

Scripture: Matthew 20:20-28 NIV

Subject: *In washing His disciples' feet, Jesus left us a model to follow: true Christians must be willing to serve humbly and un-reservedly.*

Key Verse: Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

Introduction

I said to you six weeks ago, when we began this series on the Christian Disciplines, that I believe that it *is* possible to live a Christian lifestyle, and to *become more Christ-like* through the use of the spiritual disciplines. Over and over again in his letters, Paul urges us to train for the Christian life (1Tim 4:7-8), to imitate those who are spiritually mature (Php 3:17), and to not leave our spiritual growth and maturity to chance, but rather to work hard at growing in godliness (1Co 9:24-27).

Dallas Willard, in his book *The Spirit of the Disciplines*, tells us how we should use the life of Jesus as an example of how to prepare for a life of discipline and service:

A close look at Jesus' "great acts" of humility, faith, and compassion recorded in the Gospel narratives finds them to be moments in a life more pervasively and deeply characterized by solitude, fasting, prayer, and service. *Surely, then, the lives of his followers must be just as deeply characterized by those same practices.* (Italics added) The pervasive practices of our Lord form the core of those very activities that through the centuries have stood as disciplines for the spiritual life. It would seem only logical to **emulate his daily actions** since he was a great master of the spiritual life.¹

We have briefly looked at the disciplines of fasting and solitude, and today I want us to consider the discipline of *service*. Turn with me to **[John 13:2-5; 12-17 NIV]**

The evening meal was being served, and the devil had already prompted Judas Iscariot, son of Simon, to betray Jesus. Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. (John 13:2-5 NIV)

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them. "You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13:12-17 NIV)

Of all the spiritual disciplines, of all the activities and actions Jesus would have us emulate, *service* is the one which our Lord pointedly acted out so that there would be no misunderstanding: *true Disciples must be willing to serve humbly and un-reservedly.*

...If one of you wants to be great, he must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, he must be your slave- like the Son of Man, who did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life to redeem many people. **Matthew 20:26-28 GNT**

Of this passage, Dallas Willard writes:

¹ Willard, D. (© 1988). *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. New York. HarperCollins. (pp. 28-29).

We misunderstand this passage if we read it merely as instructions on how to become great. It is, rather, a statement on how those who *are* great are to behave. To be “great” and to live as a servant is one of the most difficult of *spiritual* attainments. But it is also the pattern of life for which this bruised and aching world waits and without which it will never manage a decent existence. **Those who would live this pattern must attain it through the discipline of service in the power of God**, for that alone will train them to exercise great power without corrupting their souls. It is for this reason that Jesus told his disciples to wash one another’s feet and set them an example (John 13:14).²

Think of this for a moment: *Jesus commands us to live and serve as slaves to our world because we are already great, and because we already have great power!*

In other words, we have absolutely *nothing to gain* from this world, and nothing to prove to it, save that Jesus is really the Son of God, and that he came to earth as a man, and was killed to redeem sinful humanity. How do we prove that? By humbly serving each other, and our world. Just as he did. The whole foot-washing thing was simply a prequel to his death on the cross. He did it to prepare them for the even greater humiliation and service of dying as a criminal. And he asks us – no, demands of us! – that we do the same. So, where do we start?

1. It’s a matter of Attitude

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but *in humility consider others better than yourselves*. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but *also to the interests of others*. **Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus**: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Philippians 2:3-8, NIV)

There were no servants in the upper room on the evening of the Last Supper. Normally, not only would a servant wash the feet of arriving guests, but the servant who was last in the “pecking order” would be given the job. It was a demeaning, lowly job. Feet aren’t glamorous. Washing dirty feet is as humiliating as it gets. Word has it that in the absence of guests, there would have been an unspoken expectation of who would have washed the disciples’ feet. In this case, the one seated furthest away from Jesus. Peter.

So, when Jesus without fanfare got up, stripped, and took his towel and began to wash their feet, there was a decidedly uncomfortable and embarrassing silence. Everyone would have been looking at Peter. That’s why he at first didn’t want his feet washed. It should have been him kneeling before the others. He was too proud. Jesus wasn’t.

Are you too proud? Are you better than you Lord? He’s not just saying that we should be willing to serve each other, but to **actually** serve each other. He not only washed feet, but was stripped naked, beaten to a bloody pulp, then spiked to a cross. Why? Because he put us first.

There are many things that need to be done in people’s lives, and in this church. Do you consider that there are jobs that are beneath your dignity? Are you too proud to shovel a driveway, buy groceries, scrub a floor, serve on a committee? You need to *get over it*, and get

2 Ibid. [page 183](#).

the same attitude as Christ, who *humbled himself*. Paul says that we first of all need the humble attitude of Christ before we can serve as He did. Richard Foster writes:

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 [it]... But there *is* something we can do. We do not need to go through life faintly hoping that some day humility may fall upon our heads. Of all the classical Spiritual Disciplines, *service is the most conducive to the growth of humility*...

In that sense, we are all 'ministers' who need to be involved in *ministry*. I like how Mark Hepner, who worked for Wycliffe Bible Translators defines ministry:

...“ministry” [is] ...service carried out at God’s direction and on God’s behalf, by God’s servants, for the continuous growth, health and joy of God’s people.³

He goes on to say that in fact, we all in a sense are 'waiters,' as in waiting on tables, which is the basic meaning of the word most often translated 'serve' as in this passage in Matthew. He likes the picture of Christians as waiters who “wait on tables” because

...this concept ‘serves’ as an apt metaphor for Christian ministry since it denotes the taking of resources provided by the Master of the house and distributing them to those gathered around the Master’s table to sustain the physical and spiritual health and well-being of the Master’s family.⁴

Waiting on tables isn't glamorous, nor does it pay well, and it can be long hours for little thanks; few of us want to work in the Food Service industry, and we tend to look down on those who do. But when Jesus washed his disciples' feet he was waiting on them literally hand and foot, showing that he was not above doing for them what needed to be done. Whether or not we see ourselves as servants like Christ is a matter of our attitude.

