



"Learn the lesson that, if you are to do the work of a prophet, what you want is not a sceptre, but a hoe. The prophet does not rise to reign, but to root out the weeds."

-Bernard of Clairvaux, *On Consideration*, quoted in *Celebration of Discipline*.

## What is the Discipline of Service?

Adele Calhoun defines service this way:

*"Service is a way of offering resources, time, treasure, influence and expertise for the care, protection, justice, and nurture of others. Acts of service gives hands to the second greatest commandment: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" -Spiritual Disciplines Handbook.*

**Reflection Question: What do you like/dislike about this definition of service? Would you add anything or rephrase any of it?**

**Jesus teaches us that serving others is how love becomes tangible.** Shortly after teaching that the two most important commands in the Torah are loving God and loving our neighbors (see **Luke 10:25-29**), an expert in the law pressed Jesus to define exactly what he meant by "loving our neighbors." To answer that question, Jesus told the parable of the Good Samaritan, where an unlikely hero went out of his way to help a man in need. Jesus' point seems clear: To love our neighbors is to serve them sacrificially.

## Jesus Models the Discipline of Service at the Last Supper.

In his chapter on service, Richard Foster highlights Jesus' example of serving his disciples by washing their feet at the Last Supper (**John 13:1-17**). Here is a short excerpt from that passage:

*"3 Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; 4 so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. 5 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 13:3-5 (NIV)**

Washing the feet of dinner guests was so undignified that it always fell to the lowest servant in the household. It's a job no one wanted to do because of how dirty and degrading it was. But that didn't seem to bother Jesus. He chose to show his love through tangible acts of service.

## Jesus' Perspective On Leadership, Humility, and Service

Personally, I am struck by John's insights into Jesus' thought process during the footwashing scene. Jesus knew the truth about his identity: He came from God and was returning to God. Because he was so comfortable with his true self, he had nothing to prove. He didn't need to demand that others serve him or praise him in order to inflate his ego or alleviate any feelings of insecurity. Instead, he lived a life of service knowing exactly who he was and his place in the world.

Beyond that, he was well-aware that he was the ultimate authority on earth. **John 13:3** says Jesus knew God placed everything "under his power." If anyone deserved to be served (rather than serve others), it was Jesus. But Jesus did not come to be served, but to serve others, and to give his life as a ransom for many (see **Matthew 20:28** and **Mark 10:45**).

Perhaps Paul had that in mind when he wrote that Jesus "*did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant*" (**Philippians 2:6-7**, NIV).

**Reflection Question: How can insecurity stop us from serving others the way Jesus did? How can we overcome the temptation to make ourselves the center of attention?**

### Jesus' Example of Servant-Leadership

The rulers of Jesus' time (secular and religious) routinely leveraged their authority and position for personal gain. They made sure that they were the center of attention and had their needs met. Listen to what Jesus says the religious leader of his day:

*"They love to sit at the head table at banquets and in the seats of honor in the synagogues. They love to receive respectful greetings as they walk in the marketplaces, and to be called 'Rabbi.'"* (**Matthew 23:6-7**, NLT)

There was a prevailing belief that people with money and power deserved greater honor than people who were poor and insignificant. This type of thinking eventually became part of the church's culture as well. For example, James speaks out against this kind of favoritism in the church (see **James 2:1-4**), calling it a direct contradiction to Jesus' command to love our neighbors as ourselves.

This "me-first" attitude wasn't an easy pattern to break out of. Since this was a deeply ingrained cultural assumption that took root in the hearts of the early disciples, Jesus knew he had to teach about and model a different way of thinking. On several occasions he taught the Biblical truth that **real leaders don't demand preferential treatment – they serve others**. One example of this teaching comes from **Matthew 20:25-28**, where Jesus calls his disciples to redefine their understanding of what it means to be "great" in God's Kingdom:

*"25 Jesus called them together and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 26 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'"*

The Bernard of Clairvaux quote at the top of this handout speaks to a similar idea. There is a prevailing belief in our culture that greatness equals power (the king's scepter), but we as Christians are not called upon to wield the scepter and exercise worldly power over others. Instead, Jesus teaches us that real greatness means serving others. We aren't give a king's scepter—we are given the servant's hoe.

Going back to the Last Supper in **John 13**, we see how Jesus stooped down into the dirt to wash his disciples feet. Although he had every right to wield the scepter, he laid it down and picked up the towel instead. He wanted to leave us an enduring legacy of putting others first. He wanted us to have a new image etched into our memories of what love and power look like in God's Kingdom. And he did it so that we would have an example to follow: "*I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you,*" (**John 13:15**, NIV).

### The Ministry of the Towel

I love the way Richard Foster explains the significance of this moment:

*"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."*

**Reflection Question: What does "the ministry of the towel" mean to you?**

## Self-Righteous Service Versus True Service

*“Serving others breaks you free from the shackles of self and self-absorption that choke out the joy of living.” -James Hunter*

Richard Foster has a wonderful section in his chapter on service that helps us distinguish between self-righteous service and true, Spirit-led service.

One universal truth of Christianity is that God sees through our duplicity and false motives when we try to do the *right* things for the *wrong* reasons.

