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Romans 12:9

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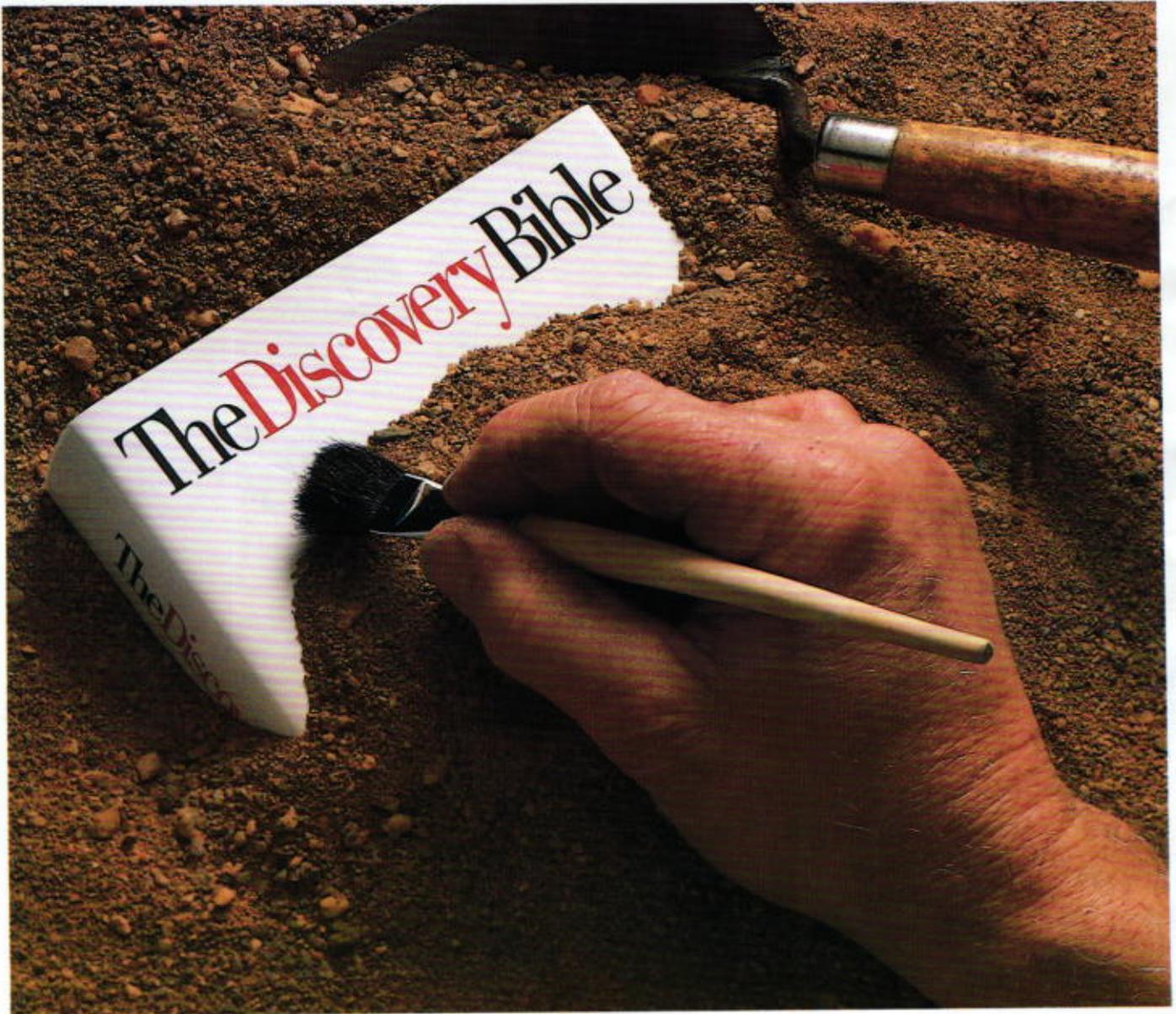
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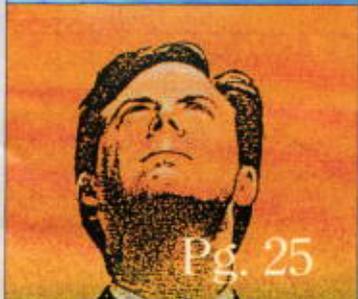
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BY JACK B. HOEY, JR.

