

Postmodernism & Community

As we continue talking about these things, you might ask about personal situations and communicating truth to unbelievers. Let us say, for example, you are working in a situation with many unbelievers and are able to talk with them openly and freely about the things that are going on in their lives—you will find this. If you commit yourself to really getting alongside people, they are going to open their hearts to you. And they are going to tell you about themselves and the things that they are involved in, many of which will be immoral, for example with a group of women sharing their lives where many are involved in all sorts of immoral practices, sexual and otherwise. How are we to deal with this as Christians? How do we begin to address the issue of the universality of God's moral commandments in such a situation? When is it appropriate to speak, when is it appropriate to be silent, and when it is appropriate simply to seek to live the truth, as imperfectly as we do, in front of them? These are great questions and I could easily spend the whole session on this. I would just say to all of you that this is the kind of situation you ought to commit yourself to being in for the rest of your lives, that is, where you get to know people well enough and they trust you enough to start sharing who they are and the things that are going on in their lives. For most Christians, and we might say for the Church as a whole, the workplace is the front line of evangelism. Not for those of you who are going to be pastors, but for almost everyone in your congregations, work is going to be the place where Christians are going to be developing the deepest relationships with unbelievers and having the possibility of getting to know people really well. Now, some of you have this kind of contact with members of your family. I had a young woman in this class who said that in talking to her brother she was very excited, on the one hand, to learn that her brother is completely postmodern, which is exactly what I have been talking about in this course. On the other hand, it was very distressing to her to realize that this is how he thinks about his life and that he is a complete moral relativist, etc. So many of you have members of your family like this who are involved in all sorts of sins—sexual and other types. So how do we deal with that?

First of all, pray. That is the most important thing you can do, because God saves people. You cannot, so pray for them. Pray for your relationship with them; pray that God will give you open doors to communicate the truth in His time. And be prepared to wait for God to open the door and to give you the opportunity, because if you try to push too hard, the door will be slammed shut in your face and the people will not talk to you anymore. So first pray; that really is the most important thing you can do. The Holy Spirit is the witness *par excellence*. He is the one who convicts people of sin, righteousness, and judgment. That is not your task; it is His task to convict people of sin. Second, live the truth. You are never going to do it perfectly, but God calls you to live faithfully a life of righteousness before the person. Third, talk with them as much as you can. When they share with you their immorality in whatever area, you do not need to say, "Well that is sinning against God's commandments." There may be a time when it is appropriate to say that, but all of you who have family members who are involved in sin of one kind or another know that that is not the place where you can start communicating with them. If you do, they will just not talk to you anymore. I used this example about my dad before. He used to swear every third word and blaspheme all the time. I never talked to him about it, because there were far more important things that he needed to deal with in terms of the existence of God in the first place. He was a communist; he did not believe in God. When he became a believer, he stopped swearing and blaspheming just like that, without me or anyone else saying anything. You need to discern what the primary area is where the person needs to be addressed, and it may very well not be the particular sin in which they are involved. Let us say your friend is sleeping with her boyfriend or whatever the issue is, and that will be true of almost everybody out there. She is sinning in that particular area but also in lots of other areas. Just think of it. You see, we sometimes make the mistake, as Christians, of thinking that if someone is involved in sexual sins, we have got to address those instantly. Everybody out there is a

materialist. You do not say to them, “You are materialistic, and this is an offense against the law of God.” You are materialistic yourselves; it is not so easy to say it. You may not be living with your girlfriend unmarried, but you are sinning in all sorts of other areas. That is why you have got to take the beam out of your own eye first. If they are proud, and almost all of them are, you do not say to them, “Listen, you are proud, and God hates pride.” That is not the way you can approach somebody, and you know that, because you struggle with pride yourself. And it is inappropriate for us to pick out particular sins, let us say like sexual sins, as if those are the ones, as a Christian, I feel compelled to address with every unbeliever when there are many other sins I would never think of addressing because it would so obviously be inappropriate to do so. Not that one would not, at some point, talk about sins of materialism and pride. Of course you will, but the issue is whether you are going to have a kind of judgmental relationship with this person where you feel compelled to be pointing out their sins all the time. If you do, no unbeliever will ever talk to you. You have to find what the fundamental area is where you can begin to challenge this person. And I have before used this image, and we will talk more about it later, of this area of overlap between a person’s life and God’s world. With the issue of morality, what I will always try to do is address the area where the person does hold on to absolute moral values; that is where they are still in touch with God’s world. With my father, for example, he was a man who had passionately strong views, absolute moral standards about sexual fidelity, purity, and integrity in the workplace. And those were the points where we could start to talk, where he was in touch with the truth, because these things really mattered to him. Now the point where I was able to challenge him as we talked further was that there is no basis for those within his Marxism. So he is holding this truth in unrighteousness, to quote the apostle’s words. I hope that is helpful for now. We will come back to this issue later, I am sure.