Consider these examples of Jesus seeing past the surface level of a person’s actions and into the inner workings of their hearts:

- “Knowing their thoughts, Jesus said, ‘Why do you entertain evil thoughts in your hearts?’” **(Matthew 9:4)**
- “Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts.” **(Mark 2:8)**
- “These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.” **(Mark 7:6)**
- Jesus knew what they were thinking and asked, ‘Why are you thinking these things in your hearts?’” **(Luke 5:22)**

**Reflection Question: Why does Jesus care so much about our motives? Have you ever felt like your service to God or others was more routine than heartfelt?**

### Nine Signs You might be a Self-Righteous Servant...

How can we tell if we are serving others with pure motives instead of selfish reasons? Foster gives us nine things to consider:

1. Self-righteous service is rooted in human effort, but true service flows from a Spirit-filled relationship with God.
2. Self-righteous service is fixated on the “big deal.” It seeks out newsworthy opportunities that will make waves and garner attention. True service does not discriminate against the smaller, less noticeable acts of service.
3. Self-righteous service is motivated by external rewards (like gratitude and recognition), but true service is content to stay hidden.

4. Self-righteous service is all about results. It asks the question, “What good things have been accomplished through our efforts?” And more cynically, it asks, “Will this person do something for me in return?” The desire to serve wanes when we don’t see the immediate fruit of our labor. True service doesn’t stress about keeping score or tallying results.
5. Self-righteous service is very calculating when it comes to choosing whom to serve. It seeks out people to serve who are likely to return the favor or improve a person’s status. True service doesn’t show favoritism.
6. Self-righteous service depends on the moods and whims of the servant. When the desire to serve goes away (e.g. “I just don’t feel like it today...”), the service ends. True service perseveres in the ministry whenever there is a need.
7. Self-righteous service is temporary. It’s limited in time and scope to specific projects that need our attention. True service is an ongoing lifestyle.
8. Self-righteous service is insensitive. It pushes ahead with plans and programs even when they sap the dignity or self-determination of the people being served. True service carefully considers the needs of the person being served. It respects the dignity of others and chooses to serve only when that service is actually beneficial.
9. Self-righteous service fractures community, because in the final analysis it is done to the glory of the person serving. It elevates their status above all others. True service is community-building. Done out of love, it builds up the church, draws people into deeper relationships, and builds bridges between people.

**Reflection Question: Can you think of times in your life where your service has been a little too self-righteous? How can we cultivate hearts that lead us towards true service instead?**



## Eight Under-the-Radar Acts of Service

"You have not lived today until you have done something for someone who can never repay you."  
-John Bunyan

1. **Hiddenness** — Serving others in secret; doing good for others without publicizing it or seeking recognition.
2. **Small Things** — Serving others in the little ways that make a big impact. Foster writes, *"In the realm of the spirit we soon discover that the real issues are found in the tiny, insignificant corners of our life. Our infatuation with 'the big deal' has blinded us to this fact."*
3. **Guarding the Reputation of Others** — Refusing to take part in slander, gossip, or unfounded rumors.
4. **Letting Others Serve Us** — Many of us struggle to accept help from others. When people we love offer to bring us a meal or watch the kids or help out around the house, we think the kindest thing we can do for them is to turn down their offer. We think we are blessing them by sparing them from hard work. But the opposite is actually true: we are depriving them of an opportunity to serve someone they love. God is moving in their hearts to bless someone they care about, so the best thing we can do is graciously accept their offer.
5. **Common Courtesy** — Showing kindness, thoughtfulness, and selflessness in our daily interactions with others.
6. **Hospitality** — Opening our homes (and hearts) to others. Remember there is a special emphasis in Biblical hospitality on welcoming the foreigner and stranger.
7. **Listening** — David Augsberg says *"Being heard is so close to being loved that for the average person they are almost indistinguishable."* Really listening to others—not to respond or critique, but simple to understanding—is a profound act of love and service. It is sorely missing from many of our interactions and relationships.
8. **Sharing the Word of Life**— Blessing others with insights from your relationship with God, prayer time, and Bible study.

## How Service Changes Us

*"Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'" -Martin Luther King Jr.*

Serving others is one of the core aspects of our discipleship. Jesus teaches us to be servants; he sets us an example of service; and he calls us to serve others as if we were serving Jesus himself. Serving others is important in its own right because it meets tangible needs that would otherwise go unmet.

But serving others is also an important part of our own spiritual growth. Serving others helps cultivate in us an attitude of humility. It releases us from the bondage of always needing to be in charge, of always needing to get our way. Serving others helps us move away from the false self of ego, pride, and the need to be served, and it leads us closer to the heart of Jesus, who willingly gave up everything to serve the people he loved.

Even secular organizations like *Mental Floss* recognize the profound benefits of helping others:

1. It increases a person's lifespan.
2. Serving others is contagious—it creates a ripple effect of altruism.
3. It increases our own happiness.
4. It can alleviate chronic pain.
5. It can lower our blood pressure.
6. It improves mental health and academic performance in teenagers.
7. It strengthens our sense of purpose.

In other words, the Discipline of Service benefits not only the one being served, but also the one serving.

**Reflection Question: How does serving others help a Christian grow in their relationship with Jesus? What are the practical changes a person might experience when they serve?**