

Customer Service and the Imitation of Christ

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DEDICATION

I am grateful to

Stacie Webster, Kimberly Wells, and Jane Lawson

for taking a chance on an out-of-work professor back in the fall of 2000. This book is dedicated to them and to my coworkers on the Resource Center from 2002 to 2005:

David Ascoli, Sam Flick, Tiffany King, Eileen Lawrence, Natalie Mallory, Kathleen Robins, Rudi Sanchez, Nancy Shue, and our supervisor, Deushawn Moore.

When we were together, it almost didn't seem like work.

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CHAPTER 1: BEATING THE CSR BLUES

Are you a customer service representative (CSR)? So am I. You know what they're saying about us? We're the bad guys. We're an example of what's wrong with the world today. They're saying that we don't care about our clients... that we just want to get them off the phone... that they have to call several times before anyone will help them.

You know what's sad? They're right.

I'm not saying we're bad people. I'm just saying there are a lot of CSRs who fit that description, and it's hard for the rest of us to turn things around. The role we play practically forces us to behave the way the public perceives us. We may have been nice before we took this position, but the job itself lays its own constraints on us.

I believe it's natural for most human beings to want to help others, but once we become CSRs, it's hard to do that consistently.

Let's begin with the positive side of this. If we're in our right minds, most of us want to be helpful. Imagine a mother with several small children stranded on the side of the highway. Black smoke is billowing out of her engine, and her kids are still strapped into their seats. Wouldn't you stop to help? You may not know anything about cars, but wouldn't you at least try to get her children to safety?

Or suppose you're in a restaurant and someone chokes on his meal. Nobody around him knows the Heimlich Maneuver. You just took a class in life-saving techniques two days ago. Would you turn to the person beside you and say, "Please pass the steak sauce"?

We've all heard of cases in which someone died shouting for help and nobody lifted a finger, but those are usually situations involving violence. The bystanders either don't know what to do or are too scared—or too scarred—to pitch in. Under normal circumstances, people sympathize with others in need and offer their assistance eagerly.

In other words, what we CSRs do for a living is a natural thing for human beings to do. Most people want to help others. We ourselves do when we're not at our place of employment. But there are a number of features of customer service work that make it hard for us to do that when we're answering the phones.

Why It's Hard for CSRs to Give Good Service

First, there are so many customers and they come at us so fast that they all blur together in our minds. Some CSRs have contact with hundreds of customers each day. "I spoke with you earlier this week," a client says. "Don't you remember me?" Many of our customers ask the same questions or have the same complaints. We find ourselves repeating stock phrases. Sometimes we hear ourselves talking but our minds are wandering.

Second, many of the people we serve are angry, and they take their anger out on us. Maybe if we had heard about their problem second- or third-hand, we would have been sympathetic. But many customers turn us off immediately by treating us unkindly. They're frustrated, and they want to take their frustration out on somebody. It's natural for them to take it out on us, but it's also natural for us to get defensive or to tell them, "That's not my area. You need to talk to Department X."

Third, we're expected to project a sense of enthusiasm and sympathy even when we don't feel enthusiastic or sympathetic. It's not just putting aside our personal problems and focusing on the customer. Any professional has to do that. But CSRs have to appear cheerful and deeply interested in whatever the customer is saying. "I hate having to be 'on' all the time," one of my coworkers once said.

To complicate matters, there are many times in which we truly aren't interested in the customers' complaints. Perhaps we think they're being petty or demanding. This means we often have to pretend that we care. I once heard about a firm that specializes in training customer service personnel to do precisely that. "The key to good customer service is not to care about the customer," they say. "It's to act like you

care.” So they offer acting lessons! We may smile, but you and I know that there’s a particle of truth to that.

Fourth, all of this takes place under the watchful eyes of quality control managers. It’s their job to critique us. “You forgot to tell the customer to have a nice day,” they say, or: “You missed a perfect opportunity to remind them about our online services.” The problem is, there’s always something more we could’ve said or done. The quality control people are there to point out to us the things that didn’t come naturally at the time—the things we might have said or done in a perfect world. Unfortunately, it’s not a perfect world.

To reinforce the quality mindset, they often give us cute phrases or tag lines that we have to include in our conversations. “Thank you for choosing Bud’s Market. May I interest you in our fine assortment of Peter Piper’s Handpicked Peck of Pickled Peppers?”

Or, “Welcome to the People’s Favorite Bank, Home of Hassle-Free Checking. Would you like to open a Hassle-Free Checking account today? I promise not to hassle you if you open one. Here’s a pen.”

In either case, if we do the natural thing—that is, if just we smile and say hello—we’ll get a poor evaluation. If we get poor evaluations then we won’t get bonuses or promotions, and if it happens enough times we may even be fired. So we have to do the unnatural thing in order to excel in our job.

Fifth, we also have managers telling us to work faster. In call centers there are mounds of statistics showing the average length of our calls, our average wrap-up time after each call, the number of calls we take per day, and so on. And we’re constantly pressured to improve these scores—to shorten the length of time we spend on each client.

On one side, then, we have the quality control people marking us down for neglecting anything we might have said, and on the other side we have managers urging us to serve each client faster. Sometimes we get both messages from the same manager.

Put it all together and it’s easy to see why our natural inclination to help others doesn’t carry over into our job. We talk to other human beings all day and yet we’re expected to relate to them in unnatural ways: to repeat canned phrases, to use the customer’s name at least twice during each conversation, to “put a smile in our voice,” and a host of other things that interfere with our natural desire to help others. And our customers can tell.

Sixth—and perhaps most importantly—there are a lot of people in this business who don’t want to be here. Many CSRs are college students studying to enter a different career after graduation. Others have been in customer service for years because it’s the only work they can find. It’s rare to meet frontline CSRs who love what they do. For the average Joe Shmoe, it’s just a job.