You might also ask if someone who is postmodern would be classified as an agnostic, which means someone who is uncertain about the existence of God, or as an atheist. This is a good question, and I will say simply that the great majority of people who are thoroughly shaped by postmodernism still believe in God in some sense. Most Americans do; something like 90% or 92% of our American contemporaries have some belief in God. That does not stop them from being postmodern. Most people believe in God, but they have no sense of accountability to God. They have no sense whatsoever that they are going to have to stand before God one day and face what He has to say about their lives, face Him as their judge. People find it almost impossible not to believe in God, because it is so obvious that we are living in a designed and created universe. No matter how strongly people are taught evolution and anything else, they continue to think that there must be some kind of creator there. But, even though they still have some acknowledgement of God, their lives are very much shaped by postmodern ideas. So, to speak about postmodernism is not to say that someone is necessarily an atheist, though some of them are. You could say that the most consistent postmodern people are atheists, but nobody is completely consistent. Postmodern people are moral relativists. That is, they deny that there are absolute moral standards and say that morality is simply a matter of individual choice, or the majority or whatever, but nobody is consistent to that, thank God. Everybody has some areas in their lives where they say that there are certain moral standards, standards that are clear. They all think, for example, that rape is wrong. You will not find anybody defending it. They all think sexually molesting children is wrong. You will not find anyone defending that, not publicly anyway. And you could talk about many other areas, too. Nobody is a consistent moral relativist. So in describing people as postmodern, one is not saying that people have completely lost touch with the truth, that they have completely lost touch with moral order, or even that they have completely lost touch with God. They cannot, in fact, completely lose touch, because they are living before God, in God’s universe, and they are made in the image of God. So there is always going to be this kind of tension in their lives; there will always be, coming back to this image, the overlap. So they will have some acknowledgment of God. New Age people are thoroughly postmodern, but they would all say they believe in God in some sense. It is a good question.

Another interesting question might concern our talk of meta-narratives. I had spoken about postmodernism rejecting any meta-narrative, that is, an account that claims to be the truth about the human condition. And yet, one may find a sort of repackaged Marxism in some of the kind of culture wars that are going on between men and women, between minorities and the majority, etc. Is this the reintroduction of a meta-narrative? You remember I said in a previous session that people have idols of the mind. When they stop believing in God they are going to believe in some account of reality. I think people cannot be consistent here. They feel compelled to reintroduce some kind of story that is going to make sense of the human condition. It is part of what it means to be human. We need to have some sense of who we are, where we are from, where we are going, and why we are here. And even if that story, if you like, says that life is absurd—or if that story is one where I adopt this sort of political motif of Marxism with its warfare between this group and that group—people are attracted to such things. Any kind of New Age set of ideas that someone gets involved in claims to be a new kind of account of reality. Remember I talked about idolatry. There is a God-shaped hole in the mind, and people are going to replace the loss of the biblical true account with some other story. So while there is this rejection in theoretical postmodernism of a story that makes sense, people are going to be reintroducing one in some way or another. It is something of which we need to be aware.

