

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
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(Guest Commentary during August by  
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## **Giving of Oneself**

Philippians 2:1–3:1a

**Key verse: Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:5)**

Serving others in the spirit of Christ is the focus of this lesson. Genuine discipleship involves taking up our cross and following Jesus; that we understand. But Paul invites us to make sure our **attitude** about service is like that of our Lord Jesus who “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” And that seems so impossible that the very thought leaves me gasping for breath! Who among us can measure up to the example of Jesus?

To be honest I seldom wake up wanting to “empty myself” in the service of others. I have a constant battle with “selfish ambition.” It is no easy task to regard others as better than myself. And I must confess that instead of caring first about “the interests of others,” I am usually more concerned about “my own interests.” But Paul will not let me off the hook! He even insists that I think like Jesus by letting my mind become like that of Christ Jesus. If I am to take Paul seriously, and I want to do that, I must deal with my self-centeredness and my pride.

Paul tags me hard on the issue of humility. Like most people I abhor having other people take advantage of me. I don’t like for people to walk on me. I am quick to protect myself and I enjoy having the upper hand in my relationships. But Paul insists that if I want to be true follower of Jesus I must learn to imitate Christ’s humility. And that is a very tough assignment. It requires the total submission of myself – my interests and my desires – to Jesus. I must be willing for my interests to be “crucified.”

For Paul Jesus was the supreme example of humility. He humbled himself and became obedient even to death on a cross. He was willing to die so that the Father’s plan for our salvation could be carried out. But before willingly dying on the cross, Jesus taught his disciples the meaning of humility by washing their feet.

Consider the scene in the upper room. The disciples had gathered for the last supper. They all knew their feet were dirty. They all knew someone needed to wash their feet, but none of them was willing to get their hands dirty. Washing feet was the work of servants and the disciples obviously felt they were too important do such a thing. But to their amazement Jesus took a towel and a basin of water, knelt down and began to wash the feet of his disciples. They were stunned that Jesus would stoop to such menial service.

Then Jesus explained that he wanted his disciples to follow his example in humbly serving the needs of others.

Richard Foster calls this “the discipline of service” in his important book, *Celebration of Discipline*. Foster helpfully points out the difference between “choosing to serve” and “choosing to be a servant.” The distinguished Quaker author explains:

“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 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.”

If I am serious about practicing humility in caring for others, then I must learn not to “serve” others, out of duty and obligation, but find ways to be a servant of others. William Law understood that service produces humility. In his book, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*, Law says if we want humility we must: “...condescend to all the weaknesses and infirmities of your fellow-creatures, cover their frailties, love their excellencies, encourage their virtues, relieve their wants, rejoice in their prosperities, compassionate their distress, receive their friendship, overlook their unkindness, forgive their malice, be a servant of servants, and condescend to do the lowest offices to the lowest of mankind.” When you and I are willing to become such a servant to others, we are surely on the road to genuine humility!

Foster describes several forms that our service can take. One is the service of hiddenness, service that is concealed and not done “before others.” He says, “Nothing *disciplines* the inordinate desires of the flesh like service, and nothing *transforms* the desires of the flesh like serving in hiddenness. The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honor and recognition. If we stoutly refuse to give in to this lust of the flesh we crucify it. Every time we crucify the flesh we crucify our pride and arrogance.”

Another form of service Foster lifts up is “the service of small things.” He encourages us to embrace the ministry of serving others in small things. Heed his wisdom in these words: “In the realm of the spirit we soon discover that the real issues are found in the tiny insignificant corners of life. Our 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.” He is so right! Most of us are willing to make great sacrifices for God, especially if we receive recognition, but we are reluctant to make sacrifices in small things that go unnoticed.

All of this makes me aware that daily I need to look for ways to follow the example of Jesus by humbly doing small things as a servant of others. Foster says it well: “The risen Christ beckons us to the ministry of the towel.” To flesh out my discipleship in true

servanthood, I need to begin each day by praying, “Lord Jesus, please show me someone today whom I can serve as you would serve that person.” And when Jesus does that, if you are like me, you will need to pray, “Lord Jesus, give me the grace to crucify the desires of my flesh so that I can become the servant you want me to be.”

The Lord answered that prayer for Timothy and Epaphroditus and a host of others since the days of Paul. He still has the power to do for us what he did for them. Let’s ask him to do it again – that we might live as genuine servants of the Master!