

HOW TO MAKE OUR LIVES COUNT FOR SOMETHING GREAT!

Part 1: How to Love Others for Greatness

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1 John 3:16-17:

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I. Introduction: While attending Dallas Theological Seminary I became friends with a particular student whose disposition is still a marvel to me. In essence, this fella consistently chooses to be last in any given circumstance in order that others might be qualitatively blessed. It is amazing to watch how he regularly chooses to be last, forfeiting opportunities so that others might receive them, taking the uncomfortable path so that others may be comforted, and giving the very best he had so others might flourish-even if the decision would be costly in terms of energy, resources, and time. This magnanimous lifestyle and habituated pattern of humility not only blesses others where it matters most, but also blesses him, his family, and ministry in the most dynamic ways. People love him because he genuinely loves them with the particular choices he makes to see their longings, dreams, and practical needs fulfilled. Therefore, by enabling others to receive the best he has to offer with what has been giving to him, he lives an adventurous life rarely lived by others. His range of ministry is amazing, his presence meaningful, and his leadership poignantly relevant. He is an inspiration to others, whether they are believers or not.

My friend really understands what it means to live out the precept in 1 John 3:16-17:

¹⁶ “Hereby perceive the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. ¹⁷ But who so possesses this world’s good, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God dwell in him?”

In essence, *agape* love, the commitment of the will to the true good of another person, is sacrificial, self-surrendering in the on-going choices one makes (present tense), demonstrated by meeting the practical needs of others, and is ever so genuine.

In contrast, **one of the greatest obstacles in truly loving others is a preoccupation of the self.** Though we may not be fully and experientially aware of the insidious nature of selfishness and its extensiveness on this side of heaven (Romans 1-3), the desire to come first, to have the most, to receive the best, and to experience all the comforts, the luxuries, and the accolades one can obtain-all for “*me, myself, and I,*” all too often manifests itself in the “*little choices*” we make in moment-by-moment living. See, it is an exaltation of the self when we “*choose to come first*” to the neglect of all other relationships. Thus, this character flaw and mark of spiritual immaturity finds expression when we fail to decrease in order that others may increase in *any given circumstance*. Said differently, this moral

deficiency, which is totally contrary to the character, mission, and ministry of Jesus Christ (Phil. 2:5-11), is evidenced when we demand to be first, not merely in the big situations of life (e.g., when we manipulate people or situations in order to receive what we want), but also in the moment-by-moment choices in our daily lives. While this moral deficiency to exalt the self has been present since the moment we came into existence because of the impact of original sin (Romans 5:12 cf. Genesis 3), this moral deficiency finds pertinent expression every time believers in Jesus Christ compromise by exalting the self to the neglect of loving others with Christ-like love (Mark 12:28-34).

II. Consider the following reflective questions: In any given activity do you choose to “come first” even if that means you will forfeit qualitative and enriching opportunities others might be able to receive for their betterment? For example:

- A. Do you demand the best or first seat? Do you eat more than your share? Are you competitive regardless of the activity? Do you get frustrated, judgmental, jealous, or even angry when others experience something that you do not? Do you find yourself competitive, desiring what others have and you do not?
- B. Do your desires and needs come first regardless what this means to others, how it might inhibit others from experiencing something worthwhile, or how costly it might be to others?
- C. Do you take a leadership role that is self-directed in most situations rather than enabling others to succeed because you believe you are more gifted, more intelligent, more skilled, and more capable than those around you? Do you find yourself habitually talking about your own successes, experiences, and dilemmas?
- D. Do you seek to be the center of attention, even if cloaked in false humility, because you believe you can do ____ (e.g., the task) better; you know what to do and how to do it; you are eager to receive accolades; you find a sense of significance and value knowing that everyone is looking at you for the answer (s)?
- E. Would you rather be the decision-maker than trust others? Do you feel the need or compulsion to control others? Why?
- F. Do you truly invest in the lives of others with your energy, resources or time, or do you simply seek to be with others (non-relational) as you strive for personal gain?
- G. Do you continue to talk about what you want, how you are feeling, what problems you are facing, what you are going to do, what task you are working on, or what opportunities have emerged for you without ever seriously and genuinely asking how the other person (s) is doing?

