

# Lesson 1: The Importance of People

## Preparation

- **NOTE:** All of the pages from the Participant's Guide are included in this Leader's Guide. These pages are clearly labeled and bordered. You can obtain an electronic copy of the Participant's Guide from [www.polisinstitute.org](http://www.polisinstitute.org) and are permitted to make ten copies of the guide per Leader's Guide.
- Find out if you have any single parents in your group and discuss the opening set of statistics with them. Ask them what type of introduction would help provide context for the statistics and if they would be willing to briefly tell their story to the group.
- Read "Introduction: *Dignity Serves: A Small Group Study*," "Service Event," and this lesson prior to the group session. Make sure you understand the group exercise. After you have read through the materials and formulated some questions, watch the Leader's Training DVD.
- The main principle this lesson teaches is that **all people have dignity and deserve honor and respect because they are made in God's image. All people are important.** Please keep this in mind as you lead all sections of the lesson, and make sure to return to this concept as it fits into group discussion. This principle should be the primary takeaway for group members.
- Fill out the list for **part 10** of the group exercise.
- Pray for the group ahead of time according to the recommended prayer below.
- Gather materials.

## Materials

- 7 index cards for each participant.
- Pens/pencils.
- Leader's Guide and a Participant's Guides for each participant (see note above).

## Prayer

- That God would guide the group to a better love of himself, his people and his world.
- That God would show the group the dignity inherent in all people.
- That this study would encourage and equip the group to serve their communities in the name of Christ.

## Guiding the Lesson

### Opening Prayer, Scripture, and Introduction - ⌚ 20 minutes

1. **Open the lesson in prayer**, remembering the requests listed above.
2. **Ask** someone to read Philippians 2:5-11 from their Bible or the Participant's Guide.
3. **Introduce** the study, summarizing or reading *Introduction: Dignity Serves, a Small Group Study*. Reading the introduction as a group may double the length of this section.
4. **Read the following three goals** and allow the group time to write them down in their guide. The goals of the study are to:
  - a. discover and nurture the servant's heart – the heart of one who enjoys their dependence on God and their interdependence with others, a principle that is referred to as *dignified interdependence*.
  - b. encourage each participant to serve with greater commitment - in a particular place, with a particular ministry , or for particular people.
  - c. prepare interested participants to engage in community development.
5. Additional comments and cautions about the nature of the study.
  - a. **The study is a participatory tool.** As you will see, the lessons do not simply provide information but guide the participants through a journey of self-reflection, confession, and faith. This journey will tend to increase humility in serving others. To learn the principles taught, the group will have to engage their hearts and minds during the lessons and the service event. They will need to attend as many sessions as possible. The group leader should encourage the faithful attendance and active participation of all group members. The goals of the study will not be accomplished if group members don't participate.

- b. **The study probes the heart.** Those that participate are likely to experience a range of feelings and some will become frustrated and discouraged. Others will be motivated and encouraged by what they learn. The wide range of responses presents a challenge to the leader and great opportunities for spiritual growth.
    - i. Be attentive to people's reactions to the information and the exercises. It's more important that people feel the weight of living in a sinful world, the joy of redemption, and the comfort of godly companionship than that they "get it."
    - ii. Avoid lengthy theological and political debates initiated because of uncomfortable or unfamiliar feelings.
    - iii. Avoid trying to provide neat answers to questions that arise. Most questions related to service have no simple answer.
  - c. **The study is geared towards local service** but the principles also apply more generally. As such, several of the exercises describe struggling neighborhoods and assume the group doing the study is from the 'outside.' This is a common scenario in contemporary Christian service and one that poses particularly difficult challenges. As you go through the materials you will discover that the difficulties serving across these types of barriers show up in all types of service and the correctives are quite similar as well.
6. **Allow the participants** time to fill out the introductory questions in their guide.
7. **Lead a brief discussion** of the current types of service with which the group are involved.

8. **Discuss the service event** the group will be participating in for this study. Find out if one of the areas of service in which group members are involved is a good candidate for the group event. Ask also if anyone in the group is in need of some help and consider this as a viable option for service. By the end of this discussion try to at least settle on the type of event that would work well with the group. Please **see the Service Event section earlier in the Leader's Guide** for more information.
  
