define who is the greatest in that group?

Jesus' disciples were painfully like us. How do you think they would have defined greatness in Mark 9:33–37?

According to Jesus, what is greatness?

What is the hardest for you to accept about this definition?

5. Richard Foster makes this honest observation: “Whenever there is trouble over who is the greatest there is trouble over who is the least. . . . Most of us know we will never be the greatest; just don’t let us be the least.” Describe how this might be true for you.

In what way, if any, does this human tendency impact your own servanthood?

6. In Matthew 25:31–46 Jesus offers some enormously challenging words concerning the ministry of the mundane. Carefully review the passage. In what way does this passage most challenge you concerning the subjects of humility, servanthood, and true righteousness?

When was the last time you served someone who might be considered “the least” by our cultural standards?

How would your servanthood be different if you really believed you were serving Jesus as you served others?

7. Jesus is our best example of the ministry of the mundane. Read John 13:1–17. Why do you think this has stood out as one of the most remarkable acts of Jesus ever recorded?

NOTE: Imagine the conditions of the paths and streets in the first century—dusty and dirty, littered with animal refuse. Then imagine most people walking barefoot, or at best wearing open sandals. Such conditions made for less than pleasant feet! It's not hard to understand why footwashing was considered such a demeaning task that even slaves could not be required to do it for their masters! A disciple, though, would sometimes render this service to his teacher or rabbi.

Peter was embarrassed at having Jesus wash his feet. Why do you think this was so?

How do you do at *receiving* mundane service from others? What makes it easy or hard for you? How does being on the *receiving* end help cultivate a spirit of humility in our lives?

8. Describe a current relationship or situation in which you are being called to the ministry of the mundane.

What is one of the hardest aspects of living as Jesus would in that situation?

What specific benefits are coming to your character because of it?

## TAKE-AWAY

*My summary of the main point of this session, and how it impacts me personally:*

NOTE: You will fill in this information after your group discussion. Leave it blank until the conclusion of your meeting.