



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Articles:

📖 Live Large, Dream Small
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 72-71)

📖 The Power of Sam
(*Inklings of Glory*,
pp. 78-82)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:

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Christian Reflection

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Live Large, Dream Small

God calls us to dream small—to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more. At the same time, we are called to live large—to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony.

Prayer

O God, we are grateful for the gift of friendship, and for the grace it confers and the grace it inspires.

We thank you especially for the friendship of the Inklings, who relied on your creative impulses to fashion images of grace that still turn our hearts and heads toward you and your kingdom.

In that gratitude there stirs up within us the great desire that we, too, might offer ourselves as vessels for your grace. Grant to us your divine prompting we pray, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Luke 22:24-27

Reflection

Let's be honest about our deformed motives, Luke is saying, and about the divine cure we desperately need, when he places the disciple's cloying plea for recognition at the conclusion of Jesus' last meal with his disciples (22:24-27). "Which of us should be regarded as the greatest?" becomes their self-absorbed response to Jesus' words of institution, "Do this in remembrance of me."

A host's placement of friends who lingered after a banquet for conversation signaled their rank in the "symposium." So the disciples ask, "What's the pecking order here?" Jesus reverses their expectations: the greatest among you will become like the youngest (rather than an honored elder), and will not even be at the table. The greatest will be like a slave who serves the meal. "I am among you," Jesus reminds them, "as one who serves."

"In *The Lord of the Rings* we hear echoes of the old, old story—the gospel story," suggests Kyle Childress. "Nine walkers, a fellowship of unlikely friends, are chosen—not to use the Ring of Great Power, but to destroy it. They are not even to use it in defense of the good, however tempting that may be; they are to give up this great power, rather than use it. This small fellowship of friends, bound together in their hatred of evil and their increasing self-surrendering regard for one another, set out upon a great Quest to give up and to destroy the Ring of Great Power. They are a distant foretaste of the fellowship we Christians call the church." In their fellowship we're reminded of:

- ▶ a calling to "live large." They are called to carry the Ring of Mordor to its destruction, to undo that powerful lure for mastery in Middle-earth. So does God call the church to live large, says Childress, "to be about the large things of shalom—the peace, harmony, justice known in Jesus Christ."
- ▶ the virtue of "dreaming small." Hobbits, the diminutive "farmers and gardeners who love good land, good food, . . . and good conversation" and enjoy "the world around them as they go," are



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chosen to lead. "Because their life-aims are modest, the hobbits are not easily swayed to try to do great things with the Ring of Power," Childress observes. "Therefore they are the only ones who can be trusted to give up the Ring." Likewise in our journey, God calls us to dream small, "to be content in who we are as human beings and with what God has given us; we are to live within limits, instead of destroying creation so we can have more."

▶ *the "power" of simple goodness.* The hobbit Sam "owns the power — both plain for all to see and unknown to himself — that is most powerful," John Hamilton says. In his simple goodness "he is a servant and friend who loves without limit." Not focused on himself, he can glimpse in the beauty of a star twinkling among the clouds the sustaining hope of a "light and high beauty forever beyond [evil's] reach."

Study Questions

1. Philippians 2:5-11 is very likely one of the earliest hymns of the church memorized by those preparing for their baptism. How does it describe Jesus' servanthood?
2. The wizard Gandalf advises that "having the Ring we may seek to destroy it" would not enter the Dark Lord's mind. Nor often ours, warns John Hamilton. What evidence do you see that we rarely refuse to employ any power available to us?
3. How is the church in North America being tempted to employ coercive power to promote God's shalom?
4. What sort of congregation would earn Kyle Childress' commendation as a "hobbit church"?
5. "How sweet and awesome" is the church, writes Isaac Watts in the departing hymn. How does his description of its fellowship reflect the ambition to "live large, dream small"?

Departing Hymn: "How Sweet and Awesome is This Place," verses 1, 3, 6, and 7

How sweet and awesome is this place
with Christ within the doors,
while everlasting love displays
the choicest of her stores!

While all our hearts and all our songs
join to admire the feast,
each of us cry, with thankful tongues,
"Lord, why was I a guest?"

Pity the nations, O our God!
constrain the earth to come;
send Thy victorious Word abroad,
and bring the strangers home.

We long to see Thy churches full,
that all the chosen race
may with one voice, and heart and soul,
sing Thy redeeming grace.

Isaac Watts

Suggested Tune: ST. AGNES

Live Large, Dream Small

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To understand the form of servant leadership that Jesus models for his disciples.
2. To consider how the fellowship in *The Lord of the Rings*—which pursues its calling with courage and passion, yet with humility—echoes the gospel story of the church’s calling.
3. To recognize how our society, and even the church, has been tempted to exploit coercive power.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Inklings of Glory (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the two focus articles before the group meeting. For the hymn “How Sweet and Awesome is This Place,” locate the tune ST. AGNES in your church’s hymnal.