BREAKING THE UNPLOWED GROUND

Does God intend for us to limit our service to the areas of our spiritual gifts?

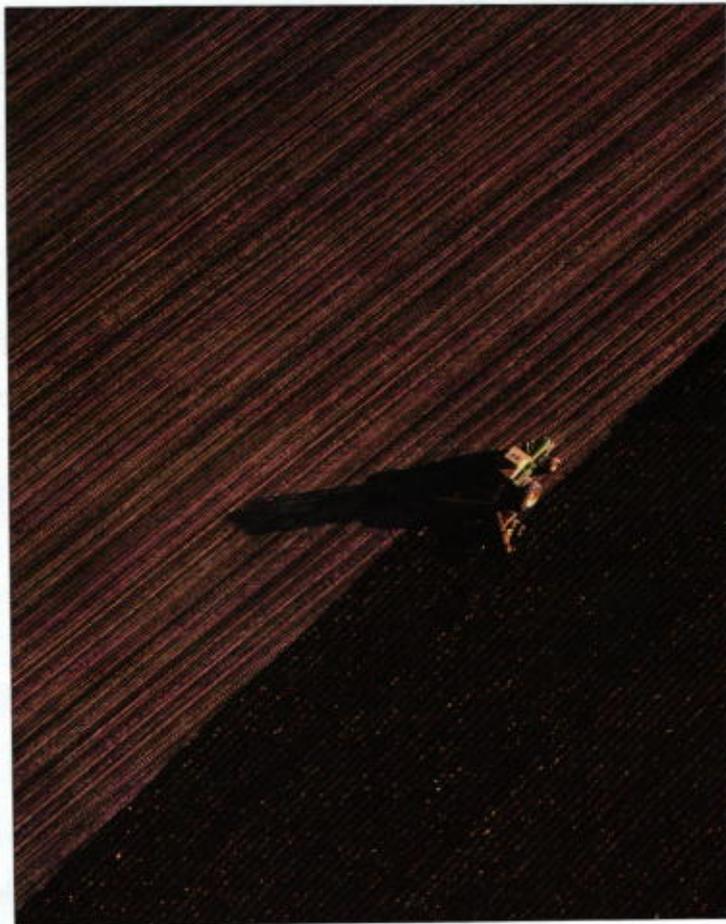
WHILE I WAS browsing in a used bookstore one day, a beautiful set of books caught my eye. The set was an edition of Charles Dickens's complete works. The green cloth binding and gilt lettering were hardly worn, even though an inscription showed the books to be one hundred years old.

As I thumbed through some of the books I discovered why they were spotless: In most of the volumes the pages were still uncut, indicating that the books had never been read. Though they appeared impressive on the shelf, the great literature inside had never provided insight or entertainment to anyone.

Sometimes Christians resemble those untouched books. They have clean, courteous, ethical exteriors, but they have never used the resources they possess to benefit others.

Jesus once compared our responsibility to continually care for those around us with that of a servant put in charge of feeding the household in the master's absence. He completed the parable by commenting, "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns" (Mt. 24:45-46).

All of us are surrounded by people who hunger, whether physically, emotionally, or spiritually. Failure to feed them



produces results as tragic as the suffering of a hungry child. The prophet Hosea's challenge to the Israel of his day addresses our own complacency:

Sow for yourselves righteousness, reap the fruit of unflinching love, and break up your unplowed ground; for it is time to seek the LORD, until he comes and showers righteousness on you. —Hos. 10:12

We all have "unplowed ground" in our lives that we've never allowed God to put into productive use. And even when

we recognize such fallow ground, we're often slow to break it up.

"BUT THAT'S NOT MY GIFT" Misunderstanding the role of spiritual gifts can be a major obstacle to ministry. We naturally concentrate our efforts on activities we enjoy or in which we excel. These areas of our lives are usually well-tilled. But spiritual gifts are given so that we can meet others' needs. When we focus our ministry on using our abilities without regard to the needs around us, we are ministering primarily to ourselves.

Paul begins his treatise on spiritual gifts in 1 Corinthians 12 by explaining, "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (v. 7). This verse contains two important points. First, spiritual gifts are literally of the Spirit, not a matter of inborn talent. Second, they are given "for the common good"; they are a means by which God builds up all believers.