Granted, this is not the only field that suffers from this problem. Lots of people devote their time and energy to work that means nothing to them. That’s not something peculiar to us CSRs. But customer service work brings us in direct contact with people who need us to care. So we either have to learn to care or else we have to put on a good show. Of course, there’s a third alternative: to give poor service. And judging from statistics, that’s the option of choice for many CSRs.

Managers do what they can. They pay outside companies a lot of money to survey us in hopes of discovering ways to motivate us. Then they meet with us to discuss the survey findings and they chart out action plans that are supposed to increase our job satisfaction. But if we CSRs aren’t internally-motivated, then nothing management does will change how we feel. Although it may sound like I’m being a defeatist, it’s true. If you’re a CSR and you view customer service as just a job, then there’s nothing management can do to make you feel differently. But I can tell you from experience that there is something God can do.

Opportunity Knocks

I have a PhD in Philosophy. I love teaching, and for a few years after I earned my doctorate I was lucky enough to be in the classroom full-time. But I couldn’t get a tenure track position. Competition was fierce, and I wasn’t part of a brand-name graduate program. I’m proud to say that I got my degree from

Saint Louis University, a fine Jesuit school. But name recognition is everything in the academic world, and I was competing against applicants from Princeton and Harvard. (It didn't help that I was a maverick and that my philosophical project was highly unusual. But we won't go into that right now.) To support my family, I went back to the field I had been in before graduate school: I began working in a customer service call center by day and I taught college courses at night.

It wasn't what I wanted. But I was a disciple of Jesus Christ, and as I sought divine direction, I began to understand some things.

First, I realized that I was back in customer service for reasons beyond my control, and I believed that something as important as that doesn't happen by accident. Somehow in the scheme of things, it mattered that I was here doing this. I therefore accepted it as part of my calling, at least for the present. I hoped to return to full-time teaching later, but for right now I was determined to learn what I was called to do in this place and to do it.

Second, I began to see that customer service was an ideal venue for practicing my faith. Perhaps you've heard of the great Christian classic by Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*. Maybe you've even read it. But have you ever noticed that our line of work provides unique opportunities for practicing it? No other profession offers quite so many situations in which we must turn the other cheek or go the second mile. Few other jobs provide so many chances to help people in concrete ways or to move mountains on a daily basis. And if this job is temporary and we do something else for a living later on, no other profession will better prepare us to go forth and serve.

I accepted the challenge and it made all the difference. I discovered that the life of a CSR can be more than just a job: it can be a holy calling. I soon demonstrated that I was good at soothing angry customers and especially at solving their problems. I made friends easily with people in other departments and, relying on that network of relationships, I was able to get things done for my clients. Before I had completed my first twelve months, my department named me "CSR of the Year." I was chosen to mentor new employees and was put on a committee dedicated to improving CSR quality.

I had stumbled back into the CSR role at the lowest point of my life, but it turned out to be exactly what I needed. I was discovering a new kind of spirituality: I was practicing the imitation of Christ by means of customer service! It saved me from a life of despair and, somewhat to my surprise, turned me into an effective CSR.

This book contains the meditations that have helped me to beat the CSR blues. No, this wasn't a career choice for me, but I have been cheered by a shimmering vision of what Christ wants me to do in my workplace. As I have tried to imitate him under these conditions, I have found a certain measure of peace—and sometimes even exhilaration—in being a CSR. In the pages ahead, I hope to communicate that vision to you.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you experienced any of the frustrating aspects of customer service work described in this chapter? Are there others that weren't mentioned?

2. As a customer, have you yourself experienced poor customer service? As a CSR, can you understand what went wrong? If you were the CSR in that situation, how would you have handled it differently?

3. What qualities do you think a good CSR should have?

4. Suppose that managers all over the world made their CSRs take acting lessons, and we all became really good at pretending that we cared. Now imagine that CSRs all over the world were to begin imitating Christ and caring deeply about their customers. Which scenario would increase the level of service worldwide? Which one would improve the quality of life for CSRs?

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CHAPTER 2: SERVICE WITH A SMILE

It's the start of our shift. Marie, a friend of ours, comes into the office with her shoulders drooping, shuffling her feet. She plops down her purse and sighs heavily. "Oh, God," she moans. "Get me through another day."

People around her chuckle. This is Marie's morning mantra. We laugh, but it's also rather sad. Marie is a Christian. She keeps a Bible at her position and quotes from it frequently, but she lives like a victim, not a victor. To talk with her, you wouldn't know that she has direct access to the King of Kings.

Nor are we in a position to criticize her. As Christians, we should stand with shoulders back, head high in the air. Each day should be an adventure. And yet we, too, often feel that it's a struggle just to get through the workday. We're followers of the risen Christ. Can't we do better than that?

A study of the life of Christ suggests that we can. He shows us what it means to live powerful lives that are focused on others, not on ourselves. From him we can learn to face each new day with a sense of expectation.

Our first order of business is to want to serve our customers. This is where the imitation of Christ begins. In this regard, I have been especially inspired by the stories told in Matthew 8:1-4, 14-17. (The same stories are repeated, with some variation in the details, in Mark 1:32-42; Luke 5:12-16; and Luke 4:38-44.) These stories show Jesus on the lookout for people to whom he can minister. He seems genuinely enthusiastic about serving.

Not So Close

We can hear it in his voice as he replies to a man stricken with leprosy. We have to put ourselves in Jesus' place to appreciate this. Imagine someone coming toward us whose skin has a vile disease, and it's highly contagious.

How do you think you would react? The natural thing would be to back away quickly. Most of us would probably do it without even thinking.

