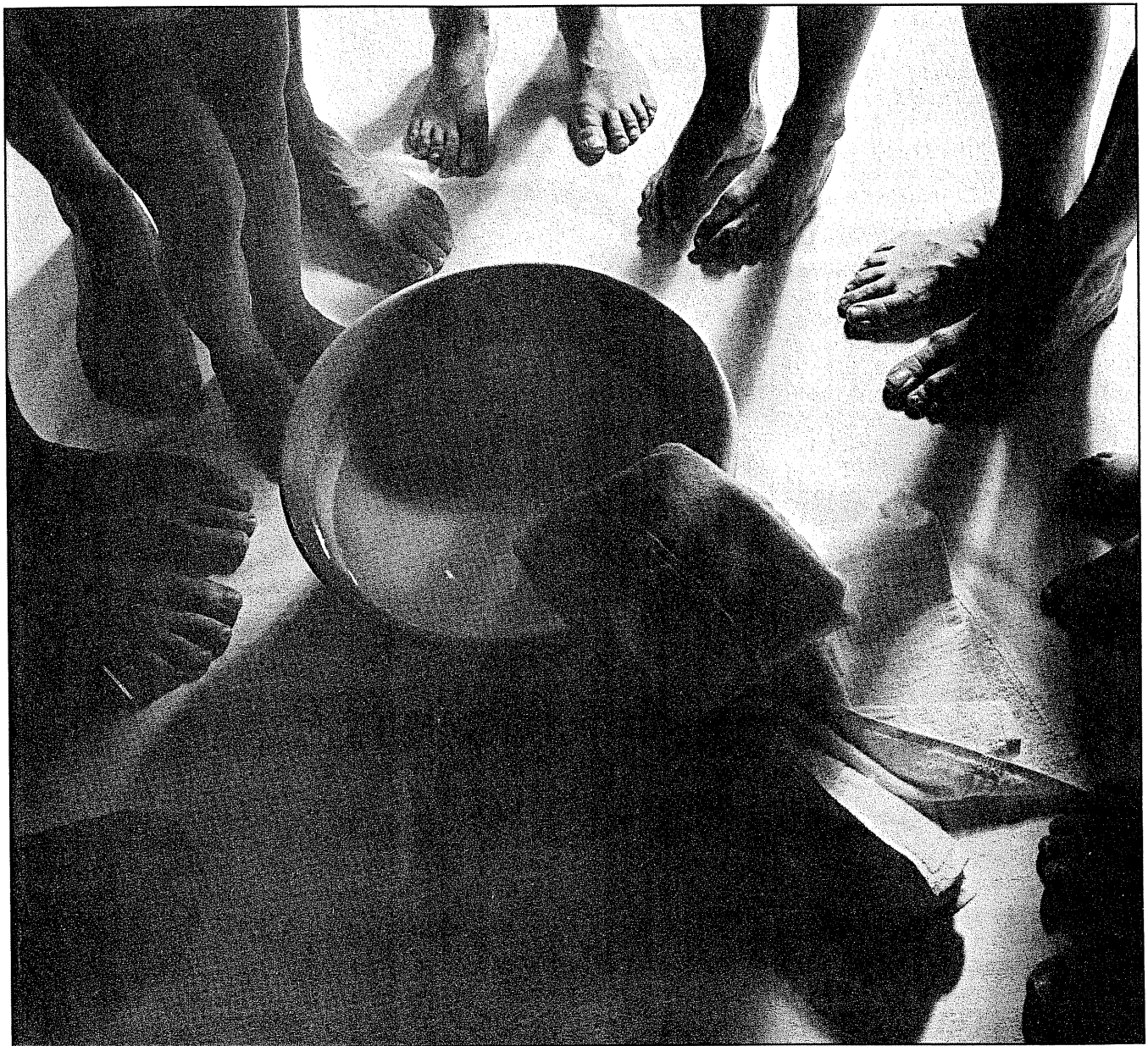

The Ministry of the Towel: Practicing Love Through Service

RICHARD J. FOSTER



Photos by David Singer

*The Christlike life is a life like Christ,
who came to minister as a servant.*

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 over 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 so 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 are banished 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 when a job needs to be done and who steps forward. (Depending on the job it may be a sign of mastery or a sign of servitude.) These things are written on the face of human society.