Begin with a Story

Share Samwise Gamgee’s fantasy that he experiences when he, a modest hobbit gardener, places the Ring of Mordor on a chain around his neck. It begins: “[Sam] felt himself enlarged, as if he were robed in a huge distorted shadow of himself, . . .” (*Inklings of Glory*, pp. 75-76).

Sam fantasizes about what he would accomplish in the world with the Ring’s power. If we possessed such power, what fantasy would tempt us?

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently and then ask members to read aloud together the prayer in the study guide.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 22:24-27 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This is an opportunity for group members who are familiar with J. R. R. Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* (or Peter Jackson’s film adaptations) to explore how the fellowship of nine walkers resists the temptation to employ the terrible power of the Ring. Members may investigate how Tolkien’s epic shapes the moral imagination—by nurturing in us the sentiments (the complex of emotions and thoughts) that are characteristic of “hobbit-sense” and humility.

If group members are not familiar with Tolkien’s epic, focus the discussion on these features of Jesus’ call to his disciples: to be caring servants to one another, to resist the lure of domineering power, and to model their attitudes on Jesus’ posture of service.

Luke places the disciples’ disagreement about who will be regarded as the leader into the context of the Last Supper. (By contrast, Matthew 20:24-28 and Mark 10:41-45 place the dispute earlier in Jesus’ ministry, when he tells the disciples about his forthcoming passion and resurrection in Jerusalem.) Luke shocks us by sandwiching it between Jesus’ announcement of his betrayal by a disciple (Judas) and prediction of Peter’s denial. In this context, our striving to have power over others in the church is interpreted as a betrayal of Jesus and rejection

of his servanthood. Luke's readers would recognize this context as a "symposium," the conversation of friends after their banquet. Perhaps he is recommending that we can begin by serving one another in simple ways, such as who we host for meals and how we treat other disciples.

Drawing from Tolkien's epic, Kyle Childress describes the sentiments of "living large" – "to live with courage and passion as we give ourselves to the greatest quest of serving God in peace, justice, and harmony in this old dark world," and "dreaming small" – "to live within humble boundaries of who we are, instead of invading and imposing, even if we think it is in service to a good cause" (p. 76). John Hamilton delineates the "simple goodness" of Samwise Gamgee, the faithful hobbit friend of Frodo.

Encourage members to compare these three sentiments imaginatively represented in *The Lord of the Rings* to those that Jesus is calling his disciples to develop. Do we embody these sentiments? How well do our congregations measure up to the fellowship Jesus has in mind?

Study Questions

1. Jesus "emptied" and "humbled" himself and "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited." (Through Christian history the latter phrase has been given two interpretations: that Jesus relinquished or did not rely upon the equality with the Father that he possessed; or that he did not try to grab his crowning prematurely – as Adam did – but willingly endured suffering first. The second reading emphasizes Jesus' obedience as the reversal of Adam's disobedience.) The action that most clearly reveals Christ's servanthood is his obedience "to the point of death – even death on a cross." How would memorizing this particular hymn shape the sentiments of a new Christian preparing for baptism?
2. Hamilton mentions that often (1) we fail to restrain development of new technologies despite their likely dangerous and immoral use – e.g., when we make "armaments for Armageddon," or try to clone human beings, and (2) we ignore other values in our pursuit of mere economic gain – e.g., when we destroy unique ecosystems to build parking lots (p. 78). Members might mention other examples like these. We also display hubris in using power when (3) industries fund technologies that benefit a privileged few; (4) governments distribute foreign aid to promote political goals rather than meet human need – e.g., when the bulk of aid, humanitarian as well as military, goes to political allies; or (5) individuals spend their income and borrow more money for personal display and extravagant luxuries.
3. Discuss Childress's concerns that the church is tempted to use "tanks and guns, laws passed by Congress, and prayers imposed by the state" to advance God's kingdom. "Too many Christians today cannot see the inconsistency in wanting to talk about Jesus Christ and having the state help them do the talking. Many see no inconsistency in evangelizing people for Christ and having the Pentagon pave the way" (p. 75).
4. Childress praises congregations that do not seek "power, success, wealth, and bigness," but rather fosters a community of "people who love to eat together and raise children, to serve one another with passion, joy, and courage; people whose church is snuggled down in the woods, close to the earth" (p. 77). Let members flesh out these metaphors with examples of some attitudes, approaches, and programs that a "hobbit church" should avoid, or embrace.
5. The church is "sweet and awesome" because Christ moves it to action with "everlasting love." It *lives large* by being taken up into God's forgiveness for people in all the nations. With eager anticipation and gracious hospitality, the church prepares for God to "bring all strangers home," so that all "may with one voice, and heart and soul, sing Thy redeeming grace." Yet the church *dreams small* because only God's invitation, and not the use of coercive force, can include all strangers into one banquet. Each member continually sings a humble and grateful chorus: "Lord, why was I a guest?"

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.