

9. The Discipline of Service

Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you need is not a scepter but a hoe.

—BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX

As the cross is the sign of submission, so the towel is the sign of service. When Jesus gathered his disciples for the Last Supper they were having trouble deciding who was the greatest. This was no new issue for them. "And an argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest" (Luke 9:46). Whenever there is trouble over who is the greatest, there is trouble over who is the least. That is the crux of the matter for us, isn't it? Most of us know we will never be the greatest; just don't let us be the least.

Gathered at the Passover feast, the disciples were keenly aware that someone needed to wash the others' feet. The problem was that the only people who washed feet were the least. So there they sat, feet caked with dirt. It was such a sore point that they were not even going to talk about it. No one wanted to be considered the least. Then Jesus took a towel and a basin and redefined greatness.

Having lived out servanthood before them, he called them to the way of service: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:14, 15). In some ways we would prefer to hear Jesus' call to deny father and mother, houses and land for the sake of the gospel than his word to wash feet. Radical self-denial gives the feel of adventure. If we forsake all, we even have the chance of glorious martyrdom. But in service we must experience the many little deaths of going beyond

ourselves. Service banishes us to the mundane, the ordinary, the trivial.

In the Discipline of service there is also great liberty. Service enables us to say "no!" to the world's games of promotion and authority. It abolishes our need (and desire) for a "pecking order." That phrase is so telling, so revealing. How like chickens we are! In the chicken pen there is no peace until it is clear who is the greatest and who is the least and who is at which rung everywhere in between. A group of people cannot be together for very long until the "pecking order" is clearly established. We can see it so easily in such things as where people sit, how they walk in relation to each other, who always gives way when two people are talking at the same time, who stands back and who steps forward when a job needs to be done. (Depending on the job, it may be a sign of mastery or a sign of servitude.) These things are written across the face of human society.

The point is not that we are to do away with all sense of leadership or authority. Any sociologist would quickly demonstrate the impossibility of such a task. Even among Jesus and the disciples, leadership and authority are seen easily. The point is that Jesus completely redefined leadership and rearranged the lines of authority.

Jesus never taught that everyone had equal authority. In fact, he had a great deal to say about genuine spiritual authority and taught that many did not possess it. But the authority of which Jesus spoke is not the authority of a pecking order. We must clearly understand the radical nature of Jesus' teaching on this matter. He was not just reversing the "pecking order" as many suppose. He was abolishing it. The authority of which he spoke was not an authority to manipulate and control. It was an authority of function, not of status.

Jesus declares, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. *It shall not be so among you* [italics added]." He totally and completely rejected the pecking-order systems of his day. How then

was it to be among them? "Whoever would be great among you must be your servant . . . even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve" (Matt. 20:25-28). Therefore the spiritual authority of Jesus is an authority not found in a position or a title, but in a towel.

Self-righteous Service Versus True Service

If true service is to be understood and practiced, it must be distinguished clearly from "self-righteous service."

Self-righteous service comes through human effort. It expends immense amounts of energy calculating and scheming how to render the service. Sociological charts and surveys are devised so we can "help those people." True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside. We serve out of whispered promptings, divine urgings. Energy is expended but it is not the frantic energy of the flesh. Thomas Kelly writes, "I find He never guides us into an intolerable scramble of panting feverishness."¹

Self-righteous service is impressed with the "big deal." It is concerned to make impressive gains on ecclesiastical scoreboards. It enjoys serving, especially when the service is titanic. True service finds it almost impossible to distinguish the small from the large service. Where a difference is noted, the true servant is often drawn to the small service, not out of false modesty, but because he genuinely sees it as the more important task. He indiscriminately welcomes all opportunities to serve.

Self-righteous service requires external rewards. It needs to know that people see and appreciate the effort. It seeks human applause—with proper religious modesty of course. True service rests contented in hiddenness. It does not fear the lights and blare of attention, but it does not seek them either. Since it is living out of a new Center of reference, the divine nod of approval is completely sufficient.

Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. It

eagerly waits to see if the person served will reciprocate in kind. It becomes bitter when the results fall below expectations. True service is free of the need to calculate results. It delights only in the service. It can serve enemies as freely as friends.

Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve. Sometimes the high and powerful are served because that will ensure a certain advantage. Sometimes the low and defenseless are served because that will ensure a humble image. True service is indiscriminate in its ministry. It has heard the command of Jesus to be the "servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Brother Francis of Assisi notes in a letter, "Being the servant of all, I am bound to serve all and to administer the balm-bearing words of my lord."²

Self-righteous service is affected by moods and whims. It can serve only when there is a "feeling" to serve ("moved by the Spirit" as we say). Ill health or inadequate sleep controls the desire to serve. True service ministers simply and faithfully because there is a need. It knows that the "feeling to serve" can often be a hindrance to true service. The service disciplines the feelings rather than allowing the feeling to control the service.

Self-righteous service is temporary. It functions only while the specific acts of service are being performed. Having served, it can rest easy. True service is a life-style. It acts from ingrained patterns of living. It springs spontaneously to meet human need.

Self-righteous service is insensitive. It insists on meeting the need even when to do so would be destructive. It demands the opportunity to help. True service can withhold the service as freely as perform it. It can listen with tenderness and patience before acting. It can serve by waiting in silence. "They also serve who only stand and wait."³

Self-righteous service fractures community. In the final analysis, once all the religious trappings are removed, it centers in the glorification of the individual. Therefore it puts others into its debt and becomes one of the most subtle and destructive forms of manipulation known. True service builds community.

It quietly and unpretentiously goes about caring for the needs of others. It draws, binds, heals, builds.

Service and Humility

More than any other single way, the grace of humility is worked into our lives through the Discipline of service. Humility, as we all know, is one of those virtues that is never gained by seeking it. The more we pursue it the more distant it becomes. To think we have it is sure evidence that we don't. Therefore, most of us assume there is nothing we can do to gain this prized Christian virtue, and so we do nothing.

But there *is* something we can do. We do not need to go through life faintly hoping that someday humility may fall upon our heads. Of all the classical Spiritual Disciplines, service is the most conducive to the growth of humility. When we set out on a consciously chosen course of action that accents the good of others and is, for the most part, a hidden work, a deep change occurs in our spirits.

Nothing *disciplines* the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing *transforms* the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition. It will devise subtle, religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered. If we stoutly refuse to give in to this lust of the flesh, we crucify it. Every time we crucify the flesh, we crucify our pride and arrogance.

The apostle John writes, "For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world" (1 John 2:16). We fail to understand the force of this passage because of our tendency to relegate it all to sexual sin. The "lust of the flesh" refers to the failure to discipline the natural human passions. C. H. Dodd says that the "lust of the eyes" refers to "the tendency to be captivated by outward show." He defines the "pride of life" as "pretentious egoism."⁴ In each case the same thing is

seen: infatuation with natural human powers and abilities without any dependence upon God. That is the flesh in operation, and the flesh is the deadly enemy of humility.

The strictest daily discipline is necessary to hold these passions in check. The flesh must learn the painful lesson that it has no rights of its own. It is the work of hidden service that will accomplish this self-abasement.

William Law made a lasting impact upon eighteenth-century England with his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. In it Law urges that every day should be viewed as a day of humility. And how does he suggest that we do this? By learning to serve others. Law understood that it is the Discipline of service that brings humility into the life. If we want humility, he counsels us to ". . . condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow-creatures, cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassionate their distress, receive their friendship, overlook their unkindness, forgive their malice, be a servant of servants, and condescend to do the lowest offices to the lowest of mankind."⁵

The result, then, of this daily discipline of the flesh will be the rise of the grace of humility. It will slip in upon us unawares. Though we do not sense its presence, we are aware of a fresh zest and exhilaration with living. We wonder at the new sense of confidence that marks our activities. Although the demands of life are as great as ever, we live in a new sense of unhurried peace. People whom we once only envied we now view with compassion, for we see not only their position but their pain. People whom we would have passed over before we now "see" and find to be delightful individuals. Somehow—we cannot exactly explain how—we feel a new spirit of identification with the outcasts, the "offscourings" of the earth (1 Cor. 4:13).

Even more than the transformation that is occurring within us, we are aware of a deeper love and joy in God. Our days are punctuated with spontaneous breathings of praise and ad-

oration. Joyous hidden service to others is an acted prayer of thanksgiving. We seem to be directed by a new control Center—and so we are.

Yes . . . But

A natural and understandable hesitancy accompanies any serious discussion of service. The hesitancy is prudent since it is wise to count the cost before plunging headlong into any Discipline. We experience a fear that comes out something like this: "If I do that, people will take advantage of me; they will walk all over me."