But if we were living in New Testament times, there's another reason why we would recoil at the sight of this man. Not only does he have a contagious disease, but our own scriptures condemn him for approaching us. Leviticus 13:45-46 requires those with leprosy to live outside the city, either alone or with other lepers. On their way out of town, they must warn those around them by shouting, "Unclean! Unclean!" This isn't just for sanitary reasons; a leper is considered unclean spiritually as well as physically. Whoever comes in contact with a leper—even unknowingly—also becomes unclean before God: "guilty," the law of Moses says (Leviticus 5:2-3).

We might shrug and say, "Yes, but Christ is going to heal him." But in the Old Testament, the prophet Elisha wouldn't even come out of his house to heal the leper Naaman (II Kings 5). Naaman was a high-ranking Syrian dignitary who was carrying a letter of introduction from his king. But Elisha wouldn't budge, even though Naaman was insulted by his refusal to talk to him face-to-face. Elisha sent out a messenger to tell Naaman what he had to do to be healed. Naaman was outraged. "Why doesn't he come out and wave his hands over me!" Naaman demanded. But Elisha wouldn't do it.

Of course, Elisha was probably trying to humble Naaman, who had arrived with his entourage expecting VIP treatment. But the law of Moses does say quite clearly that the Israelites are not to have any close contact with unclean people. And lepers are definitely unclean people, especially foreign lepers. Naaman was healed, but he didn't encounter the prophet in person; not until after he had been healed.

Here, then, is this vile leper coming right up to Jesus. He falls down at Christ's feet, and the damage is done. The Law of Moses says that he has defiled Jesus just by coming close to him. Again, if we were in Christ's place, both our natural inclinations and our religious upbringing would compel us to flee from the man, shouting imprecations at him over our shoulders.

But Jesus steps toward him.

The leper falls on his face before Jesus and cries, “If you want to, you can make me clean.”

Jesus replies, “I want to!”

Then he reaches out and touches him. This is totally unnecessary. Christ often heals people without making physical contact. Sometimes he heals people who are on the other side of town (Luke 7:1-10; Mark 7:24-30). He doesn’t have to touch the leper. He does it because he wants to.

“Be made clean!” he commands. And the man is healed.

“I want to!” Now *that* would make a great CSR mantra: “I *want* to help. I *want* to serve.” Some of us might have grumbled, “Oh, all right. Be made clean, then.” Or we might have been tempted to say, “You know, technically I shouldn’t be doing this, but as a one-time courtesy. . .”

No. He says, “I want to!” Mark’s gospel adds that he is “moved with compassion” (Mark 1:41, KJV). And it shows.

Notice that, when it’s all over, the man doesn’t even do what Jesus asks him to do. According to Leviticus 13, he’s supposed to present himself to a priest for a physical inspection. He mustn’t stop to see anyone else on the way. He must have a priest declare him clean and attest that he’s eligible to live in town again. After that, he can do whatever he wants.

Biblical scholars also believe that Christ wants the man to help him keep the so-called “Messianic Secret.” In other words, he doesn’t want word to get out just yet that he’s the Messiah. So, for both of these reasons, he charges the man not to tell anyone what has just happened to him. He must go and show himself to a priest. The man disobeys him. He’s so excited, he runs around town telling everyone that Jesus has healed him. As a result, according to Mark’s version of the story, the town gets worked up into such a frenzy that Jesus has to leave (Mark 1:45). But such disregard for his wishes doesn’t douse Christ’s enthusiasm. He doesn’t walk away muttering, “That’s the last time I’ll stick my neck out for anybody.” He continues to reach out to those in need.

A Long Night and an Early Morning

It ends up being quite a day. He heals a centurion’s servant and Peter’s mother-in-law, but there are also many others to whom he ministers, long into the night. The entire town comes to his door. Sick and needy people visit him all evening, and he heals every one of them (Luke 4:40). Referring to a prophecy from Isaiah 53:4, Matthew describes him as taking people’s infirmities upon himself (Matthew 8:17). He gets deeply and personally involved.

It’s a long day. But we don’t see him shooing people away or complaining about the lateness of the hour. He takes time to help and heal people.

The next morning, long before daybreak, he rises and finds a solitary place in which to pray (Mark 1:35). We aren’t told what he’s praying about, but we can guess, based on his remarks afterwards. He’s praying about others, and about what he can do for them. He emerges from the session decisive and enthusiastic about the course his ministry must take. His disciples find him and tell him everyone in town is looking for him, but he replies that it’s time to move on to other cities. There are people in those places who need his ministry, too.

Taken all together, these episodes show Christ focusing on other people and enthusiastic about ministering to them. He doesn’t just help them; he wants to help them. He works late into the night, then gets up early the next morning to meet with his Father to consider ways to help people better.

What It’s Like to be a Customer

Even though you and I do customer service for a living, we’re also customers ourselves. And we know how hard it is to get good help.

Suppose we have a complaint about a product or service. We call the company’s 800 number and the person who answers the call couldn’t care less. He just tries to get us off the phone as quickly as he can.

We call back and a lady comes on the line with a confrontational attitude. She seems to be on a tight schedule and doesn't have time to listen to us. Without even asking about the details of our problem, she rattles off something about company policy. We keep trying to interrupt but she doesn't give us a chance. The next thing we know, we're listening to a dial tone.

Now we're mad. We call back and demand to speak to someone who can help us. We get passed around from one extension to another. "That's not my department," several people tell us, but none of them can identify the person to whom we should be talking. We're thinking about hiring a lawyer and taking it all the way to the Supreme Court if necessary.

And then. . .

We hear a friendly voice. She introduces herself and asks detailed questions about our problem. She doesn't hurry us. She seems truly sorry about the trouble we're having, and she regrets that we've been transferred so many times. Best of all, she takes personal responsibility for helping us resolve our problem. She gives us her full name and phone number and invites us to call her back any time we wish, but she promises to call us back with an update by 5 P.M. today.

When we hang up the phone, we're encouraged. Unfortunately, it's not unusual to be faced with apathy and even antagonism from the very people who are supposed to be serving us. But this woman's attitude is unusual. She sounds like she will help us, but more importantly, she sounds like she wants to do so. That's rare.