In our last session we were talking about the loss of moral direction, and at the end we were discussing whether we personally hold on to God's law. Do we love God as the lawgiver? Do we love His commandments? Are we committed to living in obedience to Him, or are we becoming postmodern like so many other people and living just simply to serve ourselves? And this brings us to our next point. Are we communicating, in word and life, the beauty of righteousness? Do we live the truth in a way that commends the law of God and commends true righteousness to people? Jesus challenges us in Matthew 5:13-16. He says that we are “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world,” and He is talking about our lives when He says those words. “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven.” That is your calling wherever you work, to live such good lives before the people you work with that they may see your good deeds and give glory to your Father in heaven. Well, this is where the true application comes in for the Christian. We are called to live in the world alongside unbelievers and before unbelievers, but to live in a way that always commends the truth to them. Peter says the same thing in 1 Peter 2:12 when he says, basically, “Live such good lives before the pagans that they will glorify God.” What do people see when they look at your life? Do they see the ugliness of self-righteousness, a person who thinks that he is right in everything and who is condemning them? It comes back to the first question. Do they see someone who is constantly pointing out other people's faults, or do they see somebody who lives a life of genuine beauty? Righteousness is beautiful. And in 1 Peter 3:1, Peter is writing to women whose husbands are unbelievers, and his words apply to anybody who has family members who are non-Christians or people who know you really well. If you have a brother, sister, father, mother, spouse, child, or a close uncle, aunt, or grandparent, if you have got members of your family and people you have known, close friends for many, many years, Peter says this: “Win them without a word by your behavior.” Those are the words of Scripture. “Win them without a word by your behavior—when they see the beauty and reverence of your lives.” That is how Peter addresses women whose husbands are unbelievers. Win them without a word by your behavior. He is not saying you are forbidden to speak, but he is saying that especially in a relationship where somebody knows you really well, your primary calling in that relationship is not words but your life. Are you demonstrating the beauty of righteousness? Paul says the same thing in Philippians 2:15-16. He says that we are to “shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and depraved generation.” Now does your life shine like a star? If you think about where you live in your neighborhood and the unbelievers around you and the places where you work where there are non-Christians, is your life shining like a star? Well, it is called to. Paul in Titus 2:10 talks about workplaces

very explicitly and he says, “Make the teaching about God our Savior attractive by the way you work.” What sort of model of integrity do you have? Do people see you as somebody who works faithfully, who works hard? And not just when somebody is watching you, which Paul talks about in Colossians 3:22-24—not just when somebody has got an eye on you. But you work hard as a matter of obedience to God and delight in serving Him. You always work hard and with integrity. If you are in a position of authority in your workplace, what would people under your authority say about you? Would they say that you are a jerk, demanding, difficult to work for, impossible to please? If that is what people say about you, you have betrayed the Gospel. If people look at you and say, “Well, we cannot fire this guy, but he is actually just lazy. He sleeps on the job, and he is always gossiping with people and taking stuff home from work,” well, you have brought discredit on the name of Christ. We are called to live righteously, and righteousness is beautiful. Your life needs to shine like the life of Christ shone. He was enormously attractive to people because true righteousness is beautiful. And when we communicate righteousness to people, do we communicate it as something beautiful, or do we communicate just a lot of rules about the way we think people should live? So, are we living and communicating God’s commandments as something truly beautiful?

And that brings us to our next main point, which is on the loss of relationships and community. And we spoke about this, the breakdown of community in Western culture. Fundamentally, while there may be all sorts of sociological reasons for it in America, from the existence of cars to many other things, and the way we live in suburbs and so on, at the heart of the breakdown of community is our culture’s insistence that the individual lives just to please himself. And wherever you have individuals living just to pursue their own happiness as their fundamental goal, you are going to have the breakdown of community. If that is your approach to marriage, your marriage will end in disaster. If that is how you treat your children, they will leave home as soon as they can, and you will destroy the possibility of any depth of relationship with them. The pursuit of happiness of the individual is completely destructive of community in every context, whether it is marriage, the family, or any other part of our society.

Now, let us think about the challenges that this causes for us. The church is criticized for its lack of community. One of the most common criticisms of churches is that they are simply programs. I used this figure before, but between one third and half of all people who come to churches and join them leave within a year, and their primary criticism is the lack of relationships in the church. The church had lots of programs, lots of business, but it was difficult to get to know people. Everyone was so busy filling their slot, doing their thing, or running their program, that nobody had time for relationships. Churches are criticized as just preaching points. When we moved to St. Louis, after church one Sunday we were driving home and one of my sons was sitting in the back of the car. He was about 14 or 15 years old, and he had tears running down his face, and I said to him, “What is wrong?” And he said, “I miss the family-ness.” And that was his comment about our church, that there was no depth of relationships. He did not feel like it was a family of which he could be a part, and there were cliques among the kids, depending on which school they went to. They were not prepared to really talk to anybody else and to get to know them. And at the time I plead with a couple of our students who were leading the youth group in that church and said, “Please make a personal effort to try to get our sons involved.” And what they got was a card through the mail. Not any kind of personal, truly personal attempt to involve them in the community of the church. I will say that for myself coming here, when we moved here 12 years ago, the most difficult thing for my family was becoming part of the community of the church. And that was with a good will and a longing to be so. But that is what my kids found to be really difficult. It is not a criticism of any particular church; that is just a general problem—that new people in churches have a very hard time really entering into the community life of the church. And this is a major barrier for postmodern people as they look at the church.