- H. Do your conversations and activities revolve regularly around what you want, long for, and need without ever truly knowing the dreams and desires others have, and what difficulties others are experiencing? Do your conversations principally revolve around you?
- I. Do you consistently seek to intimately understand who others are, what their love language might be, and how to meet their deepest needs?
- J. Do you *manipulate* situations in order to receive the greatest gain in certain activities, conversations, experiences, finances, meals, certain, material needs, places, sports, relationships, and travels?
- K. Do you pro-actively seek to anticipate, meet, and exceed the practical needs and earnest God-centered desires of others?
- L. Are you absorbed with the self to the extent that you do not even intimately know and understand the people who regularly are in your sphere of influence or daily living?
- M. Do you honestly listen to what people have to say? Do you ask them sincere and genuine questions or are you more interested in what you have to say?
- N. Are you about entertaining yourself to the responsibilities you have toward others? Are you willing to keep a promise to someone only if it means more fun than other potential activities? Or are you willing to keep a commitment to someone even if that means you will miss out on other invitations that come after you made this particular commitment? So many people will make plans or offer promises only to keep them if something more fun or exciting does not come around. Others will regularly refrain from commitment because they always want to keep their options open for what will maximize the greatest amount of pleasure. Is this you? Are you inconsistent in keeping your promises or do you refuse to commit until the very last moment?
- O. Do you seriously consider the consequences of your actions and how this decision will impact others? How will this decision impact another person's time, energy, and resources?

III. On the other hand, you are loving others with greatness when you consistently...

- A. Anticipate, meet, and exceed the God-honoring desires and practical needs of others.

- B. Find satisfaction in seeing the dreams (God's unique plan for their lives) of others come true.
- C. Decrease an opportunity you could have in order to see others experience the riches of that moment.
- D. Practically put yourself in the "shoes" of another.
- E. Understand another's life story, their love language, their gift-cluster, their dreams, their struggles, and their longings. You go beyond the superficial in conversation to understanding where people and who they are.
- F. Know what others are experiencing in their daily living.
- G. Recognize a person's greatest need and seek to meet that need with what God has given you.
- H. Relinquish _____ (e.g., personal time) in order that others might be _____ (e.g. blessed).
- I. Allow others to flourish even if it costs you something (s).
- J. Decrease in any given circumstance in order that others might be qualitatively blessed.
- K. Promote Christ and not "me, myself, and I."
- L. Jealousy is foreign to your personal experience.
- M. Possess a disdain for fake/false humility; you demand personal authenticity from your own person as well as others.
- N. Consistently seek to be an attentive, good listener. Asking thoughtful and relevant questions is part of your identity.
- O. People in your sphere of influence have your undivided attention.

If we truly want to live out what it means to be a committed follower of Jesus Christ, then we must not only mortify, that is, subdue, deprive, and break the propensity to come first in any given situation in the strength of the Holy Spirit (not one's own strength) (cf. Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5), but we must also decrease in order that others might increase in the particular choices we make in moment-by-moment living-all to the glory of God. By loving others with this type of ministry (1 John 3:16-17), everyone, including ourselves, will be blessed, and God will be magnified in the choices we make, the values we embrace, the activities we pursue, and the people we love.