9. **Commit to having the event scheduled by the end of Lesson Two.** If you are not able to select the type of event the first time you meet, have group members bring suggestions for the event and their availability to your second meeting so that you can come to an agreement by the end of that meeting. You should provide them with a follow up email to remind the group.

It will not be possible to schedule an event that satisfies every participant's interests and schedule. As far as the study goes, it does not matter when you schedule the event. Simply interrupt your progress through the lessons to do the Service Event and the After Action Review and then continue with the next lesson. In summary, try your best to schedule the event by the end of Lesson Two and complete the event before you get to Lesson Six.

Participant's Guide

# Lesson 1: The Importance of People

## Scripture

### Philippians 2:5-11

*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: <sup>6</sup> Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, <sup>7</sup> but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. <sup>8</sup> And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross! <sup>9</sup> Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

## Introduction

Your group leader discussed the goals of this study. What are they?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

What questions arose for you from the introduction of this study?

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In what ways are you currently serving others? \_\_\_\_\_

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Do you find the service work that you do fulfilling? Why or why not? \_\_\_\_\_

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## Guiding the Lesson

### Did You Know? - ⌚ 10 minutes

1. **Read**, or have a group member read “**Did You Know**,” in the Participant’s Guide.
2. The first set of statistics is alarming. Take some time to provide proper context. These statistics reveal potential outcomes of raising children in single parent environments but they are not determinative. There are many, many wonderful exceptions to these trends. The statistics also do not reveal specific causes nor do they readily turn our thoughts to the varied stories and situations that they represent.

**NOTE:** If you have single parents or those who grew up in single-parent homes in your group, be sensitive to their presence. If they are willing, it will be beneficial to the group if they share some of their challenges and joys.

3. Open a **brief discussion** welcoming comments or questions about “Did You Know.”  
Some questions or comments that might arise:
  - Predictor versus cause: single-parent households are a PREDICTOR, not necessarily the cause of the issues mentioned. A complicated set of factors are certainly involved, but it is clear from the given statistics that those from single-parent homes experience significant struggles.
  - What about the criminals and rapists – do they really have dignity?  
The rest of the lesson will continue to delve into the concepts that we are all sinful and broken, yet all have dignity, so you can defer answering questions such as these by saying something like - “I think you will get some answers to that question as we continue into the next section.”

## Participant's Guide

### Did you know?

Growing up in a single-parent home is a stronger predictor for living in persistent poverty than many other factors, including race, ethnicity, and education level.<sup>i</sup> Those who have grown up in single-parent homes account for:

63% of youth suicides<sup>ii</sup>

71% of pregnant teenagers<sup>iii</sup>

71% of all high school dropouts<sup>iv</sup>

75% of all adolescent patients in addiction recovery centers<sup>v</sup>

80% of convicted rapists<sup>vi</sup>

85% of all children with behavioral disorders<sup>vii</sup>

85% of all youth in prison<sup>viii</sup>

90% of all homeless and runaway children<sup>ix</sup>

If you are a single-parent, grew up in a single parent home, or know someone that is a single parent, please know that while these statistics are troubling, they are not determinative. Moreover, these statistics show the percentage of those with the indicated problem who came from single parent homes NOT the percentage or likelihood of a child raised in a single parent home to have the problem. Rearing children in a single parent environment presents unique and difficult challenges, yet many single-parent homes defy the odds. Sadly though, many more are struggling intensely to provide the structure, love, and attention required to raise children. Parents and children who are in this situation are in need of friendship and support. Each single parent, each child in a single-parent home, each pregnant teen, each adolescent addict, each runaway bears God's image and has gifts, dreams and abilities to share.

## Guiding the Lesson -

### Challenging Our Perceptions - ⌚ 20 minutes

1. **Read “I used to be you”** in the Participant’s Guide. Mary is a real person and the story is true.
2. Allow for **questions or comments**.
3. **Read** the three paragraphs following Mary’s story in the Participant’s Guide.
4. Additional Scripture for your reference.