Now this brings us to our second point here under this subject. What about me, myself, and what about our own church? Does my church, does my life, have a reality of community in it? Are we so personally shaped by the culture and so busy in our own things that we have to do, whether it is in the programs of our church or the business of our own lives, that we have no time for relationships? We can, as Christians, start living for ourselves and all the things that we are doing for God, and we completely forget about our calling to love our neighbor as ourselves and to give ourselves to community and to relationships. I always remember talking to a woman many years ago who was very heavily involved in teaching Bible studies, which of course is a wonderful thing. Who is going to speak against that? I am sure you are all involved in teaching Bible studies. But she said to me, “I just got so active and I was constantly involved, and one day I was sitting at our kitchen table with my kids and with the woman who I had hired to help look after them. And my little boy, who was three, said this to me, ‘Now, are you my mommy or is she my mommy?’” And she said, “That really caused me to think again about what I was doing. What is it God calls me to do?” Now I am not speaking against mothers teaching Bible studies or against mothers working. That is not my point at all, so do not be offended by what I have said. You can use the same illustration of a father. Fathers are much more guilty than mothers of the problem of spending no time at all with their children. What I am asking is this: are you committed to relationships? You can do thousands of things for God: preaching, teaching, and all sorts of other things—running church programs, etc. But if you are not giving yourself to relationships, whether in your own family or in the family of the church, you have missed what is fundamental to the nature of the Gospel.

Think of how strongly the New Testament puts it. Jesus in John 13:34-35 says this: “A new commandment I give you, that you love one another.” And then He says, “By the way you love one another, all men will know that you are my disciples.” And in John 17:20-23 in Jesus’ high priestly prayer that He prays on the night before He dies, He says that by the quality of our relationships, by the unity we have, people will know that the Father sent the Son. People draw conclusions about the truth of the Christian message when they see the reality of our lives. They draw conclusions about what God has done to save us when they see the way we relate to each other. You might say, “Well, what does that have to do with it? Surely I need to preach that the Father sent the Son.” Of course we do. But Jesus says that people will know that the Father sent the Son by the quality of our relationships. God is a community. The Trinity is a community through all eternity; the Father and the Son and the Spirit have loved each other, served each other, and sought to honor each other and to bring glory to each other. And we are called as those made in the image of God to live in community, too, and to give ourselves to honor, serve, and love others. Frances Schaeffer used to put it this way all the time: “Love is the mark of the Christian.” And the New Testament teaches us that very clearly. If you turn to 1 John 4, John writes about this. In 1 John 4:7-12 John says, “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.” People do not see God; they see you. In this life they are never going to see God. He is invisible to us until we see Christ face to face. But they see you. No man has ever seen God, but God lives in us and His love is to be made complete in us. That is an amazing statement; you would think it was almost blasphemous if the Scripture did not say it. Is God’s love not complete already in the Trinity and in the way He has loved us in Jesus Christ? John says that God’s love has got to be manifested and made complete in your life. This is how people are going to find out about God—by seeing the reality of love in your life. And later on down in 1 John 4:19-21, John adds some words: “We loved because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar; for anyone who does not

love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” And what is love? John speaks about it in 1 John 3:16-18: “This is how we know what love is, Jesus Christ laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers. If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.” Do we love the Trinity who is community? Do we live the Trinity, where there is love, service, and honor for one another, and do we put that into practice in our lives so that people see a reality of the love of God in us? God demands for this to be what they are able to see.