2. It's a matter of Aim

Putting others first, looking to the interests of others. Opting to develop the attitude of Christ that says “you first” and not “me first.” Have you thought of what a difference that would make in our homes, in our marriages, in our churches? Have you ever thought about why Jesus did what he did, why he chose to be born in anonymity, gave up all the perquisites of godhood to die for us? Because he wasn't seeking his own good, but rather to bring glory to His Father.

... I seek not to please myself but *him who sent me*. (Jn 5:30)

... I have come down from heaven not to do my will but *to do the will of him who sent me*. (Jn 6:38)

... the world must learn that I love the Father and that *I do exactly what my Father has commanded me*. (Jn 14:31)

...“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. *Yet not as I will, but as you will.*” (Mat 26:39)

What is our aim in serving? Is it to be noticed or appreciated? Is it to be rewarded or to gain an advantage over someone? Is it to prove how spiritual we are? We need to be brutally honest

3 Mark Hepner, *Waiting Tables in God's Household: A Personal Theology of Ministry*. Ashland Theological Journal Vol. 37, page 49. Ashland, OH: Ashland Theological Seminary.

4 Mark Hepner, *Ibid*, page 49.

with ourselves at this point, because if either our attitude or aim are “off” in our service, then like the Pharisees of old, we will have received our “reward in full” (Mat 6:2). Christ’s **aim** was **to bring glory to the Father**. What are you aiming at? What is the over-riding goal of your life? Remember what Jesus said:

...“If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. **Mt 16:24-25 NIV**

We need to be careful, because even in our service, it is possible to not only have the wrong attitude, but the wrong aim. Are we seeking God’s glory, or a nice, big, fat “attaboy” from those we serve? In our service, are we in fact being “self-righteous”? Richard Foster writes:

"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. Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. It eagerly waits to see if the person served will reciprocate in kind.

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." [Foster, "Celebration of Discipline", pp. 112, 114]

Our AIM in life should be bringing glory to God, not ourselves. So, what does the Discipline of Service look like in “real life.”

3. It’s a matter of Action (Service in the Marketplace)

The Service of Small Things

Foster quotes Bonhoeffer who writes in “Life Together”:

“... 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.” **Foster, p. 118**

In other words, “nothing is too small.” What good is it to say, “Hey, if you ever need a kidney, just call!” when a guy needs a pair of shoes, or a Mom needs a babysitter. Why can’t you do it?!

[III: Don Dudecom and shoes; Jim Long takes up collection]

The Service of Guarding the Reputation of Others

Refusing to gossip or put others down in their presence or absence, and never, as Paul puts it to “speak evil of no one” (Tit. 3:2). And my Mom was right: if you can’t say something nice, then keep it shut!

The Service of Being Served

This was Peter’s problem, and truth to tell, it is the problem of many today. People don’t want others to know their need, their frailty. I know people who hide the fact they are sick, don’t want to be visited or prayed for. Grow up!! It works both ways!! Foster writes:

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. **Foster, p. 119**

The Service of Common Courtesy

Giving people the time of day, helping someone put on their coat, saying “thankyou” and “yes please,” letters of appreciation and calling others to let them know our plans have changed. And by the way, how well do you treat those who are in the service sector, like waitresses?

The service of Hospitality

There are all kinds of excuses why your home is closed, but why not look for reasons to open up? There is a desperate need today for open homes, and open lives, a place to go where there are no expectations, and no requirements.

The Service of Listening

“Listening is a rare happening among human beings. You cannot listen to the word another is speaking if you are preoccupied with you appearance or impressing the other, or if you are trying to decide what you are going to say when the other stops talking, or if you are debating about whether the word being spoken is true or relevant or agreeable... Listening, in other words, is a primitive act of love, in which a person gives self to another’s word, making self accessible and vulnerable to that word.” – Wm. Stringfellow

The Service of Bearing one another’s burdens

Paul writes, “Bear one another’s burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). But be careful! The only way you can do this and not be swamped is if you are mature enough to be able to take your burdens and the other person’s burdens, and give them to Christ. He bought them and paid for them, so why are you still holding on?!! Be an encourager, a “pray-er”, someone who is quick to help out.

Conclusion

D.L. Moody once said, “*The measure of a man is not how many servants he has, but how many men he serves.*” Paul tells us in Galatians 5:13: “*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*” What an amazing but true paradox: we are totally free now to do what we want, and what we should want is to make ourselves servants to Christ, and therefore servants to each other. When we serve one another, when we serve our world, we are never more like Christ than at that moment of submission and action!

A lot of people wear crosses these days. I think it’s time we got another symbol for those of us who would follow Christ: let’s wear a towel! Let me close with this quote from Richard Foster:

“Service that is duty motivated breathes death. Service that flows out of our inward person is life, and joy and peace. The risen Christ beckons us to the ministry of the towel. Perhaps you would like to begin by experimenting with a prayer that a number of us have used. Begin the day by praying, “Lord Jesus, I would so appreciate it if You would bring me someone today whom I can serve.””
Foster, p. 122