

Service - discipline seven in our spiritual formation series

PART 3: SERVICE LEADS TO FLOURISHING



MISSIONAL COMMUNITY OR DNA GROUP DISCUSSION

Read this Overview Together

If giving ourselves away in service is the way of Jesus, then serving others will lead to true flourishing. Yet, many of us hear the invitation to serve and it doesn't sound like good news. We may even be serving faithfully, but our service just feels draining, not life-giving.

After Jesus had served His disciples, washing their feet, He invited them to follow His example and serve each other in the same way: "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (John 13:17) In other words, Jesus knew that giving ourselves away in service to others led to true flourishing...to blessing or to living life as it was meant to be lived. Jesus' invitation to abundant life (John 10:10) and His invitation to follow Him in the way of selfless service are not contradictory. His invitation to experience abundant life goes hand in hand with his invitation to give ourselves away in service.

This is the paradox of Jesus' way. When we seek to keep and preserve our lives (time, energy, resources) in a feeble attempt to obtain life, we end up losing our lives. But when we follow the way of Jesus and lose our lives, giving ourselves freely for His sake, we find abundant life. Jesus says, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matt. 16:25)

True flourishing, or abundant life, is found in the way of Jesus; including the way of selfless service. And when we give ourselves away in service to others, we get to experience blessing, or life as it was meant to be lived.

So, why does service not sound like good news to us? Why do we try to serve and only feel drained and depleted? Not flourishing?

One reason is that service does require real sacrifice. As we learned in the last part, you can't serve others without taking on greater vulnerability, or exposure to meaningful risk... the truth is you may suffer. Service is often hard. To say that service is part of flourishing does not mean that service is not also painful at times. When we give our time, energy, and resources, we do actually give something away. There's a real loss involved. And we must be honest about this loss.

As Jesus approached his death, He asked His Father in the garden if He would take the cup away from Him (the coming suffering He was about to endure) (Luke 22:42). He knew how much it was going to hurt and it wasn't wrong to desire another path. Yet, in the

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Discussion Continued...

end, He said, "not my will but yours be done." As we approach serving others, it may seem hard at times. It's okay in those moments to ask the Father if there's another way. It's okay if you want to avoid suffering. But sometimes, this will be the only way. And the Father lovingly will invite us to trust Him and enter the suffering. In those moments, like Jesus, we must trust the Father's great care for us and say with Jesus: "not my will, but yours be done."

Like Jesus, we must also learn to relinquish our lives to our trustworthy Father and believe that joy and abundance can be found even in suffering. He wants to give us abundant life. Jesus went to the cross "for the joy that was set before Him." (Hebrews 12:2) God may invite us to suffer as we serve others, but He is also inviting us to experience a fullness of joy and life far greater than the life we will give away.

There's another reason you may not be experiencing real flourishing when you serve. Some of us are not serving others out of a secure relationship with the Father, one that is rooted in His deep love for us. Instead we may be serving others out of an insecurity or a need to be needed by others. Or, we may be serving as an attempt to repay a debt we think we owe. This kind of service is not actually true service. Instead, it's actually a kind of pseudo-service that exploits others rather than serves them. This views others and their needs as a way to assuage your guilt or to help you feel affirmed and secure. And this kind of service will only drain you.

Richard Foster writes about "self-righteous service" vs. "true service."¹ Self-righteous service flows out of our attempts to repay a debt or pursue affirmation through serving others. It never leads to flourishing, but only destroys. One way it destroys is that it hurts the relationships you're seeking to serve as you use them instead of loving them. Listen to how Foster contrasts self-righteous service and true service.

SELF-RIGHTEOUS SERVICE

"Self-righteous service comes through human effort. It expends immense amounts of energy calculating and scheming how to render the service."

"Self righteous service requires external rewards. It needs to know that people see and appreciate the effort. It seeks human applause--with proper religious modesty of course."

TRUE SERVICE

"True service comes from a relationship with the divine Other deep inside. We serve out of whispered promptings, divine urgings. Energy is expended but it is not the frantic energy of the flesh."

"True service rests contented in hiddenness. It does not fear the lights and glare of attention, but it does not seek them either. Since it is living out of a new Center of reference, the divine nod of approval is completely sufficient."

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Discussion Continued...

SELF-RIGHTEOUS SERVICE

"Self-righteous service picks and chooses whom to serve."

"Self-righteous service fractures community...it puts others into its debt and becomes one of the most subtle and destructive forms of manipulation known."

TRUE SERVICE

"True service is indiscriminate in its ministry."

"True service builds community. It quietly and unpretentiously goes about caring for the needs of others. It draws, binds, heals, builds."

So, how do we engage in true service that leads to true flourishing?

Right before Jesus stooped to wash His disciples feet, John first tells us what Jesus "knew." Jesus knew who He was, He knew where He was going, He knew all authority had been given to Him. Secure in His identity and purpose, He then gives Himself to serve. He didn't serve us because He wanted to be needed by us or out of some attempt to pay a debt. He served out of a secure relationship with His Father, loved and full of purpose.

When we have received Jesus' love and His unmerited service to us, then we are secure and we know who we are...beloved children of God. This frees us to turn towards those around us and offer our lives freely without expecting anything in return. Instead of needing to be needed or attempting to repay a debt, we have all we need and can give ourselves away. And this allows us to truly flourish as we serve.

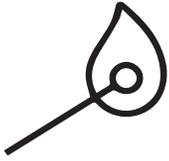
So, do you know who you are? Do you know you are loved? Are you secure in how the Father feels about you? Are you free to give yourself away in hiddenness, without receiving anything in return, because you already have all you need? If so, you are on the path to true flourishing.