Now this brings us to the next point. Do we welcome the broken people of our postmodern culture into our community, into our churches, into our lives, and into our homes? You might say that postmodern people have messy lives. They are sexually unfaithful; they have all kinds of other problems. But it is precisely broken, sinful people who we are called to welcome into our churches, homes, and lives, and we are to do so gladly. But we live in a generation that values relationships more highly than it values propositional truth. That does not mean we must abandon the communication of propositional truth. Our culture is dying because of the loss of truth. We have to communicate truth. But people will not pay any attention to us at all, no matter how passionately and loudly we declare the truth, unless they see a reality of relationships. In fact, most of them will never come within the hearing of the truth unless they are attracted to it by seeing the reality of love in our lives. Whether it is people you are meeting in the coffee shop where you work, or anything else, if they do not see a reality of love, they will not even talk to you and open their lives to you. The more you love them, the more they will open themselves to you and share the brokenness as well as the joys of their life. The way people should respond to our churches is like a couple who started coming to our church. They had lived in many different places, and I said to them, “Why are you coming to church?” They said, “Well, we have lived in various parts of Africa—in Kenya and Tanzania; we have lived in the Netherlands, Italy, different parts of Britain, and here and there; but we have never seen a community like this, and we want to be a part of it.” That is how people should respond to our churches. There is to be a reality of community.

The church I worship with right now is a black church that meets down the road from the seminary, and it is a very high level of the reality of community. There was a young engaged couple who came to the church last year in April. They got married in July, and the women of the church did the whole wedding for them. They were only there for three months, and everybody knew that they had to leave right after their wedding and would not be back. And the women of the church prepared all the food; the church did the music; one of the women in the church basically took the place of this girl’s mother, who was not going to help her in any way. The woman got close to her and basically ran the wedding for her. And everybody did it for nothing, just for love. That is what it means to be a Christian, and that is the way our churches are to be. They are to have that kind of commitment to community, to loving one another, and to caring for people. When my wife was having her cancer surgery a couple of years ago and going through chemotherapy afterward, it was just an awful time. But we experienced such a high level of community from our colleagues on the faculty here and from the members of our church. I will never forget it. And it had an enormous impact on other people. When nurses, doctors, and visitors to other patients came past my wife’s room in the hospital, there were 35 bunches of flowers in there! There were so many flowers that a room for two people had to be converted to a room of just one, because there was not room for two beds in there with all the flowers. And people—doctors, nurses, visitors, and other patients would come in and say, “There sure are a lot of people who love you.” It had an enormous impact on people. My pastor, Bob Loggins, came to spend the whole five hours with me in the hospital when my wife was having her surgery. I will never forget that. And people who were in the hospital saw it, too. Community, when it is real, has an enormous impact on people’s lives. Cathy Chappell, Polly Long, and Mary Pat Peterson came and scrubbed our floors for six months and washed

our toilets every couple of weeks while my wife was terribly ill. That is community. And when I thanked Cathy Chappell one day, she said, "It is an honor to do this." And she meant it. That is community. That is what all of us are called to in our relationships with one another and within our churches. That is what people should see—that kind of glad service of one another which takes time and is costly and it is very beautiful to see. And it is that kind of reality that is going to impact our postmodern generation.

Our next point is the loss of respect for authority. Now, we have spoken about the way authority is under attack in our postmodern culture, and let us again briefly go through these points. When we claim authority for our churches, our creeds, our confessions, our teaching, our pastors, and our church leaders, this is offensive to people. People see the claim to authority as absurd. At the time of the Heaven's Gate tragedy, there were a series of articles in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* about the kind of strange ideas of that cult. But several of the articles said that really the ideas of the Heaven's Gate cult were no more bizarre and absurd than the claims of Christianity. Christ is going to come again in person, we are going to see Him, and He is going to reign on the earth and establish His kingdom. And the people writing the article said that what the Heaven's Gate people teach is really no more bizarre than what churches teach, what Christians teach. The claim to the authority of our teaching is just considered a bizarre and absurd claim by people around us. That is why people, Christians too, find church discipline to be such an impossible idea to get their minds around. And so this is the question I want to ask us. What about us? How do we deal with authority ourselves? Are we shaped by the culture so that we are cynical about all authority as well? We already talked about this a bit. But I really want to emphasize this third question. What kind of authority are we displaying in our churches? What do people see? One of the problems that we wrestle with is that, in reaction to the attack on authority in American culture, there is a lot of teaching in the evangelical church that says the answer to the problem of the culture's moral breakdown and the breakdown of authority is just to have more and more authority in the church. So we have this very heavy teaching of the chain of command. You have got to live in obedience to your husband, your father, your elders, the state, or whomever it happens to be. With unquestioned obedience, we just submit to this chain of command coming down from God through the authorities. Along with that heavy emphasis on the chain of command and the increase of authority in our homes and churches, there is endless legalistic teaching. We make lots of rules telling people what to do in every circumstance. Well, neither of those are biblical authority in any way, and they are just ugly.