Exodus 15:11-13: *“Who among the gods is like you, O LORD? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders? You stretched out your right hand and the earth swallowed them. In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.”*

The above Scripture is from the song of Miriam and Moses which is recorded after the account of the God’s deliverance of Israel from slavery. They sang this song because they were in awe of God. Their thankfulness for his deliverance, his strength, greatness, and unfailing love for his people overflowed in song and praise. Verse 11 asks the rhetorical question, “Who is like the LORD?” While there is no one and nothing equal to God and so worthy of our worship, God has bestowed special honor on human beings, creating us alone in his image and likeness (Gen. 1:26).

Genesis 1:27: *“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”*

During biblical times and in the region where much of biblical history takes place (called the Ancient Near East), kings were thought to be made in the image of God, a status which gave them immense dignity. In contrast to this belief, the first page of the Bible teaches that God created not just kings, but all men and women in his image. Being created in the image of God is the most central and important characteristic of any person. God’s image bestows great honor and dignity, and also great responsibility on all of us.

## Participant's Guide

***"I used to be you."***

*Mary stood outside the church mission with a look of fatigue and desperation. "What's going on?" a volunteer asked. "Nothing," Mary replied, avoiding eye contact. She continued, "It's just hard for me to see you and your wife because I used to be you. I used to be where you are. I used to have what you have, I used to do what you do, I used to live where you live - I used to be you."*

*The volunteer asked, "Do you mind if I ask what happened? How did you end up homeless?" She replied, "I was married and had kids, friends and a home in a nice neighborhood. My husband became abusive so I had to leave. Even then I was doing fine, working, had a decent place to live. But the place burned down and I had to move. In the transition, I lost my job. A month later I couldn't afford rent and the next thing I knew I was living under a bridge asking myself how it all happened."*

*She continued, "Since being at the mission God has transformed my life. I see how broken I am and how broken this world is and I know that my only hope is in Jesus. I know this but it is still hard. There are no jobs around here and a cycle develops of not having a job so you can't get a place to live, and then not having a place to live so you can't get a job. But I know God has me in this place for a reason. There are hurting people here who I know God wants me to have an impact on. And they have taught me a lot about what it means to live with dignity and to care for one another."*

**It's so easy to tie our identity to our circumstances in life.** We all do it. Mary's rapid change from a suburban and well-to-do wife and mother to a homeless woman living on the streets in a bad part of town left her broken, tired, and humiliated. It was painful for her to be reminded of the comfortable life she once had. Her current situation really challenged her former ideas about poverty, homelessness, identity and worth.

**Social research reveals that the average person thinks they are better than the average person.**<sup>x</sup> We also tend to group ourselves with others of similar background and life circumstances.<sup>xi</sup> Such attitudes encourage us to think in "us and them" terms. We tend to think that "we" have it all together and "they" don't. "We" have the answers, so "we" need to help "them." These perceptions also play into who we think is more deserving of our help. Those whose struggles we understand and can empathize with are easier for us to help.

The "us" and "them" mentality can become quite arrogant and condescending when we begin to see others as having nothing to offer us or as undeserving of our help. **True service should not be a "one-way" flow of resources. We all have dignity and have something to give. As we seek to serve our communities, we must be open to learn from and to be served by others.**

## Guiding the Participation Exercise

⌚ **40 minutes total - in two parts**

This exercise will help the participants discern how much their identity is attached to the different roles, traits, and accomplishments in their life. For this exercise to work well, the setting needs to have as few distractions as possible so each person can thoughtfully participate. The goals are to reveal how deeply we tie our self-worth to these identifying characteristics and how that affects how we see others and how we reach out to help them.