Questions for Discussion

1. If you're honest, does serving others sound life-giving, or like flourishing, to you? Why do you think that is?
2. How does pseudo-service, or what Foster calls "self-righteous service" show up in your life? What does that look like for you? It may be helpful to reference Foster's "self-righteous services vs. true service" chart above. Which of those ring most true for you?
3. What motives lay underneath this pseudo-service? If you're not serving out of a secure relationship with the Father, why are you serving?
4. What resistance or hesitation shows up in your heart and mind when thinking about serving others? What do you think is behind that?
5. Take some time to review the individual practice and talk about next steps for pursuing regular service as a rhythm of life together

Individual Practice on next page...

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INDIVIDUAL PRACTICE: SERVING AS A RHYTHM OF LIFE

The goal of this last practice is to identify and take next steps towards a regular rhythm of service outside of the way God has called you to serve in your home and workplace.

Service must be a lifestyle. And as we're formed into servants, we'll learn to respond to people and situations with a servant's heart. But to be formed into this kind of person, we also need to make service a spiritual discipline. Just like the practice of prayer, it needs to be a regular rhythm of our life. We will be formed into servants by actively serving. This was how Jesus approached training His disciples. He invited them to obedience and service and formed them through that process. If service really is a part of true flourishing, then God, in His goodness, will give us ample opportunities to serve others.

Take time to pray and ask God about what regular service looks like in your life right now. Think about the following three categories and see which best describes you (It's okay if you fit into more than one category):

1. You are currently serving regularly and flourishing, even though it is a sacrifice.
2. You are currently serving, but not flourishing at all. It feels very draining.
3. You are not currently serving and need to find a regular rhythm of service.

If the first category describes you best, take some time to thank God for this and ask for His Spirit's help and power as you continue to serve in this way. Ask the Father if He wants you to continue serving in this way or if there's something new He is inviting you into. It may be that He is inviting you to give yourself away in new ways, potentially in leading others to serve.

If the second category describes you best, take some time to ask the Father about why this may be. It may be that you're in a season of significant sacrifice. Be honest about what you are giving away and ask the Father to help you trust Him to give you even more abundant life. It may also be that you are serving in a role that doesn't best fit how God has gifted and made you. Sometimes, we're drained when we try to meet a need we're not equipped or gifted to meet. If this is the case, talk to trusted friends and leaders about how you can begin to transition into a serving role that better fits you.

Take some time to also ask the Father to show you if there is any pseudo-service or "self-righteous service" happening in your life?

- Are you serving because you long to be needed by others?
- Are you serving because you want others' approval and can't say "no" to them?
- Are you serving because you still feel you have a debt to repay to others or to God?

Practice continued on next page...

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Be honest about this with God. Then, go back to what you learned in part 1 of this guide: receive the love of Jesus for you and His service to you. Take some time to meditate on how Jesus has tangibly served you. Ask Him to reveal His deep love for you. Ask Him to help you receive and rest in His love.

If the third category describes you best, consider where you will commit to a regular rhythm of service. Most of us will start with one regular commitment. "Regular" may mean once a month, twice a month, weekly, or something else. The point is not how often you are serving, but that you are making it an intentional rhythm for your life. Start with what you think may be sustainable.

Here are a few ideas for you to pray about:

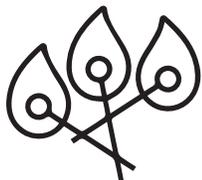
1. Serve your church on Sunday to help make disciples through our weekly gathering. (see www.doxa-church.com/serve for more detail and how to take next steps)
2. Serve by partnering with a local organization or ministry meeting the needs of the vulnerable or underserved.
 - Get involved in a Care Community supporting families who are fostering kids. Text "doxacares" to 24587 to learn more.
 - Partner with an organization like HopeLink or Jubilee Reach meeting the needs of those experiencing issues like food insecurity or homelessness: HopeLink: www.hopelink.org/take-action/volunteer; Jubilee Reach: www.jubileereach.org/volunteer
 - Partner with REST to fight human trafficking in Seattle: www.iwantrest.com/get-involved/volunteer
3. Serve by helping your local neighborhood school. Get involved with the PTA or with your school's volunteer or mentoring program.

What next step will you take towards establishing a regular rhythm of service? What step can you take this week? Maybe it's applying to serve on a Sunday serve team. Or, maybe it's reaching out to a local ministry, non-profit, or school to start the volunteer process.

Don't lose steam. Most ongoing service opportunities have an application process. This process will be a temptation for you to drop the ball or lose interest. Pray for God to give you clarity about how He is inviting you to serve, and then pray for help to follow-through and move forward.

Reflection questions on next page...

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

After you have tried the practice above, find time to meet with your DNA group and reflect together on your experience. Let the conversation go wherever God leads; here are some questions that might be helpful.

1. Take some time to reflect more on how you feel about the practice of service. Does it feel life-giving or draining to you? Do you experience the blessing Jesus promises to those who follow His example in service? If not, why do you think that is?
2. What category best describes you in the "individual practice"? What did God reveal to you as you prayed about that?
3. Do you already have regular rhythms of service? If so, what are those? (The goal is not to make anyone feel guilt or shame, but to understand what each person's current rhythm is.)
4. Did you make time for the individual practice and take a next step towards a regular rhythm of service?
5. If God is inviting you to pursue new ways of regular service, what next steps are you taking? Is there a serve team you're going to apply for to serve Doxa on Sundays? Is there an organization you're going to follow-up with in the community?
6. How can this group help you be faithful to follow through on this commitment?