IV. How can I better love others with Christ-like love? Consider the following...

A. Translate the biblical commands of humility, discipleship, and servant-hood into habits of excellence. A habit is to think, feel, desire, and act in such a way that you do not consciously will to do it, you just do it. Therefore, ask God to cultivate in you this particular habit of humility, discipleship, and servant-hood and find ways to practice this activity in the Lord's strength until it becomes part of your identity (Philippians 4:13). Like Jude, the half-brother of Jesus, identified himself as a slave unto Jesus Christ, we no longer belong to ourselves (Jude 1). When we placed our faith in Jesus Christ, believing that He is the Son of God who died on the cross for our sins and rose bodily from the dead, we received a new mind to know Him, a new heart to love Him, and a new will to love Him. Thus, our capacity to live out this worshipful lifestyle of humility is not rooted in our old human nature but in yielding to Him in the particular moment we find ourselves. When we align our new nature with God's will in those particular moments of time, we see Him loving the unlovely through us, meeting the needs of others in powerful ways, and empowering us to come last so that others may be first. In those moments manifest the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). How awesome would it be for us to take those biblical precepts of servant-hood and find ourselves habitually yielding to the Holy Spirit (Gal. 5:16-18; Ephesians 5:18) whereby people see Christ, not us (Gal. 2:20)! Moreover, the gospel of Jesus Christ will be proclaimed in the harmony of both proclamation and presence. People will see Jesus as we touch people's lives with His presence in and through our lives.

B. Be observant of your relationships, your surroundings, and your daily choices. In those particular moments take advantage of the opportunity to decrease that others might be blessed. Routinely ask yourself, "What ways can I better love others with the love of Jesus Christ?"

C. Put to death (mortify) the propensity to exalt the self in conversation and in the particular choices you make in daily choices (Romans 8:13; Colossians 3:5). All too often we find ourselves promoting "me, myself, and I" in the most subtle ways. Interestingly, most often our decision to promote ourselves is due to the pursuit of pleasure or/and personal gain. Ask someone to help hold you accountable and be willing to address this propensity in your life when he or she sees it. The exaltation of the self continually needs to be addressed! We are naturally prone to idolize the self... experience pleasures for the self and pursuing activities that promote the self.

D. Regularly study the life of Jesus Christ. Watch how he loves the unlovely, comforts the hurting, and gives all away. Be like Christ by following after Him (Mark 8:34-36). He is the greatest example of humility (Philippians 2:5-11).

E. Minister to those who are in need, who are suffering, and conflicted in the most strategic ways! I have often found that in those types of ministries, my vision for people enlarges, my passion to see the needs of others increases, and my love for people grows. Perhaps you can ask your local pastor or nearby para-church leader what needs exist and how those needs might be met. But be strategic in every commitment you make. We can be well-meaning in ministering to others, but choose what is strategic in both glorifying to God in action and in outcome. Thus, pour into the lives in the most needed ways that mirror God's beauty. In other words, give where it matters most! And be willing to go outside of your comfort zone! The road may not be easy, but the blessings are manifold!

F. Actively mentor others. Mentoring others often stretches you in the most amazing ways as a servant of Jesus Christ. But mentoring must involve pouring out in day-to-day living, not merely having a meeting over lunch or coffee once, twice, three, or even four times a month.

G. Ask God to scrutinize your life, to give you a grievous burden for those who are in need, and to cultivate opportunities to decrease that others may increase. If things are not right with you and the Lord, confess your sins (1 John 1:9). Turn away from the idolatry of the self. You may have to confess your sins of self-exaltation multiple times a day. Allow God access into those areas where you keep the doors closed and locked. You need to be altogether His in how you live, what you embrace, who you are, and the particular choices you make.

H. Develop the intuitive insight to consistently recognize the practical needs of others and seek to meet those needs with the resources God has given you. But do not merely give what is marginally beneficial; offer your very best resources to them!

I. In particular choices or situations you find yourself, be proactive in choosing what is uncomfortable in order that others might experience the ministry of Jesus Christ through you. Strive to take the difficult road, not the easy road, in any given situation where others are struggling, hurting, or in need.

