

Discussion Guide

Why Serve?

Connecting:

45 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a way of connecting with one another so that you might partner in the work God is doing in your lives.)

- In what ways did God move in your life this week? In what ways did you respond to him?
- What was your biggest challenge this week? In what ways, if any, did you invite God into this challenge?
- How honest have you been with us? (Graciously thank group members for their honesty if they answer that they have held back.)

Getting Started:

10 minutes

- If you were tasked with developing a plan for addressing poverty, what elements might your plan include? Could you elaborate?

Diving Into the Text:

60 minutes

(The following questions are intended to provide your group with a simple road map through the text. Feel free to use these questions in ways that best fit your group and the dynamics of your own meeting.)

- Using the notes, explain the concept of service.
- Read Leviticus 19.9-10 and Deuteronomy 24.19-22.
- What was God's plan for addressing poverty in Israel?
- What were the elements of this plan?
- Who was to participate in this plan and why?
- What is our plan for addressing issues of powerlessness and poverty today? Who is to participate?
- What are the similarities and differences between the two plans?
- Read Isaiah 58.6-7.
- It has been said that service is worship, an engaging not just with people but with God. Read Matthew 25.31-46. In what ways might Jesus' parable support this idea?
- If service of the poor and powerless is a form of worship, what might be some of the implications?

- Do you find these implications to be easy or difficult to act upon? Could you elaborate?
- What might be a step this group could take to engage in service as worship?

Context and Background Service

Service involves the giving of one's person to meet the needs of others, particularly those who find themselves in a powerless position. This intentional movement to care for others is part of God's intention for how his people live (Deuteronomy 24.19-22; Leviticus 19.9-10; 23.22), and is associated with a just and happy life (Proverbs 14.21). God warned his people against closing their hearts to those in need around them (Deuteronomy 15.7-9), and the prophets implored the Israelites not to abuse the needy but rather to care for them (Amos 2.7; 4.1; 5.11; Isaiah 58).

God's commandments and exhortations to care for the poor provide a mechanism for ensuring a society in which all people are noticed and receive basic provision and protection. However, these commandments find their source not in an orderly society but in the nature of God who is love and thus one who cares for all people, including those who find themselves to be powerless (1 John 4.8; Psalm 22.26; 107.9). This loving character of God is seen most clearly in the person of Jesus who gave his very life in service so that the needs of the powerless (humanity) might be met (1 John 3.16; Mark 10.45). Those who follow Christ are called to exemplify this same character of service (1 John 3.16-18), a calling the early church clearly took seriously (Acts 6; 2 Corinthians 8-9).

More recently, Christianity has engaged in a debate concerning the necessity of service, particularly service of the poor. This debate has arisen out of a fundamentalist/liberal discussion about the nature of Scripture. This debate has led many, particularly within Evangelical circles, to reject service as a necessary part of the life of faith, reserving it instead as a spiritual gift only given to some believers. While there does appear to be a spiritual gift of service (Romans 12.7), all believers are called to engage in acts of service, intentionally ministering to the poor and powerless among them (1 John 3.16-18), acts of service which demonstrate the veracity of their faith in Christ (James 2.14-26).

The Text

Deuteronomy 24.19-22:

Don't neglect the powerless

The book of Deuteronomy is Moses' rehearsal of the Law as the people of Israel prepare to enter the Land of Promise (Deuteronomy 1.3-5). In his rehearsal, Moses reminds and expounds upon God's commands so that the people of Israel are prepared to live with God in the land. In chapter 24, Moses takes up a variety of laws covering personal relationships. In verse 19, Moses takes up God's command to care for the poor and powerless. In Leviticus, God had commanded the Israelites to leave food for those who could not provide for themselves by not reaping the entirety of their fields or gathering the gleanings of their harvests (Leviticus 19.9-10; 23.22). With these commands, coupled with the command concerning every third tithe year (Deuteronomy 14.28-29), God built an effective means for providing for the poor in the land of Israel. In Deuteronomy 24, Moses reminds the Israelites of God's intention for this system of provision and their involvement in it. This system was to be supported by all the Israelites and it was to provide sustenance for people like the orphan and the widow. Such a command would have been difficult for many people, desiring to harvest the entirety of their fields. However, God states that they were to provide for others because they had once been slaves in Egypt. This statement reminds the Israelites that any blessing they possess comes from God. They were once powerless and are now blessed only by the gracious actions of God. Therefore, the Israelites were not to look down upon the powerless but view themselves as recipients and therefore instruments of God's gracious blessing.

Isaiah 58.6-7: Service is worship

The book of Isaiah is a collection of prophecies by Isaiah, primarily to the nation of Israel, calling them out of idolatrous worship to true worship of God (Isaiah 2.6-22). In Isaiah 58, God speaks through Isaiah, critiquing the religious practices of the Israelites, demonstrating how deep their idolatry has gone. The particular religious practice singled out in Isaiah 58 is the fast. Fasting is the intentional abstinence from food—fasting may involve abstinence from anything—for the purpose of turning one's attention more fully to God (Leviticus 16.31). Because fasting involves turning one's attention to God, it is an act of worship. However, Isaiah notes that the fasting in which the Israelites were engaging was not the kind of fasting God desired; that is, it was not turning them to God.