### **PART ONE: ⌚ 25 minutes**

1. **Distribute** seven index cards and a pen to each participant.
2. Have participants **write** seven answers to the question **“Who am I?”** - one per card.<sup>xii</sup>
  - ❖ Some participants may ask whether they are supposed to write **characteristics** (such as intelligent or funny) or **roles** (such as husband, mother, or teacher). Either is appropriate for this exercise. Do not tell them which to do – it’s up to them to decide.
3. Next, have them **arrange the cards** in order of how important each characteristic or role is to their sense of identity or worth. The characteristics closest to the core of who they are should be on the bottom and the *least important should be on top*.
4. Then, ask them to **think about what it would be like** to give up or lose the role or characteristic written on their top card. How would they think about themselves? How would others likely view them?
5. **After two minutes, have them discard the top card.**
6. **Repeat the process for the remaining cards.** Give two minutes per card. ⌚ **14 minutes**
  - ❖ Encourage the participants **not to rush ahead**. The amount of time and effort put into imagining this loss directly impacts the effectiveness of the exercise. Have them spend a **full two minutes on each card in silence reflecting on the loss** of this identifying characteristic. Cue them with as little distraction as possible when it is time to go to the next card.
  - ❖ Some people may have written down negative attributes that feel freeing to imagine giving up but most will have written down positive roles and traits and will be affected, sometimes dramatically, by the idea of losing these positives.

7. **Ask** the group how the exercise so far has made them feel and how different their life would be without these parts of their identities. You may also want to ask how they think losing these roles or attributes would change the way others look at them.
8. **Pray.** Take a few moments to pray with the group, particularly if you notice that the exercise has troubled anyone in the group.

**PART TWO: ⌚ 15 minutes**

9. Have the group **turn over their cards** so the blank side is facing up.
10. Ask them to write down the first thing that comes to mind when they consider the following seven people or types of people, one per card. They should be told that it is very important to be honest and that they will not have to share this with the group.

- **“Write down the first thing that comes to mind when you think of...”**

1. A homeless man pushing a shopping cart
2. The person in your life that you are having the most difficulty with right now

3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_
5. \_\_\_\_\_
6. \_\_\_\_\_
7. \_\_\_\_\_



**Fill this out prior to the group meeting.**  
(see below)

- For numbers three through seven in the above list, pick people or types of people that others tend to look down on. Consider what you think would be best for your particular group. Suggestions include Drug addict, Spouse abuser, Prostitute, Rapist, Pedophile, Politician, Lawyer, Used Car Salesman, Lobbyist, Tax Collector, Mobster, Gambler, Adulterer, Conman, or TV Journalist. You may also want to pick a specific “infamous” person from history or pop culture.
  - Be sensitive to the fact that there may be people in the room who fall under one of these labels. The purpose is not to assess relative good or bad, it is simply an opportunity to reflect on those we tend to quickly label in our minds.
11. After all seven cards are filled out, **ask** if anyone would like to share an insight from this part of the exercise (please do not pressure anyone to share). If there is time, conclude this part with a discussion about how it would feel to be labeled by others this way.

## Guiding the Lesson

### Conclusion - ⌚ 15 minutes

1. **Ask** someone in the group to read the **Conclusion**. You may want to re-read or draw attention to the Scripture (Phil. 2:5-11) at the beginning of the lesson.

2. **Read** the following:

The importance of people, our value, comes from God. The dignity that he affords us is not something we accumulate or acquire; it is something we are granted by God's grace and creative power. Our dignity ultimately says more about God than it does about us. He is the king of kings, the supreme dignitary of the universe, and to him all honor and praise is due. He is the standard of goodness, trustworthiness, truth, and holiness. He is eternal. He is worthy of praise.

3. **Review** the "At Home" section following the Conclusion. Each week there will be suggested prayers for the week, a question for the group to ask others, and any preparation for the following week.

The questions that are included are quite simple but can be very difficult to ask other people. Each one exposes in some way our vulnerability and need for others and for God. Perhaps that is why they are so difficult - we prefer to be strong. Those we help can often sense our desire to be strong, to have all the answers. Sometimes we make people feel ashamed for needing help, for being weak. There are two things that will work against this harmful tendency – confessing our need for God and others, and seeking to discover the strengths and abilities of those we serve. Participants who make the effort to ask at least one person the included question will practice the art of dignified interdependence – the biblical ideal for giving and receiving help.

