

A Biblical Theology of Learning Through Service

The Need for a Theology of Learning Through Service

As a theological seminary, the faculty and student body of Dallas Theological Seminary are intentionally moving toward a plan that involves compassionate, sacrificial service and relationally based actions that express the love of Christ. We want to show how these stated aims are grounded in a biblical theology of learning through service (L-S). What follows is a tracing of biblical mandates and examples throughout both the Old Testament and the New Testament that demonstrate a biblical basis for incorporating L-S in the seminary setting. This investigation shows not only how the character of God exemplifies compassion, but what a student involved in L-S will embody. Furthermore, it shows how the “teaching of truth” will affect “loving well” in ways that are demonstrated, commended, and established in the whole of Scripture. L-S is designed to give a foundation for our students as they integrate biblical and theological instruction and actual contact with real individual needs in our local communities and suffering world.

L-S is ministry. It is not peripheral, optional service to poor unfortunates who need help. Rather, it is a personal, direct demonstration of biblical values. It is compassion in action, because compassion without action is not really compassion ([Luke 10:25–37](#)). L-S showcases to all the redemption of God through his people, while helping us learn how to respond to affliction, need, and pain in life. It helps us understand suffering, our own and that of others, and how we are to respond to the world’s needs in a biblical manner by applying biblical truth we are learning in the classroom setting.

God’s Character Exemplifies Compassion

Godly and loving ministry develops from a growing understanding of God’s majesty and holiness as the true and living God, who alone is worthy of utmost human worship and devotion ([Deut 6:4–9](#); [Ps 119:38](#); [Isa 6:1–4](#); [Jer 10:6–7](#)). God is holy ([Ps 99:9](#); [Isa 5:16](#)) and demands that his people be holy ([Lev 11:45](#)). This holiness is to be a reflection of God’s holiness through our acts of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience ([Col 3:12](#)). God is love, and his people are to love their neighbors as themselves ([Lev 19:18](#); [Luke 10:27](#); [Rom 13:8–10](#); [1 John 4:7–11](#)). The God of Scripture is just and fair, and his people are to be just and fair to those who have been treated unfairly and with injustice ([Deut 32:4](#); [Isa 45:21](#); [Mic 6:8](#)). Because God is righteous ([Ezra 9:15](#); [Ps 145:17](#)), he commands his people to be righteous in their dealings with others ([1 John 2:29](#); [3:7](#)). God is good, and goodness and good works are to be a part of the Christian’s way of life ([Pss 25:4–10](#); [119:68](#); [Eph 2:10](#)). God is gracious and merciful ([Exod 34:6](#); [Ps 116:5](#); [Luke 6:36](#)), the God of compassion who commands his people to be compassionate ([2 Kings 13:23](#); [Rom 12:15](#); [1 Pet 3:8](#); [Col 3:12](#)). This view of God and of ourselves as sinners in need of grace ([Rom 3:23](#); [6:23](#)) convinces us that the objectives of L-S are to reflect God’s character toward the real needs of people that can only be accomplished

through God's strength and power ([Gen 17:1](#); [Exod 6:3](#); [Phil 4:13](#)). Servant-learners are to serve in love and compassion produced by the Holy Spirit, not from our own resources ([Isa 41:10](#); [Jer 9:23–24](#); [John 15:5](#); [2 Cor 2:14–3:6](#); [2 Tim 2:1–2](#)).

The Old Testament Reveals the Need for Compassion

Loving service toward others is rooted, in part, in God's creation of all things and humanity's responsibility to care for creation and respect all people as made in God's image ([Gen 1–2](#); [Jas 3:9–10](#)). The need for such service was heightened by human sin and its many consequences ([Gen 3](#)). As a result of Adam's disobedience ([Gen 3:6, 11, 12](#); [Rom 5:12, 15, 19](#)) sin, evil, corruption, violence, depravity, guilt, unrighteousness, blasphemy, disease, and death were introduced into the human race ([Gen 6:5, 12](#); [8:21](#); [Ps 51:5](#); [Rom 3:23](#); [7:18](#); [Titus 1:15](#)). The history of Abraham's descendants and all human beings from Genesis to the last of the prophets reveals the need of humanity for grace, mercy, forgiveness, and love. Human history is full of hatred, murder, immorality, and sin. The Bible faithfully records humanity's failure, but it also records evidence of the redeemed person's response to God's command to care for and love others in need, those who are caught in the results of slavery to sin. The responsibility of those who have a relationship to God can be summed up in the following passages (NASB).

Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth;" ([Exodus 34:6](#))

You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. ([Leviticus 19:18](#); cf. [Luke 10:27](#)).