This is not to downplay the importance of using one's abilities. However, many vital ministries in the church do not require special talent, just a willingness to serve. For example, in my experience with a number of Sunday school classes for young married couples, I've found an important factor affecting the well-being of each one. It's not outstanding teaching, nor an active social calendar, nor a well-focused ministry outlet, though these are all important. The *sine*

Photography by CHUCK O'REAR

qua non is the simple, humble ministry of the nursery.

With a well-run nursery, any group of young marrieds has potential. Without one, new couples are repelled and the fellowship's growth is stunted. The couples who remain are perpetually distracted, and their personal growth is hampered.

The gift of administration may be needed for overseeing the nursery, but no spiritual gifts are needed to care for babies every fourth or sixth or eighth Sunday. If there were, only "gifted" people could be parents. Yet without a good nursery, the long-term vitality of any church is imperiled, because it can't attract or hold young people who comprise much of its future.

First Corinthians 12 ends with an admonition to "eagerly desire the greater gifts" (v. 31). This doesn't mean that all are to seek positions of leadership or teaching. The preceding verses say the opposite: "Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?" (v. 29). But the admonition leads into an exposition of "the most excellent way"—the well-known passage in 1 Corinthians 13 on the supreme importance of love. The "greater gifts," then, are not the most visible manifestations of talent. Instead, they manifest the Spirit's work by expressing love.

How is this principle translated into ministry? Rather than doing jobs with which we feel comfortable, the highest expression of love may involve doing what *doesn't* come easily. Rather than assuming prominent roles, love for the body may require that we meet needs through obscure ministries. When Jesus set His example as a servant before His disciples, He didn't point to His matchless teaching, but to His willingness to perform the humble task of washing their feet.

Sharing possessions with those in need is another ministry that doesn't require abundant talent—or even abundant funds. My grandfather died shortly before the Great Depression began, and my grandmother faced the daunting task of keeping her eight fatherless children fed, clothed, and together. For years she didn't have a penny to spare. Yet it made an indelible impression on my father that no hobo who came to the door asking for food ever went away hungry. She may have had only bread and butter, but she shared it.

Sometimes sharing out of scarcity accomplishes more than sharing out of abundance. It cannot be mistaken for

Rather than picking and choosing ministry opportunities based solely on our talents and interests, we are directed, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord."

anything but an expression of love, a recognition of the deep value in others. In this way it goes beyond satisfying an immediate hunger; it helps the whole person.

Using our talents in ministry is similar to sharing out of abundance. There's nothing wrong with it; it's right and necessary, just as it's right and necessary for the affluent to share with the needy. But rather than picking and choosing ministry opportunities based solely on our talents and interests, we are directed, "Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain" (1 Cor. 15:58). The picture is of a life that spills over with love and meets a wide range of needs, not of a carefully regulated spigot. After all, it's the ministry opportunities that don't come easily that usually present the potential of unplowed ground.

A SERVANT'S HEART

Serving in a nursery can be thankless drudgery. It's certainly not a high-visibility ministry. But recognition and rewards often merely show the value the world places on our efforts. On the other hand, Christ established a different set of values for His disciples, telling them, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—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" (Mt. 20:26-28).

It's difficult to reconcile the importance our culture places on realizing our potential with the thought that we should be the servants of our neighbors or coworkers or those in need. But failure to do so costs us many opportunities.

Franklin Roosevelt's closest adviser during much of his presidency was a man named Harry Hopkins. During World War II, when his influence with Roosevelt was at its peak, Hopkins held no official Cabinet position. Moreover, Hopkins's closeness to Roosevelt caused many to regard him as a shadowy, sinister figure. As a result he was a major

political liability to the President.

A political foe once asked Roosevelt, "Why do you keep Hopkins so close to you? You surely realize that people distrust him and resent his influence."

Roosevelt replied, "Someday you may well be sitting here where I am now as President of the United States. And when you are, you'll be looking at that door over there and knowing that practically everybody who walks through it wants something out of you. You'll learn what a lonely job this is, and you'll discover the need for somebody like Harry Hopkins, who asks for nothing except to serve you."¹

This might seem to be a left-handed compliment. Yet Winston Churchill rated Hopkins as one of the half-dozen most powerful men in the world in the early 1940s. And the sole source of Hopkins's power was his willingness to serve. A man more preoccupied with his own recognition and advancement could never have been so productive. There is always a surplus of self-serving people; on the other hand, the Harry Hopkinses of the world are rare. As Prov. 20:6 says, "Many a man claims to have unfailing love, but a faithful man who can find?"

