

Servant to Servant

“(Jesus said)...as I have done for you, you must also do for one another.” John 13:15

One night in her dreams, a woman was given a tour of heaven and hell. As she entered the first room, her eyes immediately focused on a beautifully set banquet table. People were seated around a feast of every imaginable food, including selections from every corner of the world. It was an awesome sight.

Taking a closer look, however, she noted that not one person at the table was smiling. In fact, the entire atmosphere of the place was gloomy and oppressive. Even with the abundance of food, every person looked emaciated, literally skin and bones. Suddenly, she realized the reason for this depressing sight. Each person in the room had a fork with a four foot handle strapped to one arm and a knife with a four foot handle strapped to other. Despite the abundance of delicacies within easy reach, they were starving. There was no doubt in the woman’s mind that this must be hell.

Her next stop produced a scenario identical to the first. Same banquet table, same foods deliciously prepared, and same long handled knives and forks. But these diners were joyful, laughing, singing and having a wonderful time. They weren’t skin and bones at all, but well fed and in excellent health and spirit. How could the conditions be so similar and yet produce such drastically different results?

Then the answer became clear. The people in hell had been trying to feed themselves with four-foot utensils, which was quite impossible. In heaven, people were using the same knife and fork; but were feeding each another. Each person would reach across the table and feed the person opposite. By feeding one another, they fed themselves.

For believers, doing for others isn't optional, something to be tacked onto our busy schedules if we can spare the time; it's required. It's the heart of Christian life; the very reason for our existence. Service is the rent we pay for the space we occupy on the planet. Serving others is our primary way of serving God and helping bring heaven closer to earth.

At the Last Supper on the night before he dies, Jesus gives final instructions on what his disciples are to do when he's no longer there to guide them in person. Besides instituting the Eucharist, he gives them another important way to keep his memory and spirit alive. Rising from the table, Jesus removes his outer garment, takes a towel, ties it around his waist, pours water into a basin, then washes and dries their feet. Imagine how taken aback the disciples must have been at such a gesture! No wonder Peter objected!

In first century Judea washing road dust off bare feet when entering a home was common practice. Usually you washed your own feet, or a servant did it for you, or a disciple washed the feet of a revered teacher to show respect. Jesus, on the other hand, reverses the master-servant roles and honors his disciples instead by washing *their* feet. To make his meaning crystal clear, he tells them: “...*I have given you a model to follow... as this is done for you, so you must do for one another.*” Jesus, as he did so often during his earthly ministry, challenges them and us to live according to God's values, not the world's.

Most of the world values self; doing what feels good; looking out for “number one.” God, on the other hand, values selflessness, humility, compassion, living for others. The world defines greatness in terms of power, possessions, prestige and position. God measures greatness in terms of service and love.

From early childhood popular culture drills us to be conscious of our rank in society. The education system urges us to study hard and get good grades so we can graduate with honors, and live the *good life*, which Madison Avenue and Hollywood defines as one of conspicuous consumption and self-indulgence.

The business sector and professions reward people who succeed with titles, perks and bonuses. To be considered important by conventional standards, you have to sit in the choicest seats at concerts and sporting events; drive the finest cars; live in the plushiest neighborhoods and have others serve you. Jesus, by contrast, urges us to live counter-culturally -- simply, selflessly, spiritually, and for others. Is that easy to do? Not by a long shot, but the benefits are certainly well worth the effort.

Dr. Karl Menninger, a noted psychologist, was once asked his therapeutic approach for dealing with depression. You'd expect him to say he'd prescribe medication, a vacation or at least a brief period of rest. On the contrary, here's what he said: "If I felt a sense of futility overwhelming me, I'd go out of my house, lock the door, go across the tracks and find someone in need, and do whatever I could to assist that person." Most spiritual gurus, regardless of tradition, agree that people are happiest when their lives have purpose and most find purpose by focusing on others, rather than self. Washing someone else's feet; feeding him or her, different metaphor, same principle.

You don't have to perform great deeds of service to live a purposeful life; you can serve others in small ways. In your home, for example, think of another family member ahead of yourself. Pick up your clothes so someone else doesn't have to. Help your brother or sister with a chore. Turn off the T.V., computer, or video game and do

something together as family. Help get the little ones ready for bed. Help prepare a meal. Outside the home, become involved in some church ministry. Volunteer at a human service agency. Reach out to someone who's hurting. The list goes on and on.

Jesus' entire life was an unending offering of praise to God and loving service to others. By word and example, he demonstrated over and over again that love and service are synonymous. There is no such thing as an *insignificant* act of kindness. With every act of kindness, seen or unseen, the universe changes. By serving others, we allow God to use us to reshape the world, becoming co-creators with Him of His kingdom on earth.

Some years ago, the Nobel Prize winner, Albert Schweitzer, already famous as a Scripture scholar and musician, became a medical doctor who served in Gabon, West Africa. He once addressed a group of students in the United States: He said: "I do not know what your destiny will be, but one thing I do know; the only ones among you who will really be happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

Success in life, in short, has nothing to do with what we gain or accomplish for ourselves. It's what we *do* for others. So let's keep reaching across the table....

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Exodus 12:1-8, 11-14; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 13:1-15.

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