

UNIT 5

The Passion

Summary

Love is a journey downward through the valley of humility. In this unit, we trace Jesus' own downward journey to the cross as he teaches his reluctant disciples the importance of humility. Love is usually difficult because it is so humbling. Yet in the low place of humility, we learn to see clearly, because God lives there.

As Jesus journeys to the cross, he speaks openly of the sadness he feels in three relationships: with the nation of Israel, Judas, and his heavenly Father. He grieves over Israel's rejection of him and the judgment that is to come on Israel. At the Last Supper he is agitated as he contemplates Judas' betrayal. When he thinks about his death and separation from his Father, he is honest about his feelings, though not shaped by them.

The study climaxes with the last 24 hours of Jesus' life. Every aspect of Jesus' love is displayed as he comes under intense pressure. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus performs a symphony of love—protecting, defending, touching, healing, and rebuking. Jesus even moves toward Pilate's heart as he is on trial.

We reflect on the meaning of the cross by observing that the center of every act of love is a substitution, an exchange of one life for another. Death is at the center of love.

The resurrection of Jesus breaks the power of death and represents the ultimate victory of love, because without hope, love is pointless. Jesus is the shepherd king, someone both good and strong, who meets our deepest fears and smallest needs.

Chapters in *Love Walked Among Us*—19 through 24.

Lessons

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LESSON 38

Humility

Summary

The disciples' pride leads them to quarrel three times before Jesus' humiliation on the cross. Jesus points to his own life as an example of humility.

Chapter in *Love Walked Among Us—19: The Way of Humility*.

Outline

1. "Who's the Greatest?" 10 min
2. A Power Play 10 min
3. Who Will Get the Best Seat? 10 min
4. The Lower Place 10 min
5. Taking the Lower Place 5 min
6. The Six Blessings of Humility 20-min Total 65 min


Goals


Love: Much of what makes love painful is simply the humiliation of taking the lower place. But being humble not only kills quarreling but also enables us to discover God.

Faith: It takes faith to trust God when we are giving up power.

1. “Who’s the Greatest?”

10 min.

 **Review:** So far we’ve studied the three aspects of love: compassion, honesty, and dependence/faith. We’ve seen how these three bring about the possibility of oneness. Now we start our final unit, which focuses on the cost of love. Love is a journey that begins with dying and ends with hope. We begin this unit by reflecting on how the cost of love involves humbling ourselves.

 **Teach:** In the last month of Jesus’ life, he moves toward the humiliation of the cross, even as the disciples are trying to go higher. But there are only so many spaces at the top, so three times, quarrels break out. [Try to go through these 3 stories relatively quickly if you are doing this as one lesson.] In the first incident, Jesus has taken the disciples north out of Israel to Caesarea-Philippi. There Jesus selects three of them (Peter, James, and John) to go with him up a mountain, where he is transformed in their presence. The remaining nine disciples have tried and failed to cast out a demon while Jesus has been away with the three.

Q. How might the nine be feeling about the three who were selected?

Envious.

Q. How might the nine be feeling about not being able to cast out a demon?

Frustrated. Defensive.

Q. What might the three be feeling toward the nine, especially since the nine couldn’t cast out a demon?

Pleased with themselves. Quick to give advice to the nine.

Q. What does this kind of tension usually lead to?

Arguing.



Read: Mark 9:33-37, Matthew 18:1-5 [Matthew adds more details.]

Q. How is this scene amusing?

We can picture the disciples standing there, shuffling their feet, when Jesus asks them what they were arguing about.



Historical Background Peter’s House

The house referred to here is Peter’s house, mentioned in Lesson 30. Archaeologists are fairly confident that they can identify the very room where this discussion took place. The house is very small—a mere hovel.

Q. Given how children were viewed in the first century, how is Jesus turning first-century values inside out?

Jesus is lifting the child up to his disciples as an example of humility. He’s holding up what his culture devalues as an example of value. (No one at the time would have considered a child to be “pure.” A child was unimportant.)

2. A Power Play

10 min.

In this account, two disciples make a play for power while ten are asleep at the switch.



Read: Matthew 20:20-28—A Request

Q. What is charming about how James and John make a play for power?

They use their mother to try to get the best job for them.

Q. Why does Jesus talk to all the disciples and not just James and John?

Most likely the disciples are upset—not because James and John sinned, but because the rest of them got the wrong end of the stick.

Q. When Jesus talks to all the disciples, how does he turn first-century cultural values inside out?

Instead of being like the Gentiles whose rulers lord it over them, they are to be servant-leaders.



Read: Quote from Henri Nouwen

What makes the temptation to power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to be God than to love God, easier to control people than to love people, easier to own life than to love life.¹

Q. To what example does Jesus point?

He points to himself.



Old Testament Background
“Drink the Cup”

When Jesus talks about “drinking the cup,” he’s referring to an Old Testament figure of speech, which symbolized God’s anger: the cup of God’s wrath (Isaiah 51:17, 22; Jeremiah 25:15,28). When Jesus died on the cross, he drank the cup of his Father’s wrath. Jesus’ reply implies that suffering comes before leadership, humility before honor.