Do we enter God's presence in prayer simply because we want something out of Him? Or are our hearts committed to His service? Our opportunity is even greater than that of Harry Hopkins. He had a major impact on world affairs through his willingness to serve the President of a powerful nation. But we can leave an impact on eternity by serving the Lord of all creation. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do" (Eph. 2:10).

CONFUSION OVER GOD'S CALLING

How do we recognize the good works God has prepared in advance for us? Some people wait for the Lord to deliver a dramatic pronouncement—a Call. When they hear that Call, they plan to apply themselves one hundred percent to whatever it is God wants them to do. They

listen so hard for a Call that they screen out the quiet signals He sends every day.

The Greek word usually translated "called" in the New Testament means "bidden" or "called forth." It is the word James uses when he says, "Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord" (Jas 5:14). It is not a dramatic word, implying a momentous religious experience. It is a simple, straightforward direction from the Lord.

All of us have received a call: "to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good." Furthermore, we need to remember that some ministries are not a matter of calling but of commandment. For example, all of us are commanded to share with those in need (Ro. 12:13, Eph. 4:28).

This doesn't mean that no one ever receives a special calling. Paul begins his letter to the Romans by speaking of himself as "Paul, a servant of Christ

Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God." Here he uses a word that means "invited" or "appointed," set apart for a special task. But, as the book of Acts shows, before Paul became fully aware of this ultimate, overarching call, he had been responsive for many years to the quiet words of the Spirit.

To learn how God would have us minister, we need to begin by committing ourselves to nourish the physical, emotional, and spiritual hunger of those with whom God puts us in contact, whoever and wherever they are. This requires developing sensitivity to others, so we can recognize those needs that are never expressed. It requires sensitivity to God's Spirit, who quietly points out the opportunities around us. And it includes being open to the possibility that God will lead us to break up some previously unplowed ground, to grow or minister in an area we've never explored.

When God commanded Abraham to

leave civilized Haran and "go to the land I will show you" (Gen. 12:1), He didn't tell Abraham where he was going or why. Abraham "obeyed and went," even though he did not know his destination (Heb. 11:8). Because Abraham obeyed, God promised him, "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3).

God may be leading you out of safe, well-trieed areas of ministry into the awkward or the unknown. Maybe it will involve a dramatic change in your way of life; on the other hand, He may simply be trying to point out some nearby feet in need of washing. Don't be afraid to discover His plan for your unplowed ground!

Note

1. Robert Sherwood, *Roosevelt and Hopkins: An Intimate History* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1948), pp. 2-3.

JACK B. HOEY, JR., is a financial manager with Rockwell International Corporation in Boulder, Colorado. He and his wife, Penny, are active in church ministries to young couples.

Washing Today's Feet

On Your Own

1. Study Jesus's example of servanthood in Jn. 13:1-15. According to verse 1, why did He wash the disciples' feet?

2. How do you think verse 3 relates to the rest of the passage (cf. vv. 13-15)? What is the relationship between power or position and serving?

3. Does anything else from Jn. 13:1-15 stand out to you? Why?

4. Jesus saw a need, carried out a lowly and unpleasant task for the benefit of others, then told the disciples, "You should do as I have done for you" (v. 15). Think about the needs of those you have been called to love in your church, your city, your neighborhood, and your workplace. Are you aware of any ways in which these people need help? (Consider the list below, and ask God to show you additional areas of service. As you think, try to avoid labeling tasks as "women's work" or "men's work.")

- cooking for a funeral dinner or someone who is incapacitated

- baby-sitting for a harried couple or single parent
- befriending a lonely child
- inviting a newcomer for dinner
- chaperoning a youth retreat
- typing a paper for a student
- providing transportation
- house cleaning or grocery shopping for someone who is ill or burdened by unusual circumstances
- helping to clean up after a meeting or party
- shoveling snow, raking leaves, or mowing a lawn
- Other _____

What factors tend to prevent you from taking part in these types of "ordinary" service?

5. Take a few minutes to consider the content of the article and your answers to the questions above. Is there anything you sense the Lord might want you to do to serve someone? When will you begin, and what will you do?