Right here we must see the difference between choosing to serve and choosing to be a servant. When we choose to serve, we are still in charge. We decide whom we will serve and when we will serve. And if we are in charge, we will worry a great deal about anyone stepping on us, that is, taking charge over us.

But when we choose to be a servant, we give up the right to be in charge. There is great freedom in this. If we voluntarily choose to be taken advantage of, then we cannot be manipulated. When we choose to be a servant, we surrender the right to decide who and when we will serve. We become available and vulnerable.

Consider the perspective of a slave. A slave sees all of life from the viewpoint of slavery. He does not see himself as possessing the same rights as free men and women. Please understand me; when this slavery is involuntary it is cruel and dehumanizing.* When the slavery is freely chosen, however, everything is changed. Voluntary servitude is a great joy.

The imagery of slavery may be difficult for us, but it was not hard for the apostle Paul. He frequently boasted of his slavery to Christ, making lavish use of the first-century concept of the

*A good part of my doctoral study was on slavery in America. I am keenly aware of the horribly demonic nature of involuntary servitude.

"love slave" (that is, the slave who, out of love, has freely chosen to remain a slave). We do our best to soften Paul's language by translating the word "slave" as "servant." But whatever word we decide to use, let us be certain that we understand that Paul meant he had freely given up his rights.

Therefore, the fear that we will be taken advantage of and stepped on is justified. That is exactly what may happen. But who can hurt someone who has freely chosen to be stepped on? Thomas à Kempis instructs us to be "so subject . . . that all men may go over thee and tread upon thee as upon mire of the street."⁶

In *The Little Flowers of St. Francis* a delightful story is told about how Francis taught Brother Leo the meaning of perfect joy. As the two walked together in the rain and bitter cold, Francis reminded Leo of all the things that the world—including the religious world—believed would bring joy, adding each time "Perfect joy is not in that." Finally, in exasperation Brother Leo asked, "I beg you in God's name to tell me where perfect joy is," whereupon Francis began enumerating the most humiliating, self-abasing things he could imagine, adding each time "Oh, Brother Leo, write that perfect joy is there." To explain and conclude the matter he told Brother Leo, "Above all the graces and gifts of the Holy Spirit which Christ gives to His friends is that of conquering oneself and willingly enduring sufferings, insults, humiliations, and hardships for the love of Christ."⁷

We find those words hard to deal with today. (You must understand that I, too, struggle even to listen to the devotional masters on this point.) We fear that such an attitude will lead irrevocably down the path of excessive asceticism and self-mortification. In the Church we are only now emerging from a "worm theology" that terribly devalued human ability and potential. Does service lead back to that? No, certainly not. No doubt it is a danger we must always guard against. But we must also watch for the enemy in the opposite direction. As Bonhoeffer says, "If there is no element of asceticism in our

lives, if we give free rein to the desires of the flesh . . . we shall find it hard to train for the service of Christ."⁸

Service in the Marketplace

Service is not a list of things that we do, though in it we discover things to do. It is not a code of ethics, but a way of living. To do specific acts of service is not the same thing as living in the Discipline of service. Just as there is more to the game of basketball than the rule book, there is more to service than specific acts of serving. It is one thing to *act* like a servant; it is quite another to *be* a servant. As in all the Disciplines, it is possible to master the mechanics of service without experiencing the Discipline.

To stress the inward nature of service, however, is not enough. Service to be service must take form and shape in the world in which we live. Therefore, we must seek to perceive what service looks like in the marketplace of our daily lives.

At the outset there is the service of hiddenness. Even public leaders can cultivate tasks of service that remain generally unknown. If all of our serving is before others, we will be shallow people indeed. Listen to the spiritual direction of Jeremy Taylor: "Love to be concealed, and little esteemed: be content to want [lack] praise, never be troubled when thou art slighted or undervalued. . . ."⁹ Hiddenness is a rebuke to the flesh and can deal a fatal blow to pride.

At first thought it would seem that hidden service is only for the sake of the person served. Such is not the case. Hidden, anonymous ministries affect even people who know nothing of them. They sense a deeper love and compassion among people though they cannot account for the feeling. If a secret service is done on their behalf, they are inspired to deeper devotion, for they know that the well of service is far deeper than they can see. It is a ministry that can be engaged in frequently by all people. It sends ripples of joy and celebration through any community of people.