Do You Want To?

Now let's put our customer service hats back on. We should ask ourselves the following question, being as honest as possible:

If a customer in the situation I just described were to be transferred to us, what would they say about us afterwards? Would they compare us to the apathetic representative who first answered the phone? Would they say that we were like the confrontational rep? Would they group us with the long list of people who said they couldn't do anything? Or would they say that we were like the last person—the one who genuinely wanted to help?

For most of us, it probably depends on the day. Sometimes we live up to our highest ideals, while other times we fall short. But the question you and I need to think about is simply this: Do we want to help? Circumstances may prevent us from being helpful in every customer interaction. But wanting to help is the key. If we want to, then we can work on overcoming the obstacles to doing so. Lack of desire is the biggest hurdle.

I once told a friend and coworker about my vision of customer service as the imitation of Christ. "Ugh!" she replied. "I already know how to be servile. Why would I want to make a practice of it?" But we're not talking about being servile. We're talking about becoming like Jesus. Although he was always serving, he was never servile. I think about him smiling, stepping forward eagerly, and saying to unlovely people, "I want to help!" And that makes me want to do the same. He isn't here right now—not physically, anyway—but I am. And if I can do anything at this moment to share his influence and make the world a little bit more like his kind of world, I want to do it.

Someone may respond, "Yes, but that's not the same thing as being a good CSR. If I work in a grocery store and a customer yells at me because we're out of prune juice, I don't see that as an example of spreading Christ's influence."

But the fact is, we do represent him under just such circumstances. Maybe it would be more dramatic to save a life or offer spiritual advice, but you and I are stuck with prune juice problems. Those are the kinds of needs that come our way. If we don't like that, we can always change professions, but for as long as we work in customer service, those are the kinds of problems that we'll be expected to solve.

This is where the imitation of Christ begins. If we can't at least want to help others, then we'll have to abandon the idea of imitating him. But to put the matter more positively, we don't have to despair of imitating him just because we aren't CSR superstars. So long as we really want to help the people who come to us with their problems, we're on the right track.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Why do you suppose Christ was so eager to heal the leper in the story?
2. Do you think it's possible for us as CSRs to adopt Christ's attitude toward those who approach us? What difference would it make in our work if we could do this?
3. Have you ever tried praying to be helpful before you started your shift? Could you tell whether your prayer was answered?
4. Do you recognize the significance of "prune juice problems"? Can you see that you are representing Jesus when problems like these arise? Or do you wish that you could address more dramatic issues?

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CHAPTER 3: MOVING MOUNTAINS

Let's return to the CSR in the previous chapter who promised to call us back by 5 P.M. Consider two scenarios, each of which gives us an alternative description of this woman:

Scenario 1: She calls us back later that afternoon as promised, but she has bad news. Although she has spent the entire day working on our problem, she has been unable to resolve it for us. Resolution must come from the operations area, and they refuse to help. She has spoken with the vice president in charge of operations, and he insists that nothing can be done. We ask to speak to the VP ourselves, but she tells us the operations area doesn't take calls from customers. No matter what we suggest, she says she has tried it herself and failed. She sounds terribly frustrated. We can tell she really does care. But she simply cannot help us.

Scenario 2: She calls us back later that afternoon as promised. She apologizes again for the fact that we have been inconvenienced and tells us that she has resolved the problem. As she gives us the details, we're not only satisfied but surprisingly pleased. She has done what she said she would do, and more.

If you were the customer, which of these two women would you rather have working on your case? Wouldn't it be the lady described in Scenario 2?

I'm not going back on what I said in the previous chapter. As customers, we do want CSRs who are eager to help us. But wanting to help us is not enough. Effective customer service people should actually be able to help. If they can't, then it really doesn't matter how badly they want to do so. With a sigh, we'll ask to speak to someone who can help us.

As you and I know firsthand, however, that's one of the difficult things about doing customer service work. In fact, that's another reason why so many of us lose our natural desire to help our customers. Again and again we try to do the right thing but fail. The people who have the authority to solve the problem are often unable or unwilling to do anything about it. Disappointed, we eventually stop making promises we know we can't keep. What seems to the customer like a lack of interest is actually a lack of faith—in the system, that is. We don't believe we can help, so we don't try.

The point I want to emphasize is that this truly is a lack of faith. Yes, we've tried and failed. But most of us can't say we've tried everything. Most of us haven't tried it Jesus' way.

Christ as a Doer of the Impossible

The people who meet Christ in the New Testament gospels are amazed at his power. They ask, "What sort of man is this, that even the wind and sea obey him?" (Matthew 8:27). On another occasion, the people "were all amazed, and kept saying to one another, 'What kind of utterance is this? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits, and out they come!'" (Luke 4:36). People are filled with wonder at the seemingly-impossible things he is able to do.

Again: "And they were astonished beyond measure, saying, 'He has done everything well; he even makes the deaf to hear and the mute to speak'" (Mark 7:37). He turns water into wine, stills a tempest, and feeds thousands of people from the contents of a little boy's lunchbox. "We have never seen anything like this!" people say—and they're right (Mark 2:12).

But it's not supposed to stop with him. He tells his disciples that what he does, they should do, too:

Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father. I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it (John 14:12-14).

He lists a variety of powers that his followers will be granted (Mark 16:17-18). He sends out his closest disciples with this mandate: “Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons” (Matthew 10:8).

Miracles as the Norm

But the disciples are just as amazed as the people in the crowd. Jesus repeatedly expresses dismay at his disciples’ lack of faith. “Do you not yet understand?” (Mark 8:21).

The gospels describe a head-on clash between life as we know it and life as Christ says it ought to be. The disciples are shocked when he walks on water. They can’t imagine how he can feed thousands of people in the desert. They’re amazed at his power just as we would be amazed today if someone were to perform such feats like these. To us, such things would be considered extraordinary.