What kind of authority are we displaying? It needs to be the authority of the servant King. Jesus says about Himself, "I came not to be served but to serve," and He is Lord of the universe. Though He was the disciples' Lord and Master, He washed their feet. He was a servant and He calls us to serve in the same kind of way. There is a passage, Matthew 20:25-28, where Jesus says He came to serve and He calls us to serve as well. And He is challenging His disciples when He says this, because they are wrestling with each other about who is going to have more authority. This is a constant theme you find in the Gospels: the disciples arguing with each other about who is going to have the place of greatest power. This is because when they think about authority, they think about power and status. So the mother of James and John says, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." Those of you who are mothers and fathers know that you want positions of status and authority for your kids. Well, she was no different, and Jesus' words are very challenging. The other 10 disciples are indignant about this because they want the places themselves. It is not that they are just critical; they are saying that she tried to get in first here, and now they want to get their word in. There are several accounts in the Gospels of this kind of argument among them. And Jesus says this in Matthew 20:25-28: "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, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” All of you are here because you feel God has called you to ministry of some kind. The word “ministry” is actually a problematic word. It used to mean in English “being a servant.” We tend to forget that. That is all ministry means; to be a minister means to be a servant. We have turned it into a title, a status in power. I cannot tell you to abandon the word, but we need to remember what it really means. We have been called to be servants. Whoever feels called by God to a place of teaching or leadership among God’s people must remember what Jesus says. You are called to be a servant. And over a little further in Matthew 23, Jesus talks about how our attitudes should be toward positions of authority and leadership in the church. In Matthew 23:5-7, He is talking about the scribes and the Pharisees and the teachers of the law: “They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues. They love to be greeted in the marketplace and to have men call them Rabbi.” Now, that happens very easily in our churches. We have special seats of honor for pastors and people in authority. We like to be greeted. It is one of the temptations you are all going to face, those of you who become pastors or are in positions of leadership; you will like to be greeted in public places as pastor. It makes your chest swell a little bit, and you feel good about yourself. You like having an important seat if you get invited to a church dinner somewhere. Everybody has got to look up to you. Well, that is what Jesus is talking about. He goes on to say in verses 8-12, “But you are not to be called Rabbi, for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth father, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called teacher, for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” We do not pay much attention to this biblical passage, but we should. Whether you like the title pastor, teacher, counselor, or anything else, just throw it out. That is what Jesus says. You are called to be a servant. Now do not go around rebuking people for calling you pastor or teacher. That is not my point. The issue involves what is going on in your heart. And do you like the title? Do you kind of swell with pride when people say this to you? Well do not. Jesus calls you to be a servant.

Jesus speaks on this again in John 13:12-17, and this is after Jesus washes His disciples’ feet. And there He is crawling around on the floor with a jug of water and a bowl, collecting the dirty water as He goes around, just in His loincloth and a towel wrapped around His waist, just stripped down. And you can imagine how quiet it got, until He got to Peter, of course, who was not very good at keeping quiet in any circumstance whatsoever. But then after it is all over, Jesus says this: “Do you understand what I have done for you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and rightly so for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent them. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.” This is what it means to lead a church. In any way you are called to be a servant, you are called to wash people’s feet. And that may be literally. When we were out in California recently, I had to wash my father-in-law’s feet because he is getting elderly; he cannot bend anymore, and he cannot wash his own feet. And you may end up literally washing somebody’s feet, but of course Jesus means you take the place of lowliest service, wherever you are. If you are married, with your wife or your husband, and with your parents, children, friends, church, and people you work alongside—you are called to be a servant. Christ calls us to serve them. This is the kind of authority we are to demonstrate. Now I say to my students that if I were to come visit you in your church where you are going to be pastors, I am not going to go and ask people what kind of preacher you are. I am going to go talk to the janitors and the secretaries and say, “What is it like to work for this guy? What kind of a servant is he?” Because that will tell me far more about the genuinely Christian ministry you have than

anything else that people in the church could tell me. Because if that is not there, it does not matter what else is, you are not imitating Christ and you are not faithfully communicating the Gospel.