There is the service of small things. Like Dorcas, we find ways to make "coats and garments for the widows" (Acts 9:39). The following is a true story. During the frantic final throes of writing my doctoral dissertation I received a phone call from a friend. His wife had taken the car and he wondered if I could take him on a number of errands. Trapped, I consented, inwardly cursing my luck. As I ran out the door, I grabbed Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, thinking that I might have an opportunity to read in it. Through each errand I inwardly fretted and fumed at the loss of precious time. Finally, at a supermarket, the final stop, I waved my friend on, saying I would wait in the car. I picked up my book, opened it to the marker, and read these words: "The second service that one should perform for another in a Christian community is that of active helpfulness. This means, initially, simple assistance in trifling, external matters. There is a multitude of these things wherever people live together. Nobody is too good for the meanest service. One who worries about the loss of time that such petty, outward acts of helpfulness entail is usually taking the importance of his own career too solemnly."¹⁰

Francis de Sales says that the great virtues and the small fidelities are like sugar and salt. Sugar may have a more exquisite taste, but its use is less frequent. Salt is found everywhere. The great virtues are a rare occurrence; the ministry of small things is a daily service. Large tasks require great sacrifice for a moment; small things require constant sacrifice. "The small occasions . . . return every moment. . . . If we want to be faithful to these small things, nature never has time to breathe, and we must die to all our inclinations. We should a hundred times rather make some great sacrifices to God, however violent and painful, on condition that we be freed with liberty to follow our tastes and habits in every little detail."¹¹

In the realm of the spirit we soon discover that the real issues are found in the tiny, insignificant corners of life. Our infatuation with the "big deal" has blinded us to this fact. The service of small things will put us at odds with our sloth and idleness.

We will come to see small things as the central issues. Fénelon writes, "It is not elevation of the spirit to feel contempt for small things. It is, on the contrary, because of too narrow points of view that we consider as little what has such far reaching consequences."¹²

There is the service of guarding the reputation of others or, as Bernard of Clairvaux put it, the service of "Charity." How necessary this is if we are to be saved from backbiting and gossip. The apostle Paul taught us to "speak evil of no one" (Titus 3:2). We may clothe our backbiting in all the religious respectability we want, but it will remain a deadly poison. There is a discipline in holding one's tongue that works wonders within us.

Nor should we be a party to the slanderous talk of others. In one church I served we had a rule on the pastoral team that the members came to appreciate. We refused to allow any person in the congregation to speak disparagingly of one pastor to another pastor. Gently, but firmly, we would ask them to go directly to the offending pastor. Eventually, people understood that we simply would not allow them to talk to us about pastor so-and-so. This rule, held to by the entire team, had beneficial results.

Bernard warns us that the spiteful tongue "strikes a deadly blow at charity in all who hear him speak and, so far as it can, destroys root and branch, not only in the immediate hearers but also in all others to whom the slander, flying from lip to lip, is afterwards repeated."¹³ Guarding the reputation of others is a deep and lasting service.

There is the service of being served. When Jesus began to wash the feet of those he loved, Peter refused. He would never let his Master stoop to such a menial service on his behalf. It sounds like a statement of humility; in reality it was an act of veiled pride. Jesus' service was an affront to Peter's concept of authority. If Peter had been the master, he would not have washed feet!

It is an act of submission and service to allow others to serve

us. It recognizes their "kingdom authority" over us. We graciously receive the service rendered, never feeling we must repay it. Those who, out of pride, refuse to be served are failing to submit to the divinely appointed leadership in the kingdom of God.

There is the service of common courtesy. Such deeds of compassion have fallen on hard times in our day. But we must never despise the rituals of relationship that are in every culture. It is one of the few ways left in modern society to acknowledge the value of one another. We are "to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all men" (Titus 3:2).

Missionaries understand the value of courtesy. They would not dare to blunder into some village demanding to be heard without first going through the appropriate rituals of introduction and acquaintanceship. Yet we feel we can violate these rituals in our own culture and still be received and heard. And we wonder why no one will listen.

"But acts of courtesy are so meaningless, so hypocritical," we complain. That is a myth. They are extremely meaningful and not in the least hypocritical. Once we get over our ego-centric arrogance about the fact that people don't really want to know how we are when they say "How are you?" we can see that it is just an American way of acknowledging our presence. We can wave and acknowledge their presence too without feeling the need to give a prognosis on our latest headache. Words of "thank you" and "yes, please," letters of appreciation and RSVP responses are all services of courtesy. The specific acts will vary from culture to culture, but the purpose is always the same: to acknowledge others and affirm their worth. The service of courtesy is sorely needed in our increasingly computerized and depersonalized society.