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. ([Deuteronomy 6:4–5](#))

I know that the LORD will maintain
The cause of the afflicted
And justice for the poor. ([Psalm 140:12](#))

Is this not the fast which I choose,
To loosen the bonds of wickedness,
To undo the bands of the yoke,
and to let the oppressed go free.
And break every yoke? ([Isaiah 58:6](#))

For I know your transgressions are many and your sins are great,
You who distress the righteous and accept bribes
And turn aside the poor in the gate. ([Amos 5:12](#); cf. [4:1](#))

He has told you, O man, what is good;
And what does the LORD require of you

But to do justice, to love kindness,
And to walk humbly with your God? ([Micah 6:8](#))

Therefore, as the Lord is compassionate and gracious ([Pss 72:13; 103:8; 116:5](#)), so his ministers are to be the same ([Mic 6:8](#)). God cares for widows, orphans, and strangers, and by implication all who are neglected by society ([Deut 10:18-19; 24:17](#)). God clearly gives justice to the needy and requires that of his servants ([Exod 23:6-11; Lev 19:10; Pss 70:4-5; 86:1; Prov 14:31](#)). The principle is that we are responsible to carry out what God commands and expects of his people.

The Gospels' and Jesus' Disclosure of the Need for Compassion

Jesus Christ set the standard for L-S in his command in [John 13:34-35](#) “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” Christ’s instruction and example calls his servants to love God and love people wholeheartedly and sacrificially ([Mark 12:28-31; John 13:34-35; 15:12-13](#)). Being Christ’s disciples requires us as Christian leaders to serve others in humility ([John 13:12-16](#)), to be servants of all ([Matt 20:25-28; Mark 9:35](#)), not to domineer or seek to be served but instead to give ourselves to meet the needs of others ([Mark 10:42-45; Luke 22:24-27](#)). All self-focused or self-willed service is out of place when we follow the crucified and risen Lord ([Mark 8:34-35; John 12:24-26; Titus 1:7](#)).

Truly Christ-like L-S means responding with direct personal engagement and compassion toward the deep needs of people. In the lead-up to his missionary discourse, Matthew presents Jesus’ actions of teaching, preaching, and healing in various places (9:35). Then he states, “Seeing the crowds, Jesus felt compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd” (9:36). The word “compassion” denotes profound sympathy and love coming from the inmost parts of the person (literally, the bowels or viscera pictured as the source of deepest emotion). The phrase describing the crowds, “harassed and helpless” (NIV, ESV), refers not so much to their inward mental or psychological state (i.e., “troubled, bewildered, worried”) as to their outward condition, to injuries inflicted on them that have left them helpless and vulnerable (e.g., wounded and abandoned, “mangled and thrown to the ground” [Berkeley]). Because the next phrase adds “like sheep without a shepherd,” the initial picture is of sheep ravaged by predators and helpless against further attack. But this metaphor speaks of human spiritual need that a person’s physical, economic, or social helplessness is ultimately rooted in. We are lost and wandering from God and this leads to manifold difficulties. The shepherds that humans need are God ([Pss 23:1-6; 100:1-3; Isa 40:11](#)), his Messiah ([Jer 23:1-8; Ezek 34:22-23; John 10:1-16](#)), and the gifted spiritual leaders ([Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 5:2](#)) God calls to minister in his name. In the context of [Matt 9-10](#), Jesus’ immediate command to pray for God to send workers into his harvest (9:37-38) and his commissioning of the twelve disciples to go and preach, heal, deliver from demons, and minister to the needy (10:1-8) indicate his desire that his followers would serve people in desperate need out of that same heartfelt compassion that he exemplified (9:35-36).

Throughout his ministry Jesus confronted human need in all its complexity—spiritual, physical, emotional, social, economic (Luke 4:16–21; 6:20–26)—with heartfelt personal concern (Matt 8:3, 15; 14:14; 15:32; 20:34; Mark 9:20–29; Luke 7:11–15). His healing of physical disease and casting out demons symbolized the larger spiritual deliverance he came to provide (e.g., Mark 2:1–10) and in many ways provided a platform for his preaching. But he reached out to people in their manifold needs not limited to the spiritual realm only and instructed his disciples to do the same (Mark 6:7–13; Luke 10:29–37). Jesus’ ministry often displayed a “word and deed” pattern, where his preaching was reinforced by the care he gave to people in need (e.g., Luke 4:14–41: word, 4:14–30; deed, 4:31–41).

The Epistles Declare the Need for Compassion

The early church served people at various levels of need (Acts 2:37–47; 3:1–9; 4:32–37; 6:1–6; 9:32–43; 11:27–30). Mirroring Jesus’ teaching, James likewise calls for Christian action in response to physical, emotional, social, economic, as well as spiritual problems (Jas 1:19–27; 2:1–9, 14–17; 5:1–6, 13–16). Paul also modeled a concern for a wide range of human needs (Rom 15:25–27; 1 Tim 5:3–16) and loving personally engaged ministry to people whatever their situation (1 Thess 2:7–8; 5:14–15).