You might ask how we are to respond to the appeal in Acts 6 in light of this. You might say that actually, the apostles soon got past this and no longer waited on tables but just appointed deacons to do that, because they did not have time for such things. They only had time to preach the Word and to pray. I would say first, it is a misreading of the passage to say that the apostles are drawing the conclusion that it is inappropriate for them to be servants any longer. The point of the passage is simply that they had become so involved in overseeing the distribution of food and in serving people in that practical way, that they were beginning to neglect the ministry of the Word and prayer. What is interesting to notice is the kind of people they appoint to the task. They look for people who are filled with wisdom and the Holy Spirit, several of whom are later described as preachers, evangelists, teachers, and leaders of the church, to fulfill this task of serving at tables and overseeing the distribution of food. It does not mean that the apostles stopped being servants. You can just think of the way Paul describes his own ministry over and over again. He says, "I cared for you as a mother cares for her children. I served you. I will gladly not only expend everything I have for you, but expend my life as well." That is how Paul describes his own ministry. And for you, no matter what the press of teaching and preaching and prayer is, you are never to get beyond the point of being a servant. Now, obviously there is so much service, practical service in any church that you could spend your whole time doing nothing but that, and you would end up having no time to teach and preach at all. And that is not right if God has called you to minister His Word to people. But you never grow beyond being a servant where you say, "Well now that I am the pastor of a church this size, I do not have to serve anymore." Well, Jesus is the pastor of the whole Church, and He washed His disciples' feet. And what is beautiful about that passage is that the beginning of John 13 says that He was determined to show them the full extent of His love, and then what He does is wash their feet. And for all of us, what Luke's Gospel teaches us is that when we come into the kingdom and sit down at the marriage supper of the Lamb at Christ's banqueting table, it says He is going to serve us again. He is never going to get beyond service. That is what it says in Luke 12: Christ will serve us at the fulfillment of the Last Supper, just as He served His disciples. So you do not get beyond it—ever. Yes, you are going to give yourself to the ministry of teaching and preaching, if that is what God has called you to, and prayer for His people, but if you stop being a servant both in the attitude of your heart—how you think about yourself—and practically in what you do, then there is something wrong. If people never see you waiting on tables, if they never see you serving your family, that is not biblical. And I have seen pastors who say, "Well, I have such responsibility for teaching the Word. I get up at 9:30 in the morning, my wife takes care of the family and does everything, I go out and minister the Word of God to people, I come home and I am waited on like a lord, and I do nothing in my home." Well that is not biblical. I hope that if I were to visit any of you in your home who are going to be pastors, I see you serving your wife and your children in all sorts of practical ways and doing it gladly. Every morning of our married life I have gotten up first and made my wife a cup of tea in bed and made breakfast for her. I have done that every single day, basically, for 33 years, and I do so gladly. And that is how we are to be in our churches. Yes, God can call you to lots of teaching, those of you who are called to be teachers, but you do not ever stop being a servant, because if you do, you have betrayed the Gospel.

What about serving people who have the wrong attitude and are too unfit, perhaps, to receive the Lord's Supper, or for Christian fellowship? Well, there are only unfit people out there, let us put it that way. There is not anyone else. Jesus served these guys around the table, and just think about it: every one of them was going to deny Him that night, and He knew that. He called His closest friends to go to the Garden of Gethsemane with Him to watch and pray with Him, and they fell asleep. And then they are boasting, "Lord, even though all the rest deny you, I will not. I am strong. I have got it together. I am an

upstanding, faithful believer and disciple of Yours,” and then they all denied Him and said, “I never knew the guy.” We are called to always serve unfit people. Now there is a different question here, in terms of whether everybody should be welcomed to the Lord’s Table. In Scripture it is quite plain that there are issues of sin that we have to deal with there. But in terms of service, practical service, we are called to serve people, whoever they are. And you are going to have lots of broken people coming to your churches, into your lives, and into your homes from a postmodern culture. There will be people filled with awful sin, and you need to serve them gladly. Even if they do not say thank you, even if they do not appreciate it, even if they do not love you back, you serve them gladly. That is how Christ has served us. When we were unkind and ungrateful and paid no attention at all to Him, He died for us, and we are called to serve in this same way.