There is the service of hospitality. Peter urges us to "Practice hospitality ungrudgingly to one another" (1 Pet. 4:9). Paul does the same and even makes it one of the requirements for the office of bishop (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). There is a desperate need today for Christians who will open their homes to one another.

The old idea of the guest house has been made obsolete by the proliferation of modern motels and restaurants, but we may seriously question whether the change is an advance. I have walked through the Spanish missions of California and marveled at the gracious and adequate provisions that were made for visitors. Perhaps it is the modern, shiny, depersonalized motels that should become obsolete.

I know of a couple who have sought to make the ministry of hospitality a priority in their lives. In any given month they may have as many as seventy people visit their home. It is a service to which they believe God has called them. Perhaps most of us cannot do that much, but we can do something. We can begin somewhere.

Sometimes we limit ourselves because we make hospitality too complicated. I remember an occasion where the hostess was scurrying around, attending to this and that, sincerely wanting to make everyone feel comfortable. My friend startled us all (and put everyone at ease) by saying, "Helen, I don't want any coffee. I don't want any tea. I don't want any cookies. I don't want a napkin. I just want to visit. Won't you sit down and talk with us!" Just a chance to be together and share—that is the stuff of hospitality.

There is the service of listening. "The first service that one owes to others in the fellowship consists in listening to them. Just as love to God begins with listening to His Word, so the beginning of love for the brethren is learning to listen to them."¹⁴ We desperately need the help that can come through listening to one another. We do not need to be trained psychoanalysts to be trained listeners. The most important requirements are compassion and patience.

We do not have to have the correct answers to listen well. In fact, often the correct answers are a hindrance to listening, for we become more anxious to give the answer than to hear. An impatient half-listening is an affront to the person sharing.

To listen to others quiets and disciplines the mind to listen to God. It creates an inward working upon the heart that trans-

forms the affections, even the priorities, of life. When we have grown dull in listening to God, we would do well to listen to others in silence and see if we do not hear God through them. "Anyone who thinks that his time is too valuable to spend keeping quiet will eventually have no time for God and his brother, but only for himself and for his own follies."¹⁵

There is the service of bearing the burdens of each other. "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2). The "law of Christ" is the law of love, the "royal law" as James calls it (James 2:8). Love is most perfectly fulfilled when we bear the hurts and sufferings of each other, weeping with those who weep. And especially when we are with those who are going through the valley of the shadow, weeping is far better than words.

If we care, we will learn to bear one another's sorrows. I say "learn" because this, too, is a discipline to be mastered. Most of us too easily assume that all we need to do is decide to bear the burdens of others and we can do it. Then we try it for a time, and soon the joy of life has left, and we are heavy with the sorrows of others. It does not need to be so. We can learn to uphold the burdens of others without being destroyed by them. Jesus, who bore the burdens of the whole world, could say, "My yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:30). Can we learn to lift the sorrows and pains of others into the strong, tender arms of Jesus so that our burden is lighter? Of course we can. But it takes some practice so, rather than dashing out to bear the burdens of the whole world, let us begin more humbly. We can begin in some small corner somewhere and learn. Jesus will be our Teacher.

Finally, there is the service of sharing the word of Life with one another. The "Poustinias" that were established by Catherine de Haeck Doherty have a rule: those who go into the deserts of silence and solitude do so for others. They are to bring back any word they receive from God and share it with others. This is a gracious service to be rendered for no individual can hear all that God wants to say. We are dependent upon one another

to receive the full counsel of God. The smallest member can bring us a word—we dare not despise the service.

It is, of course, a fearful thing to proclaim these words to each other. The *fact* that God speaks to us does not guarantee that we rightly understand the message. We often mix our word with God's word: "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing" (James 3:10). Such realities humble us and throw us in deep dependence upon God. But we must not draw back from this service for it is desperately needed today.

The risen Christ beckons us to the ministry of the towel. Such a ministry, flowing out of the inner recesses of the heart, is life and joy and peace. Perhaps you would like to begin by experimenting with a prayer that several of us use. Begin the day by praying, "Lord Jesus, as it would please you bring me someone today whom I can serve."

III. THE CORPORATE DISCIPLINES