4. **Conclude the lesson with prayer** affirming our need and desire to:
  - Confess our sins of indifference, condescension, and self-righteousness towards others.
  - Elevate our view of humanity – God's image bearers.
  - Elevate our view of God – his unfailing love, majesty, and power.

## Participant's Guide

**Conclusion**

In Lesson One we have addressed two critical issues: 1) how much we base our self-worth and value on our roles and accomplishments in life and 2) how we tend to devalue others based on their failures, real or imagined. These perceptions create genuine problems when we try to serve others. First of all, we can pursue serving others as another accomplishment in an attempt to improve our worth. This makes our service all about us and ensures our failure. In contrast, the Bible teaches us to “do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit” (Phil. 2:3). Secondly, we can shun serving those we feel do not deserve our help or those who present particularly difficult challenges to us. But we are taught to humbly consider others better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3) and to adopt the attitude of Christ Jesus “who being in very nature God...made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant” (Phil 2:5-7).

We all make both of these mistakes, serving others to build ourselves up and not serving those we have mentally torn down. These errors are very harmful to our relationships. Thankfully, Jesus Christ did not make these tragic mistakes. He was faithfully obedient to God's commands, obedient even to death. He did this as a servant to us, a servant “made in human likeness” (Phil. 2:7). God has bestowed great honor on humanity in two very powerful ways. First, he made us in his image, in his likeness (Gen. 1:26). Though his image in us is marred by sin, vestiges nonetheless remain. Secondly, God also bestowed honor on humanity by sending our redeemer in human likeness. These dual honors that God has given us afford each and every human being a dignity that demands respect.

## Participant's Guide

**At Home****After Lesson 1**

## PRAYER FOR THE WEEK

Throughout the week, revisit the index cards that you filled out during the exercise and use them to inform your prayers. Consider asking God for:

- A godly view of your roles and accomplishments in life, confessing pride and idolatry as appropriate and celebrating the successes with which God has blessed you.
- Ability to see the image of God more readily in others and yourself, confessing condescension and indifference towards others.
- Protection and care for your loved ones.

## QUESTION FOR THE WEEK

The path to dignified service of others is paved with asking questions and learning to really listen to the answers. The questions to be asked are generally quite simple - so simple in fact that they often get neglected. Each week during this study you will be given a simple question. The task is to ask at least one person that question during the week. When you ask the question, take note of your ability (or inability) to listen to the answer before you begin to critique their response.

Seek out someone who was included or represented in the second half of the exercise (the people we tend to look down on) and ask them, "**What is something that people say you are good at?**"

## PREPARATION FOR NEXT WEEK

If the group has not already scheduled the service event that you will be doing as an integral part of this study, please investigate opportunities for the group and bring your ideas to the next meeting.

## Notes/Sources:

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<sup>i</sup> William A. Galston, “Putting Children First,” *The American Educator* (summer 1992).

<sup>ii</sup> U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Bureau of the Census.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> *National Principals Association Report on the State of High Schools*

<sup>v</sup> Rainbows for all God’s Children

<sup>vi</sup> *Criminal Justice & Behavior*, Vol. 14, p. 403-26

<sup>vii</sup> Center for Disease Control

<sup>viii</sup> Fulton Co. Georgia jail populations, Texas Dept. of Corrections

<sup>ix</sup> Department of Justice, Special Report

<sup>x</sup> This has been repeatedly observed in social science research. For one example consult the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (Vol. 79, No. 6). This study, done by Cornell University is summarized at

[http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicle/01/3.29.01/holier\\_than\\_thou.html](http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicle/01/3.29.01/holier_than_thou.html).

<sup>xi</sup> Another consistently affirmed social axiom: we tend to form friendships with others who are like us (what researchers call ‘homophily’). For a summary of a study being conducted through 2009 regarding Facebook that also describes the phenomenon and other homophily studies see, “On Facebook, Scholars Link Up With Data,” *New York Times*, 12/18/2007.

<sup>xii</sup> The The idea for the first part of this exercise was adapted from a group exercise found in *Existential Psychotherapy* by Irvin Yalom. Basic Books, NY, 1980.