Teach: At Jesus’ crucifixion, the gospels mention that the robbers are crucified on his right and his left (Matthew 27:38, Mark 15:27). Scholars believe that Mark and Matthew are suggesting that these are the place of honor next to Jesus; that is, the place of the humiliation is the place of glory.

3. Who Will Get the Best Seat?

10 min.



Read: Luke 22:24-27; John 13:4-5, 12-15—The Last Supper²



Historical Background Seating at the Last Supper

An argument over where each disciple gets to sit might explain why Peter is so far from Jesus at the Last Supper—an unusual arrangement because, as leader of the 12, he should've been to Jesus' left. We know:

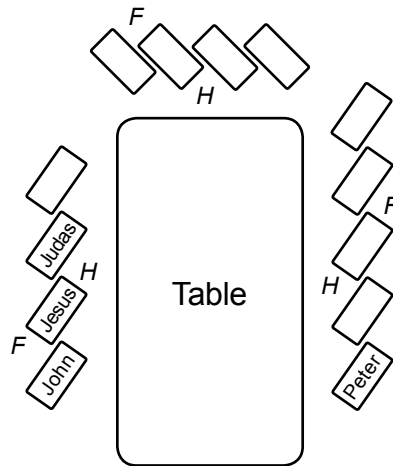
1. Peter is far from Jesus at the supper. He has to whisper to John to pass a message to Jesus (John 13:24).
2. Judas appears to be close to Jesus (John 13:24,26).
3. John is on Jesus' right (John 13:25).
4. The place of highest honor is on Jesus' left and second highest place is on his right.
5. There's an argument at the beginning of the supper as to who's the greatest. The logical scenario is an argument over seating.

Picture this scenario: Judas and Peter fight over the seat of honor on Jesus' left; Jesus rebukes them; then Peter, greatly chastened, impetuously (and dramatically!) takes the lowest seat, furthest from Jesus.³



Draw: Seating arrangement

The table is in the middle, surrounded by the single divans on which each guest reclines on his left side, with his head (H) nearest the table, and his feet (F) stretching back toward the ground.



Q. Assuming this is the table setting, why is it so undesirable to be in the lowest place?



[Write their answers on the tablet.] An example of why the lowest place is a hassle is recorded in the story itself. Peter doesn't have direct access to Jesus because he has a lower position. Power means access. It means being able to get information more easily, more quickly.

Q. How does Jesus model what he teaches here?

He washes their feet.



Historical Background Foot-washing

The servant lowest on the totem pole was the one who had to do the foot washing. Jesus becomes the lowest of the low.

Q. How are humility and love intertwined in this incident?

[Various answers.]

Q. Hint: could Jesus have loved the disciples without humbling himself?

No. Humility and love are inseparable. In order to love he had to go low.

Q. How does Jesus' physical posture reflect his humility?

He's down on his hands and knees.



Teach: So it is with love. Think about the different times you show love to others, and how it affects the position of your body:

When you take out the trash, you _____

When you scrub the toilet, you _____

stop here if dividing lesson into two sessions

4. The Lower Place

10 min.

Q. Think of a situation when you were in a low place. What was it like? What made it hard? How did people relate to you?



[Write their answers.]

Q. What's the difference between humility and humiliation?

[Various answers.]

Principle: Humiliation is when your circumstances are humbled.
Humility is when your heart is humbled.
The place where you learn humility is humiliation.



Teach: What does humility look like in relationships? Here's an example:

Situation: Husband tosses his underwear on the bedroom floor each morning. He's never made the connection between clean underwear and the activity of picking it up and washing it. Mom always picked it up for him at home. Wife doesn't.

Husband: "Honey, I'm all out of clean underwear."

Wife: "Can you remember to put it in the laundry basket? That way I won't forget it."

Husband: "What good would that do? You don't get the laundry done on time anyway."

Q. Why is the husband's last comment so nasty?



[Write their answers.] He is trying to win, to take the higher place.



Teach: He goes higher by bringing her down. We can go higher by boasting or we can go higher by lowering the people around us. He's also shifting the problem from himself to her.

Q. What will she most likely say in response?

Some form of retaliation.

Q. Then, what will he say to her?

More retaliation.

Q. So where does retaliation lead?

Just a cycle of retaliation, as in the Middle East conflict.



Teach: Just for the sake of our discussion, we're going to focus on the wife. Now, let's say the husband's last comment is partially right. They've divided the household chores, and she's behind on the laundry.

Q. Given this fact, how could her response reflect humility?

She could agree with him that she's late in getting the laundry done, even when it's in the basket.

Q. Why would it be hard for her to respond that way?

- It means giving him “points.”
- He's the one with the dirty laundry on the floor. It feels like he's getting away with something.
- It means letting him change the focus away from himself.

Q. How would it feel for her to say, “You're right. I'm behind in the laundry”?



[Write their answers. Sit on this answer because this is why we hate humility.]

- Lousy.
- Galling.
- Unfair. Like she's giving him “points” for being mean to her.