But Christ doesn’t share this assessment. He calls his disciples “hard of heart” and “slow to understand.” He shakes his head and says, “O ye of little faith.” What the disciples consider extraordinary, Christ considers the norm. He represents life as it ought to be, and he doesn’t understand why we would be willing to live any other way. He doesn’t say, “I know this is all quite incredible, but you’ve got to try to believe.” Instead, he says, “Repent and believe.”

The New Testament gospels do not present us only with a gentle sage who teaches people to be kind to each other. Nor do they portray Christ merely as the savior of souls. The gospels also describe Christ as One who has come to make the world a better place. He isn’t timid about using his power to help others, and he has little patience for people who don’t share his sense of mission.

While everyone around him marvels at his power, he marvels at people’s lack of faith. In fact, his own ability to perform miracles depends greatly on the faith of his beneficiaries. Sometimes he is unable to do much, because people don’t believe. He finds this incredible.

What This Means for Us

Have you ever wondered what kinds of miracles you and I, as followers of Christ, are expected to perform today? What opportunities do we have to continue Christ’s work of blessing and caring in this day and time? I don’t know about other people, but we CSRs are often asked to perform miracles. Here’s what it sounds like when that happens:

I’ve talked to five people and none of them could help me. Can you?

That’s *our* invitation to work wonders. Nobody has ever approached me asking to be healed, but people ask me to perform customer service miracles every day. When that happens, I can’t just shrug and say, “I’m not a miracle worker.” As a follower of Jesus, I don’t have that luxury. I may not be out to save the world but Jesus is, and his plan includes me. He’ll never hold it against me that I didn’t heal anybody, but he does expect me to perform the kinds of miracles that are appropriate within my own vocation. And for me, that means solving the seemingly-impossible problems that my customers bring my way.

It comes down to this. I said in the last chapter that the CSR’s imitation of Christ begins with our willingness to help others as Christ himself did. But this is the next step: any CSR who wants to imitate Christ must believe in miracles. More than that: we must rely on miracles, expecting that we will be empowered to do what’s right for our customers even when huge obstacles stand in the way. If God has called us to be in this place at this time, then God will help us to do what’s right. And if that means that a mountain has to be moved, then you and I are now in the mountain-moving business. Say your prayers and grab a shovel.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. As long as we care about the customer, what does it matter if we're unable to help?
2. Why does Christ expect us to believe in the seemingly-impossible? What's so virtuous about exercising faith?
3. Someone might object that the miracles in the New Testament gospels have nothing to do with our performance of our daily work. What do you think? Are we responsible for carrying on Christ's works of wonder? And if so, is our employment one of the means by which we're expected to do it?
4. Perhaps you've come up against brick walls before as a CSR. Can you describe the obstacles you faced? What do you think could have been done about them?

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CHAPTER 4: A NEW KIND OF LISTENING

Our task, then, is not only to be kind and caring but to move mountains in Jesus' name. If you've been a CSR for very long, however, then you know how hard it can be to get things done for your customers. It's one thing to believe in moving mountains and quite another thing to move them. How do we get started?

The answer might surprise you. For CSRs who practice the imitation of Christ, the moving of mountains begins with a new kind of listening, a kind they didn't teach us in CSR training.

What They Taught Us

Our trainers may have called it Active Listening, but let's be honest. "Active Listening" (also called "Empathic Listening") was originally developed for use in counseling and conflict resolution. It's a powerful tool that helps us put aside our prejudices and really hear what other people are saying, even if they're saying things we don't want to hear. True "Active Listening" is all about letting the other person talk, and when we finally get our chance, we're supposed to mirror back what we hear them saying.

What they taught us in CSR training wasn't anything like that. We work in a fast-paced environment, and there's no time for heart-to-heart discussions. And why should there be? The goal of Active Listening is to open us up to a much deeper level of interaction than we're used to. Why would we want to do that in a commercial environment? So let's stop pretending that CSRs engage in Active Listening. It would be more accurate to say that we were taught to practice "the CSR Conversation."

When we have CSR Conversations, we don't just passively absorb what our customers say. Instead, we maintain control of the discussion, guiding our clients as quickly as possible to the point at issue and keeping them on the subject if they begin to stray. We ask probing questions to discover if our clients forgot to tell us anything important. Once we have all the information we need, we answer their questions or solve their problems. Then we bring the conversation to a polite but timely close so that we can turn our attention to the next customer. Trainers like to call this "Active Listening" because we do listen to our customers, but not passively. From our first words of greeting, we're taking action—trying to get at the heart of the problem and solving it.

The CSR Conversation has a number of good features. It provides focus to our customer encounters rather than letting them meander. It encourages us to anticipate our clients' needs and equips us with questions to help clarify what we're being asked to do. It prompts us to notice when our customers appear hesitant or confused about what we have told them, or to recognize that they have other questions they don't know how to put into words.

All of this is great. In fact, we need to be at least this attentive to our customers if we want to imitate Christ, for he, too, asks probing questions even when he already knows the answers. For example, on Resurrection Sunday two of his followers leave Jerusalem all upset about the rumors that he's alive (Luke 24:13-32). As they walk along the road out of the city, they have an animated discussion and Jesus—the very person they're talking about—quietly joins them.

He doesn't clear his throat and interrupt: "Hell-o-o-o-o! It's me. Don't you get it?" Instead, he asks them what they're talking about.

They get annoyed at him, because they think he's out of the loop. "You must be the only one in town who doesn't know what's going on," they tell him.

He shrugs. "So? What's going on?" (I'm paraphrasing here, in case you're wondering.)

And out it comes: the story of Christ's death and resurrection and their feelings about it all. Jesus lets them talk it out, and only then does he reason with them. He still doesn't tell them who he is, because they need some time to work through it. He could say, "Look. I'm alive. See? Get over it. Next!" But he takes time to talk with them. He guides them step-by-step.