We must clearly understand the radical nature of what Jesus taught 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 status.

Jesus declared, "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.*" 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 which Jesus spoke was an authority not found in a position or title but in a towel.

Yes . . . But

A natural and understandable hesitancy accompanies any serious discussion of service. The hesitancy is good 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's 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 a 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 no trouble to the apostle Paul. He boasted frequently of his slavery to Christ, making lavish use of the first-century concept of the "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's 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 (*The Imitation of Christ*) instructed us to be "so subject . . . that all men may go over thee and tread upon thee as upon mire of the street."

We find those words hard to deal with today. 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 said (*The Cost of Discipleship*, Macmillan, 1963), "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."

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. 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,

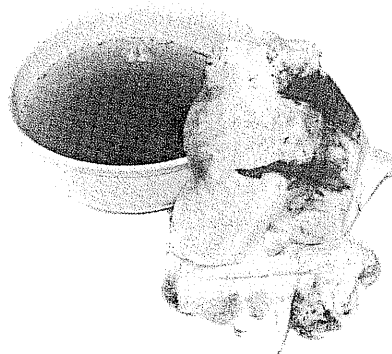
however, is not enough. Service to be service must take form and shape in the world in which we live. Therefore we must seek to perceive what service may look like in the marketplace of our daily lives.

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 . . ." (*Fellowship of the Saints*, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1957). 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 individual 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 frequently be engaged in by all people. It sends ripples of joy and celebration in 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. As I was in the frantic 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* (Harper & Row, 1976), 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,



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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."

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" (François Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*, Bethany Fellowship, 1975).

In the realm of the spirit we soon discover that the real issues are to be found in the tiny insignificant corners of life. Our constant 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 said: "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."

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 can work wonders in our inward person.

Nor should we be a party to the slanderous talk of others. We have a rule on the pastoral team of our church that our people have come to appreciate. We refuse to allow any member of the congregation to speak disparagingly of one pastor to another pastor. Gently but firmly we ask them to go directly to the offending pastor. Eventually people understand that we simply will not allow them to talk to us about pastor so-and-so. This rule, held to by our entire team, has had beneficial results.

Bernard warned 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" (*St. Bernard on the Song of Songs*, A. R. Mowbray, 1952). 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 who are of the light must never despise the rituals of relationship that are in every culture. It is one of the few ways

left in modern society of acknowledging the value of one another. As Paul counseled Titus, 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 come blundering 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 they 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 egocentric 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 R.S.V.P. 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" (I Peter 4:9). Paul does the same and even makes it one of the requirements for the office of bishop (Rom. 12:13; I Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8). There is a desperate need today for homes that can be open 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 provision that was made for visitors. Perhaps it is the modern, shiny, depersonalized motels that should be 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 70 individuals come to 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 with 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" (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*). We need so desperately 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 transforms the affections, even the priorities, of the 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. "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" (Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*).

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 called it (James. 2:8). Love is most perfectly fulfilled when we bear the hurts and sufferings of each other,

weeping with those who weep.

If we care we will learn to bear their 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 ourselves 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 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's begin more humbly. Begin in some small corner somewhere and learn. Jesus will be your teacher.

Finally, there is *the service of sharing the Word of Life* with one another. The Poustinias that were established by Catherine Doherty had a rule: those who went into the deserts of silence and solitude did so for others. Any word that they received from God they were to bring back and share 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. We must not draw back from this service for it is desperately needed today.

Service that is motivated by duty 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. Start the day by praying, "Lord Jesus, I would so appreciate it if you would bring me someone today whom I can serve." □

Richard J. Foster is associate professor of theology and writer in residence at Friends University, Wichita, Kansas. The article is condensed from his book, *Celebration of Discipline*, copyright Richard J. Foster, 1978. Reprinted with permission from Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc.