Teach: In effect, she's doing what Peter does at the Last Supper, giving up her seat. That means that Peter has less access to Jesus. That means her husband appears to “win” the argument.



Write: The wife has five “humble” options:

1. Confess. (“Yes, it's true that sometimes I'm slow with the laundry.”)
2. Try to understand. (“What do you mean when you say, ‘You don't do the laundry?’”)
3. Defend herself without barbs. (“I don't think that is true.”)
4. Silence—say nothing.
5. Pick up the underwear without anger or “the big sigh.”

5. Taking the Lower Place

5 min.



Teach: Option #5 is the most galling. But if God is telling you to “take the lower place” then you're not doing it “under your husband's thumb” but you're doing it because you've surrendered your will to God. You're not being a co-dependent. A co-dependent picks up the laundry because she's living for the other person's approval.



Read: John 10:17-18

The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.”



Teach: At the end of his life, Jesus clearly allows himself to be taken captive after a period when he had frequently hidden himself. At the Last Supper he tells Judas, “What you are about to do, do quickly” (John 13:27).

Historical Background Gethsemane's Exit

A set of steps dating back to the first century lead out of the rear of Gethsemane and into the wilderness of Judea. Jesus doesn't use them. Instead, he steps forward out of the garden toward the soldiers and identifies himself as Jesus. He takes the lower place.

6. The Six Blessings of Humility 20 min.

1st Argument Is Stopped

[Ask the question first, then say the point.]


Q. Think about the story of the dirty underwear. What happens to the argument when the wife takes a humble position?

The argument dies for lack of fuel.

2nd We're No Longer Controlled By the Other Person

Q. When we retaliate, are we acting as a free agent or are we being controlled by the meanness of the other person?

We're being controlled by the meanness of the other person.

 **Teach: Tar Baby.** Humility frees us from getting in a “tar baby” fight. In Uncle Remus, Brer Fox, knowing Brer Rabbit's tendency toward arrogance, makes a doll out of tar and sets it by the side of the road. Brer Rabbit hops by and says, “How do you do?” But Tar Baby sits there without answering. Brer Rabbit becomes so mad at Tar Baby's insolence that he hauls off and smacks him, but still Tar Baby is silent. This infuriates Brer Rabbit, who then becomes hopelessly stuck in the tar. Cycles of retaliation lead to Tar Baby-like fights.


3rd We Can See Clearly in the Low Place

Q. If you want to know what's really going on in a company, where do you go—to the factory floor or the boardroom?


The factory floor.

Q. Why?

People tell it like it is, with little or no pretense. They have little to lose.

 **Teach:** Down low you see what's really going on. Pride doesn't even notice humility, because humility is so quiet. But down low, not only do we see other people better, but we also see ourselves—and God—better. That's why the outcasts of society—children, women, foreigners, the poor and disabled—are attracted to Jesus. They see him much more clearly.

4th We Meet God in the Low Place

 **Teach:** The most wonderful benefit of humility is that in the low place we meet God. God is on the other side of the dirty underwear.



Old Testament Background

Humility

“I live in a high and lofty place but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit” (Isaiah 57:15). God is there ahead of us in the low place, inviting us to come live with him, to taste his goodness. To feel what God feels, we must humble ourselves and become concerned not with position, but with people.



Teach: Jesus is Humble. He says, “Learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:30). His first bed was a feeding trough. He ate with prostitutes and tax collectors. He talked with Samaritans. He touched lepers. His people rejected him. He died as a criminal.

5th Our Ego Dies in the Place of Humiliation



Teach: Ego—the self—gets in the way of love. Almost every religion recognizes this. Buddha solved the problem of self by proposing the annihilation or immersion of the self into “the all.” In getting rid of self-will, however, Buddhism destroys the self rather than the will. But by following Jesus, the ego, not the self, dies.

6th God Acts on Our Behalf in the Low Place



Read: Luke 14:11

“He who humbles himself will be exalted.”



Read: Matthew 5:5

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.”



Teach: Again, it takes faith to believe this because we’re doing the very opposite of what the world tells us to do. Look at the whole pattern of Jesus’ life.



Read: Philippians 2:5-8—The Pattern of Jesus’ Life

This Scripture passage is an early hymn of the church, possibly dating back to within a couple of years after Jesus’ death.⁴



Gospel Connection:

- Jesus offers us not only the model for humility but also the power by giving us his very person in our lives through the gift of the Holy Spirit.
- He also gives us a whole new identity...sons and daughters of God...so that the low place becomes the high place.

Notes:

1. Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper, c. 1991), p.59.
2. The relationship between these two passages is suggested by the context and Edersheim, but we can’t be absolutely certain that Jesus’ footwashing is a response to the argument. We know both happened early in the supper so the connection makes sense. We’ll assume that the two incidents are logically connected for the sake of this lesson.
3. This scenario is suggested by Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah, Vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 494.
4. Many scholars think that this hymn or poem was not written by Paul but was used by him. There is no strong evidence for this; it is not much more than scholarly speculation. In either case it dates to within a few years of Jesus’ death and resurrection.