So the CSR Conversation has at least this much going for it. Even though it's designed for a commercial environment, it does encourage us to be like Jesus to that extent. Imitating Christ requires that we give our customers at least the level of attention that a good CSR Conversation dictates.

But, as I said in the previous chapter, imitating Christ also means moving mountains when necessary. And in order to do that, we need to practice a new kind of listening. The CSR Conversation is a two-way discussion, but if we want to imitate Christ, we've got to develop the art of the Three-Way.

Say What?

Let's forget that we're CSRs for a moment. If we want to be like Christ, then we must learn to receive direction from God. Christ himself was (to put it mildly) extremely good at doing what his Father wanted. "[N]ot my will, but yours be done," he said (Luke 22:42), "not what I want, but what you want" (Mark 14:36). And he encouraged his disciples to make that wish the focus of their daily prayer life: "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10 KJV).

But how do we find out what God wants from us?

"Listen!" Jesus replies (Mark 4:3). And his Father agrees: "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" (Matthew 17:5). Christ says many times: "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9,23; Matthew 11:15; 13:9,43; Luke 8:8; 14:35).

These, of course, are metaphors. If we try to take them literally, sitting very still with our eyes closed, something like this might result: we'll hear a barking dog, a distant siren, the rustling of a breeze through the trees, children playing... and then the sound of our own snoring. That's not what he means when he says, "Listen."

First of all, he means to take his teachings very seriously. Don't just frame them and hang them on your wall. Study them. Pray to understand them. Discuss them with other disciples. Think long and hard about them. And most importantly, do them. "Pay attention to what you hear," Christ says, and he adds: "the measure you give will be the measure you get, and still more will be given to you" (Mark 4:24). If we do what he teaches us, we'll get better at listening.

"Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock," says the Master. "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand" (Matthew 7:24, 26). This metaphor about "hearing" therefore means to learn Jesus' teachings and to do them.

The second part should come naturally. If we're studying his sayings and trying to act on them, then we'll automatically ask, "How do they apply to this situation?" That's where the metaphor of listening becomes especially relevant, because it's not often clear how Christ's general principles apply to any one particular case. So we pray for specific guidance and we watch for clues, then we do what we think God is asking us to do in each case. Will we make mistakes? Absolutely! But we keep trying, because that's what it means to be an imitator of Christ. "My sheep hear my voice," he says (John 10:27). The message may get a little garbled sometimes, but we keep listening and doing our best to follow.

Jesus has complete confidence in us, despite our mistakes. When he says, "Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear," he's affirming that God *is* trying to tell us something and that we *can* receive God's message if we tune our ears (by which he actually means our minds and hearts).

Of course, all of this listening and doing takes place amidst our daily activities. We don't listen for God just in the morning before we start our day, or kneeling beside our bed at night. We're supposed to be listening and watching for God's messages to us throughout the day and responding to them as we receive them on-the-fly. The New Testament tells us to "pray without ceasing... for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (I Thessalonians 5:17-18). In moments of quiet meditation we practice our ability to listen without distractions, but we're also expected to keep listening even when we're doing other things. I'm not saying it's easy, but it is part of being his disciple.

This means we must listen for God's voice even when we're in the middle of a conversation. In fact, we must get into the habit of considering all of our conversations Three-Ways. While we talk with

another person—no matter what it’s about—we should continue to be attentive to the voice of God as well. Sometimes we’ll discover God giving us suggestions about how to reply. Other times we may find that God is speaking to us through that person. It can take many shapes and forms, but all two-way interactions are really Three-Ways for us, because everything we do and say is part of our lifelong communication with God.

The Three-Way CSR Conversation

Now we’re ready to examine how this affects us in our roles as CSRs. What difference would it make if we were deliberate about having Three-Way *CSR* Conversations?

First, it would change our perspective. Especially if we work in a call center, we’re constantly aware that a Quality Manager may be monitoring us. We expend a lot of energy trying to get a good score: using the customer’s name the required number of times, following the appropriate script, and so on. But if we realize that all of our customer interactions are Three-Ways, then that means that Somebody Else is listening, too. Suddenly it’s about more than just getting a good score. Now the focus is on serving people in Jesus’ name. While we acknowledge our responsibility to use company scripting, we become intent on doing more than that. We aim to bless and help others: something the script only hints at.

Second, a Three-Way CSR Conversation puts us in touch with resources that a two-way does not. A Three-Way isn’t just a conversation—it’s a prayer. We’re waiting on our customers and praying for them, all at the same time. Talk about multi-tasking! In effect, we’re asking for God’s blessing on our customers and making ourselves available as the vehicle through which that blessing can come. We do what we can, but sometimes that’s not enough. We may not have the answers or the right tools, but in a Three-Way we reach out to Someone whose knowledge and power exceed our own.

Third, a Three-Way slowly transforms us into disciples of the risen Christ. For example, any Three-Way Conversation (whether on or off the job) requires us to have the highest respect for others, to want the best for them, to listen without judging, and so on. A Three-Way is a constant reminder to live by Jesus’ teachings, because we’re talking to God while we’re conversing with others. The neat thing about a Three-Way CSR conversation is that we’re practicing our faith through our daily work. We’re becoming the kind of people God wants us to be precisely by engaging in the Three-Way CSR Conversation, because we’re doing what we’re paid to do—but we’re doing it with God.

