

# The Discipline of Service

## ***The Outer Disciplines:***

Up to this point we have emphasized the inner disciplines. We have discussed:

- Meditation
- Study
- Prayer
- Scripture Memorization

These disciplines aim at the development of the inner life, but the development of the inner life is never a goal in itself. We seek to strengthen the inner man so that we may take our place in the church and in the world. Donald Bloesch writes in *The Crisis of Piety*:

“The spiritual disciplines are not to be seen as a pretext for separation and isolation from the world. Rather they should be regarded as a means to conquest over the world. Not the renunciation of the world but service in the world—this is the purpose of the disciplines of the spirit as seen in the Bible.”<sup>1</sup>

We now turn to the outward disciplines. Again we will limit ourselves to four:

- Service
- Stewardship
- Worship
- Evangelism

## ***The Discipline of Service***

The verb most often used to describe Christian activity is the verb “to serve”. This is true in the New Testament as well as in Christian history and in the present. To be clear here we must begin with a brief word study. The key word or family of words in the New Testament is the family of words: *dokein*, “to serve”; *diakonia*, “service”; and *diakonos*, “servant”. The latter word *diakonos* is the word from which we derive the English word “deacon”. In the King James Version these words are most often translated by “to minister”, “ministry”, and “minister”, but with current English usage it is best to understand them in terms of “to serve”, “service” and “servant”. The basic meaning of the word was to serve at table. In at least three New Testament passages we clearly see this idea:

---

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, p. 109

- Mark 1:29-31 “And forthwith, when they were come out of the synagogue, they entered into the house of Simon and Andrew, with James and John. But Simon's wife's mother lay sick of a fever, and anon they tell him of her. And he came and took her by the hand, and lifted her up; and immediately the fever left her, and she ministered unto them.”
- Luke 10:39--40 “And she had a sister called Mary, which also sat at Jesus' feet, and heard his word. But Martha was cumbered about much servicing, and came to him, and said, Lord, dost thou not care that my sister hath left me to serve alone? bid her therefore that she help me.”
- Acts 6:1--4 “And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministration. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.”

## ***Jesus Defines Service***

Humble service to others as it was taught and demonstrated by Jesus and as it has been practiced by Christians was new both to Judaism and to the Greek world. The word *diakoneo* is not found in the Septuagint. The seven uses of *diakonos* are entirely of court servants and there is only one use of *diakonia* in the book of Ester. The idea of Service in the Old Testament is either that of service offered to God in acts of worship in which case words from the *latrein* family are used, or the forced service of slaves in which case the words from the *doulein* family are employed.

Though Judaism in the time of Jesus knew and practiced its social responsibilities to the poor this was done primarily by alms giving, and lowly service, such as waiting at table, was generally considered beneath the dignity of a free man. The same was true in Greek culture as Kress writes: “In general the voluntary giving of oneself in the service of one’s fellow man is alien to Greek thought. The highest goal before a man was the development of his own personality.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> K. Hess, “Serve” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. III, p. 545

It is against this background that we must understand both Jesus' teaching and example about humble service within the community. This is for Jesus the first principle of life in the church. A consideration of the following three passages will make this clear:

- Luke 22:24--27 “And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. And he said unto them, The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But ye *shall not be* so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that doth serve. For whether *is* greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? *is* not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth.”
- Matthew 20:25—28 “But Jesus called them *unto him*, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”
- John 13:12—17 So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for *so* I am. If I then, *your* Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.”

### ***Jesus established the example for us by becoming not just a man, but a servant.***

The most amazing thing about the incarnation is not that God became man, but that God in becoming man became, not the greatest and most powerful among us, but a servant. He came “not to be served but to serve”. He came among us “as he that serves”. Paul describes this process in Phil. 2:6-11:

“Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of *things* in heaven, and *things* in earth, and *things*

---

under the earth; And *that* every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

There is an intended contrast in the passage between “existing in the form of God” (v. 6), and “taking the form of a servant”(v. 7). His normal state of existence was that of God, his existence as a servant was a voluntary act on his part resulting in his “humbling himself”. It is also important to notice, from the text, that he did not just perform acts of service, but became a servant (*doulos*). This is important for us because we are to follow his example. Performing occasional acts of service is not enough. We must become servants, first of Jesus Christ, then of others. In the following quote Richard Foster discusses the difference between serving and becoming a servant:

“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’s stepping on us, i.e. 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.”<sup>3</sup>

In the passage under consideration Paul calls the Philippians to follow the example of Christ in voluntarily becoming each other’s servants. He exhorts them:

“*If there be* therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies, fulfill ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, *being* of one accord, of one mind. *Let nothing be done* through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:” (Philippians 2:1-5)

Paul’s argument in this passage may be summarized:

- Since you are enjoying the benefits of Christ
- Follow the example of Christ

To follow the example of Christ and become a servant requires discipline because being a servant is contrary to the flesh. It especially runs counter to the sins of sloth and pride. If we are to succeed in overcoming the flesh and truly becoming servants these two sins must be overcome.

---

<sup>3</sup> Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p. 115