J. Do not be afraid to take the difficult road... even if it is unclear to you what it will all mean or what will happen. As you trust God with your circumstances, resources, and time, He will lead you and you will experience inward rest and outward victory no matter what comes your way. Said differently, trust God with your circumstances is a timeless truth throughout Scripture. Though you may not know what will happen, He does. God is both sovereign and good!

K. Strive to make people in your sphere of influence first in your life. Do not seek to actively promote yourself but promote the welfare of others. Continually ask how you might better meet their needs, draw them closer to God, and building them up to become all that they are designed. Show Christ to them!

L. Realize that the use of technology while in the company of others distracts us from making people first in our lives, intentional or not. My son, Spencer, calls it the “Macbook treatment.” Attention is divided. Perhaps due to such things as the pursuit of pleasure, the habituated need to have additional stimulation, or need to always be entertained, so many people are listening to music via earphones, texting, surfing the internet, or watching some show or video to the neglect of the people that presently surround them. So, these avenues, while good in other circumstances, actually become roadblocks from qualitatively investing in the lives of others. To even ask a question or make a statement by the other party might become difficult because he or she knows that you have to adjust the volume, take off the earpiece, or finish the text. Thus, many people, I suspect, will not approach you, bridge a particular subject with you, or even ask for your help because you seem to be preoccupied with others matters. You are basically saying, non-verbally, at least, “I do not want to be disturbed!” Thus, the use of technology can become a non-verbal wall and a substantive diversion that keeps you from genuinely loving others in thoughtful conversation and understanding their existential and felt needs. In fact, when we do such activities in the presence of others, we miss out in opportunities to minister, to build each other up, learn and grow in relationships. If these technological walls become part of our daily activities, then our range of friendships and observations regarding the needs of others become rather small. Insensitivity emerges in relationships when technology is used because they become distractions.

M. Allow your home to be a haven of ministry, a place people can come and be physically, emotionally, and spiritually refreshed. Open your home!!!

N. Always be mindful that the time, energy, and resources God gives you are on loan from Him. All things, including our very lives, ultimately belong to Him. Said differently, hold onto things loosely; they are blessings God has given you to give to others. Enjoy them, but when see a need and you have the livelihood to meet that need with the blessings God has given you, you are loving God because you are ministering to those He loves (1 John). He has met your deepest needs. Will you not allow Him to use you to meet the needs that around you?

IV. In Conclusion: Underpinning all of these brief but important applications, are four virtues (good habits) that must be carefully and deliberately crafted or inculcated in one’s disposition: prudence, patience, tenacity, and willingness to change. *Prudence* must become a habit of excellence in your life. Prudence is learning how to appropriately do something the right way with the right timing. You must learn how to reason an activity through... have foresight, and weigh the consequences; be judicious. Always ask yourself, “God, what will bring you the most glory?” Then commit yourself to doing it His way in His timing. Trust Him to bring about the circumstances in His perfect timing. Second, you must develop the virtue of *patience*. Do not complain, become annoyed, lose your temper, etc. because things are not or do not go your way. It is not about you but about trusting God; you be faithful to what is set before you and trust the consequences to God. Third, *be tenacious*. Be strong in the Lord’s strength! Do not easily give up! Even

when you fail or when things become difficult, you must remain faithful. And lastly, *be willing to change by following the Lord through life’s wide array of problems and pleasures*. The vices of pride, stubbornness, and the mourning of change can often lead to our undoing, missing out in receiving God’s best because of our unwillingness to serve God on His terms. Once again, God is good and sovereign. So, we can trust Him as we experience adversity, change, and difficulties. We were not originally made for this fallen world (Genesis 3). Greater things lay ahead (Revelation 21-22). But what He does ask from us while we have air to breathe is the privilege to allow Him to use us in ways He deems best. Therefore, may we abandon ourselves to Him by loving others with Christ-like love in moment-by-moment living.

Final Thought:

The price of loving others with greatness is the surrender of the self. Will you be that daring?