In all these respects, a Three-Way CSR Conversation is quite different from the way we normally talk to our customers. It’s our attempt at hearing God’s call and heeding it even in the gritty world of commercial transactions. In the next few chapters I’ll explain in more detail how it works, but for now I want to emphasize this: we can’t imitate Christ without the Spirit’s help. We open ourselves up to that help by praying about everything, even while it’s happening. We don’t just live for Christ—we live with him. The Three-Way CSR Conversation is how we do that.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you think my description of “The CSR Conversation” is accurate? Is that how you were trained to speak to your customers? Have you modified the technique in ways that suit your personality? Give examples.
2. Do you agree that something more than the CSR Conversation is needed if we’re going to imitate Christ on the job? Why or why not?
3. You may not have referred to it as a Three-Way, but have you tried to discern the will of God in concrete situations? Can you identify moments when you believe you were successful? What do you base your belief on?
4. Do you agree that a Three-Way CSR Conversation would be quite different from the way we CSRs normally do our jobs? Why or why not?

CHAPTER 5: CSR... OR JUDGE AND JURY?

I said in the previous chapter that a Three-Way CSR Conversation makes us strive to follow Jesus' teachings, and one of those teachings is not to judge others. "Do not judge," Christ says, "and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6:37). "For with the judgment you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get" (Matthew 7:2). This is not optional. It's one of the main things we must attend to in our imitation of Christ. If we're communing with God throughout our day, then we'll find ourselves constantly on guard against condemning those who come to us for help.

But this will be very different from what we're used to doing, because judging is a prime occupational hazard for CSRs. Many of us do it all the time and don't even realize it. Do you disagree? Let me phrase it another way. We CSRs have a lot of pet peeves. Customers often rub us the wrong way. So we service them and then, after they're gone, we turn to our coworkers and vent. We don't think of it as judging, of course. We think we're just letting off steam. But it amounts to the same thing. I'll give you some examples.

Stupid Questions

We all know the saying, "There are no stupid questions," but whoever it was who said that, he must not have been a CSR. If you've been in this business for very long, you've probably heard a lot of good candidates for "Dumbest Question Ever." I'm tempted to leave the next few pages blank and let you write in your favorites. People say the darnedest things, and for some reason they tend to reserve the best ones for us.

What do we do when we're asked a stupid question? It depends on the CSR. Some of us answer it as courteously we can, trying not to laugh. Others can't help but give a withering reply. But regardless of how we respond, it's natural for us to turn to our coworkers afterwards and share the experience with them. If it's funny, we laugh. If it's not, we shake our heads in disgust. Either way, we're agreed on one thing: you and I are like Einstein compared to that loser.

This is perfectly understandable behavior. It's our way of getting through the day. But let's be honest: whenever we do that, we're commenting on the level of intelligence of our customers. We're not just repeating the question; we're making a blanket judgment about the person who asked it. "How could anyone be that dumb?" we ask.

I don't mean to be a killjoy, but if we're serious about imitating Christ then we should be troubled whenever we catch ourselves talking like that. Jesus' remark about this kind of behavior is chilling:

You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, "You shall not murder"; and "whoever murders shall be liable to judgment." But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, "You fool," you will be liable to the hell of fire (Matthew 5:21-22).

Is it just me, or do you think he's got strong views on this subject?

Let's forget about hellfire. If we're engaged in a Three-Way CSR Conversation and somebody asks us what sounds like a stupid question, here's what ought to happen. We should feel prompted by the Spirit to ask ourselves, "Is this person a fool?" And the right answer, according to Jesus, would be No. The obvious next question should be, "Then why is he asking such a stupid question?" There are several possible reasons:

Maybe he's tired, stressed, or in a hurry, and he's not saying exactly what he means. Let's see how we can help him.

Or perhaps he's not very articulate. He messes up his words all the time. So sue him.

Or he could be asking about something we've always taken for granted and never thought to inquire about. The question seems stupid because it hasn't occurred to us before.

Or it could be that he's missing something that we think should be obvious. For example, he wants to know where the nearest copier is, and it's right behind him. Or he gets in the wrong line even though we think the lines are clearly marked. Or he pushes and pushes on the door that says, "Use other door." Those kinds of things are no-brainers for us because they're part of our everyday landscape, but people who are new to our environment can easily make such mistakes. It's funny to us because we can see it coming, but you and I would make similar mistakes if we were on somebody else's turf. It happens to the best of us.

There may be a number of good reasons why this person is asking what sounds like a dumb question. A Three-Way CSR Conversation invites us to discover those reasons. When we do, then we'll realize that people are a lot smarter than they seem. We just have to give them a chance.

Barriers to Communication

"Foreign accents!" a CSR mutters, shaking her head. But what she's thinking is: "Why don't you learn to speak English, you [bleeping] foreigner!" She isn't just complaining about how hard it is to understand the customer. She's voicing a judgment about him. Yes, it's frustrating when language barriers prevent us from understanding our clients, but that's not what's happening here. This CSR is implying that there's something morally blameworthy about a person having an accent. She's holding it against him that he came to this country from somewhere else.

But this criticism cuts both ways. One of the biggest gripes about customer service call centers these days is that they're staffed by people with accents. I get that a lot from my customers. "Whew," they say. "Thank God I got somebody who speaks English." And the complaint is fueled by reports that a lot of CSR jobs have been exported overseas. As soon as customers hear a CSR with a foreign accent, they get angry, assuming that their call has been transferred halfway around the world. They don't seem to realize how many "foreigners" are here in the United States, working as CSRs right along with the rest of us natural-born citizens.

Somebody needs to stop this ignorance, and you and I are prime candidates. We, at least, must never pass judgment on our callers because they don't speak like we do. And if we forget from time to time, the Spirit of God will remind us if we're practicing a lively Three-Way.

"Foreign accents!"

[Ahem.] Remember me?

"Oops. Sorry, Lord."

After all, communication across language barriers is part of the job of an imitator of Christ. As the second chapter of Acts shows us, the Holy Spirit has a long history of bridging such gaps.