Paul often reflects indirectly on the ways in which he was confronted with his own weakness and inadequacy for the demands of ministry and through that came to see God’s complete sufficiency at work through his efforts. In Paul’s personal sufferings and afflictions God provided comfort to enable him to help others in their affliction (2 Cor 1:1–7) and taught him not to trust in himself but in God (2 Cor 1:8–11). His hard experiences in life and ministry taught him that our only adequacy as ministers of the new covenant comes from God by the Spirit (2 Cor 2:14–3:6). We are like fragile clay pots, but we carry a great treasure, the gospel of Christ, and we know that its surpassing power is from God and not from ourselves (2 Cor 4:1–12). Paul learned not to evade or deny his weaknesses but to allow God’s sufficient grace and strength to show itself through his insufficiency (2 Cor 12:7–10). This illustrates the interactive and mutually beneficial process that can occur when leaders who may not be aware of their inadequacies come into contact with real people whose troubles and weaknesses are undeniable.

The epistles regularly call for acts of love and compassion toward brothers and sisters in Christ (Rom 12:9–13; Gal 6:2; Jas 2:15–16) and connect our love for people directly to our love for God as Jesus did (1 John 2:7–11; 3:14–18; 4:7–21). But they also command us to do good works toward all people as we have opportunity and so represent God’s mercy and compassion in the wider world (Rom 2:10; 12:14–18; Gal 6:10; 1 Thess 5:15; 1 Pet 2:12; Titus 3:1–8). Perhaps John simplifies the duty of the servant–learner best when he writes, “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18).

The Book of Revelation And Compassion

One of the most meaningful lessons a servant-learner can take from the Book of Revelation is that suffering, evil, sin, and all that plagues our world today will end. Believers who suffer now will not suffer forever. They will one day be free from all pain, tears, sorrow, and the curse of the

sin nature. This wonderful condition will continue throughout eternity. So believers can look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm.

The end of suffering is part of the final aspect of salvation that God will provide for Christians, namely, their glorification and glorified bodies. As surely as he has declared believers righteous by faith in his Son in the past and delivers believers from present temptation in the present, he will complete his salvation and deliver them from all suffering and death in the future: He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away. There will no longer be any curse; and the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and His bondservants will serve Him ([Rev 21:4](#); [22:3](#)). How does this apply to L-S? The servant-learner is involved in alleviating and dealing with the aspects of suffering and injustice that dominate our present world, projecting hope and assurance through Christ.

Concluding Reflections

A valued element of L-S is the process by which even imperfect ministers can over time develop traits of real love toward God and others. Jesus' actions show that verbal instruction or exhortation alone is not enough. Learning to engage the deep needs of others with compassion and with dependence on God requires direct experience with such needs. After instructing his disciples, Jesus sent them out to serve directly ([Mark 6:7–13](#); [Luke 9:1–6](#); [10:1–16](#)). He also helped them afterwards to reflect on their successes and failures ([Mark 6:30–32](#); [9:28–29](#); [Luke 9:10](#); [10:17–24](#)). Jesus did not wait for the beginning of the Church in [Acts 2](#) to involve his followers in service to others. Service was integral to the learning process as an application of the knowledge Christ taught his disciples. Likewise, implementing L-S at DTS is grounded in the belief that service should be integrated in the training of servant-leaders aimed for ministry. Direct hands-on involvement as well as reflection and assessment are needed to complete the process.

This interactive character of L-S will directly contribute to students' personal growth in the areas the seminary has targeted in its slogan, "Teach Truth—Love Well," and in "equipping godly servant-leaders for the proclamation of His Word and the building up of the body of Christ worldwide." In this regard the books of Moses, the historical books of the OT, the wisdom literature, the Psalms, the Prophets, Jesus in the Gospels, and the rest of the NT give a biblical theological base for L-S at Dallas Theological Seminary. All of these speak about Christian instruction and its potential benefits to our world as well as dangers. The goal of all teaching and learning in Christian circles is "love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith" ([1 Tim 1:5](#)). Such love is the cardinal Christian virtue ([1 Cor 13](#)), the fulfillment of God's Law ([Rom 13:8–10](#); [Gal 5:13–14](#)), and the identifying mark of being Jesus' followers ([John 13:34–35](#)). But it is also possible to gain knowledge and act in unloving ways: to become arrogant toward others rather than building others up ([1 Cor 8:1–3](#)), to judge or belittle someone else who thinks differently ([Rom 14:10](#)), to be argumentative rather than patient and winsome about our teaching ([2 Tim 2:24–26](#)), or to be hardened to the truth and aloof from the needs of others ([Heb 10:24–25](#)). These are great dangers in the academic setting of DTS. Student involvement with people in need will help to direct classroom learning toward the goal of habitually living-out the

love of Christ, offering students opportunities to apply classroom instruction by meeting genuine individual needs in a relational, compassionate, and scripturally-based manner.