God states through Isaiah that the fasting he desires is an engagement in service, care for the poor and powerless. A true fast involves the pursuit of justice, the granting of freedom, and the extension of provision, a life which does not turn a blind eye to one's fellow person. (The phrase, "own flesh and blood," most likely means fellow person as in Job 31.15 and Nehemiah 5.5.) Somehow, in God's sight, service of the poor and powerless is true worship, an activity which turns one's face toward God's presence.

1 John 3.16-18: Living like Jesus did

The letter of 1 John is written by John, to a church reeling from a split (1 John 2.19). In light of this split, John takes time to outline a series of proofs which demonstrate the difference between true and false followers of Christ, one of these proofs being service. John notes that we see what love really is in the person of Jesus. This is important because John also states that God's essence is love (1 John 4.8). John states that in the person of Jesus we discover that real love serves sacrificially (Mark 10.45). Therefore, to have love in one's person is to willingly serve sacrificially. This means intentionally using one's material possessions to meet the needs of other people who are in need, loving with action rather than just with words. John's words are important on two levels. First, we discover in these words that all believers are called to engage in acts of service, for no other reason than in an effort to be like Jesus. Second, we discover that these acts of service are rooted in the character of God, a character of God which is to be present in the life of every believer. If the love of God is in a person—read: if God is in a person (1 John 4.8)—then such a person will serve sacrificially.

Matthew 25.31-46:

Meeting Jesus in service

In Matthew 25, Jesus picks up the Isaiah theme of service as worship. In worship, people turn and experience the presence of God. If service is worship, then it should reason that in service people should experience the presence of God. This is exactly the point Jesus makes in his parable about sheep and goats. This parable is the conclusion of a larger discussion about the return of Jesus and the subsequent judgment of people (Matthew 24.36-25.46). Jesus plainly states that the timing of his return is unknown, but what will happen when he returns is clear. Humanity will be divided into those who follow Jesus and those who do not. According to Jesus, part of this division will be determined based upon a life of service of Christ.

Those who cared for Jesus when he was hungry, thirsty, sick, in prison, and naked are those who followed Christ. Interestingly, these people did not do these for Christ himself but for those around them who found themselves in these situations. Jesus plainly states that in serving the poor and powerless, his followers served him; that is, they met Jesus personally in their service. Thus, service becomes one form of worship, a means of experiencing Jesus himself.

Real life with Blake:

Why do we serve? I am not talking just about filling a volunteer position. I am talking about rolling up our sleeves and caring for the poor and powerless among us. Why do we do this as the Church? Why has the Church emphasized this for almost 2,000 years? I have to admit I grew up wondering about this. I was always told that service, caring for the poor and powerless, was optional, the realm of super-Christians. Therefore, I was off the hook. I could ignore the pleas for help for those who had been ravaged by disease, famine, or natural disaster. I could roll up my window or walk a little faster when I saw a person panhandling. I could not feel the slightest twinge when faced with the reality that my buying patterns subjected others into forced labor, modern day slavery. It wasn't my problem. I wasn't called (or gifted!) to help those people. Now, I am not so sure.

God cares about the poor and the powerless and he wants me to care, too. The difference between me and them is slim. The only real difference is I am a recipient of God's gracious blessing, a blessing God intends I share rather than hoard. God didn't shower me with what I have so I could keep it all. He gave me grace so I could know how to be a giver of grace. He has shown me in the person of Jesus just what this looks like and just how far I am to go, but there is something even deeper in God's call to service. I am beginning to grasp that all of us are called to serve because all of us are called to worship, and service is worship. In service God approaches people through me, and I approach God in them. I know, it sounds weird, but Jesus says it works that way, and I am beginning to grasp how it is true. I am learning that that panhandler is Jesus who is out of work and if I help him, I am engaging Jesus. That earthquake victim in Nepal is Jesus who has lost his home, and if I help him, I am engaging Jesus. My wife's friend who is pregnant and just was diagnosed with an aggressive form of

cancer is Jesus who is hurting and scared, and if I help her I am engaging with Jesus. When I serve I am not just doing something good. I am doing the very thing for which I was made.

Real life with you:

Why do we serve? The Church has always served, always expressed a deep concern for the poor and powerless among them, but why? Why is it important, even necessary to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to counsel the distressed, to provide and protect the powerless? Are we gaining merit with God? Hardly! On one level, in our service we are simply sharing what has been so richly shared with us. Apart from God's grace the poor and powerless standing before us could be us. We have earned nothing ourselves, but all comes from our wonderful Father. He has given it to us, not so we can keep it but so we can share it. God has tapped some of us as his instruments of grace, human distribution centers, if you will, of the blessing God means to pour out on people. Sounds fun and a bit overwhelming, but this isn't the best part. When we serve we are not just doing good works, we are doing the very thing for which we were made. You see, service is worship. In service God meets people through us and we meet God through them. When we serve we are engaging Jesus, serving him. Anytime we stand face to face with Jesus, it is worship. All of us were made to worship. All of us were made to serve. This week, consider praying together as a family for God to open your eyes to people you might serve as a family. Talk about what this service might look like and then plan a mini service project. Serve, seeking to recognize that you are not serving that person so much as you are serving Jesus. Talk about what this experience was like and ask God what your next steps might be.



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