Look again at the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). One of Christ's opponents asks him how to inherit eternal life, and Christ turns the question back on the questioner. The man says that two commandments are most important: to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself. "And who is my neighbor?" the man asks him. To answer this question, Jesus tells the story of the Samaritan who helped a Jewish person in an emergency. The Jews have a lot of good reasons to hate the Samaritans, but Jesus tells this story on purpose. "Go and do likewise," he says. If you're going to be an imitator of Christ, then from now on you're everybody's neighbor. Stop griping about their accents. Stop sneering at the color of their skin. The Good Samaritan overlooked such distinctions. "Go and do likewise."

But accents aren't the only barrier to communication. Some customers mumble, others screech. Some talk too fast, others too slow. We're never happy. Remember, however, that these are the kinds of things customers dislike about us, too. We may be quick to pick up on their quirks, but they pick up on ours just as much.

Speaker phones are another pet peeve of CSRs who work in call centers. Customers don't realize it, but it's hard for us to hear them when they use a speaker phone. In some call centers, it's against

department policy to carry on a conversation with a client under those circumstances. But our irritation goes way beyond what's warranted. We tend to get mad at people just for doing it.

What we say is: "Can you please take me off speaker phone?"

What we mean is: "Take me off speaker, you idiot!"

It's all the same thing, whether they have an accent or a speech impediment, whether they have us on speaker or we have a bad phone connection. One way or the other, the customer is inconveniencing us, and we don't like to be inconvenienced. So what do we do? We get mad at the customer. But a Three-Way CSR Conversation helps us to get over it.

Special Requests

You're a checker in a supermarket and a customer wants to use two coupons for the same item. You don't think she's allowed to do that, but she points out that there isn't any verbiage on either coupon saying she can't. You've got a long line of customers and they're getting impatient. You're the bad guy no matter what you do. As you page your manager, you shake your head. *Why do they have to make it so difficult?*

Most of us CSRs are not like the employees at Burger King®: special orders do upset us. When customers ask us to do things that are out of the ordinary, we become annoyed. And we have good reason for feeling that way, because our customers are asking us to do things that seem to be outside company guidelines.

Again, let's be honest. When we get special requests, we don't just grumble. We pass judgment on the person making the request. "People always want something for nothing," we say.

If we're having a Three-Way CSR Conversation, however, the Spirit of God just might remind us of Christ's words about a much tougher case: "[I]f anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile" (Matthew 5:41). That sounds like management, doesn't it? They talk glibly about going the second mile for the customer. But it didn't start out as a management slogan. Jesus said it first, and we see him doing it a lot in the gospels.

Christ's disciples are constantly bombarded with special requests. Parents want Jesus to touch their children (Mark 10:13-16). "What, are you kidding?" the disciples reply. "He doesn't have time to admire your babies. Don't you realize who he is?"

They catch a guy they never met before, healing people in the name of Jesus (Mark 9:39-40). "You can't do that!" they tell him. "You're not authorized to use the brand name!"

A woman requests healing for her child, and she's very persistent (Mark 7:24-30). She's not Jewish, though, so they think she has no right to bother the Master. "Lord, this lady won't leave us alone! Can you get rid of her?"

In each case, the disciples have excellent reasons for assuming that the request can't be granted. But in each case, they're wrong.

Sometimes even the crowd gets upset about a special order. Christ is on his way to Jerusalem to die on the cross (Mark 10:46-52). There's an air of solemnity as he makes his way through the city of Jericho. On the outskirts of town, people watch him go. They may not understand what's happening, but they know it's serious. Then some blind beggar finds out that Jesus has passed by, and he starts shouting and creating a fuss. "Wait! Come back! Have mercy on me!"

"Be quiet," people say. "He's got his own problems. Show some respect."

But the blind man yells louder. He's like a customer who just found out there was a big sale and he missed it. He loudly insists on speaking to the manager, but all the other customers just want him to shut up.

Jesus stops. The people sigh with relief and tell the blind man, "All right, it's okay. Go on, he's calling for you."

The blind man feels his way to the front of the crowd and Jesus asks him, "What do you want me to do for you?" And he gives the man what he wants. Jesus isn't put out, even though everybody else is.

Sometimes Christ himself initiates an outrageous request. He has just finished teaching a crowd of thousands, and it's late in the afternoon (Mark 6:35-37). The disciples suggest that they call it a day so the people can get back to town and eat.

"Why don't *you* feed them?" Christ replies.

You can imagine what the disciples say about that!

There are, of course, lots of customers who ask for things they can't have. A lady who's new to our store whines because her neighbor, who shops regularly with us, received something in the mail promising a freebie if she opened an XYZ account. "Why didn't I get the same deal?" she asks. Or a guy in his 30s complains about a product we offer that targets people over 50. "That's age discrimination," he claims. "You have to give me the same benefit."

In cases like these we can't do what they ask, no matter how much they scream and yell about it. But we're so busy bracing ourselves for those kinds of encounters that we tend to play the role of judge and jury first, CSR second. If we're too quick to reject special requests, we may fail to recognize legitimate ones. And that's how customers fall between the cracks, because some of them have real problems but nobody in our company steps up to help.

So . . .

Now do you understand why I said that judging is an occupational hazard for CSRs? If we're not careful, we could easily spend our entire workday griping about our clients. A Three-Way CSR Conversation helps us avoid doing that. It reminds us not to condemn our customers and presents us with positive alternatives to judging them. It's the Holy Spirit's way of guiding us through the difficult terrain of customer service work.

But can a Three-Way help us when we need the greatest help of all? Can it aid us in dealing constructively with our most difficult customers? That will be the subject of the next chapter.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. What's so bad about judging people? Do you agree that it's an occupational hazard for CSRs? Why or why not?
2. What difference would it make if we consciously practiced a Three-Way every time someone asked us a stupid question?
3. Do you believe that the imitation of Christ can help us overcome communication barriers? Are you willing to give it a try?
4. Why do you think Christ's disciples were so quick to reject special requests? And why was Christ so receptive to such requests?

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