

Living Like Jesus: Service as a Faith Practice

For many years I viewed service more along the lines of volunteering than anything else. Service seemed to be something that was good to do when I had extra time and energy. It seemed more like a bonus step in my Christian faith. I could show up for a shift at a soup kitchen or help put together holiday food baskets for families that were struggling and couldn't afford a nice Thanksgiving or Christmas meal. I recall participating in several service projects that involved spending a Saturday morning raking leaves from the yards of elderly members in our church or cleaning up trash from the neighborhood around the church building. Occasionally, serving others involved taking a week-long trip to some other community to work on houses and property.

While all these activities were good for me to do, in looking back, I realize something was often off in the way I understood what we were doing. I would go home feeling like I had accomplished something, as if I had checked off my good-deed requirement and could now go back to spending my time and energy in the ways I wanted to. The people we served had real needs. I had real resources, usually time and energy. And it was good to bring those needs and resources together. But what I seldom recognized at the time was that I had a need too, and that the people we served had resources.

What makes service a faith practice?

As I participated in and even coordinated a variety of service experiences, I often heard—and sometimes said myself—“I just want to be the hands and feet of Jesus.” In its best light, this statement helps us make a connection to why service is an important faith practice. [As noted throughout the Faith Practices Project](#), one of the aspects that makes an activity a faith practice is that engaging in that activity “cultivates the life and character of Jesus Christ in us.” Another way of saying that is, When left on my own, I won't end up looking or acting like Jesus; I need regular and consistent help to desire what Jesus desires, to love like Jesus, and certainly to act like Jesus. **By serving others, I am learning to take on Jesus' servant-identity as my own.**

From this perspective, [Philippians 2:1-11](#) is one of the more significant Scripture passages for experiencing service as a faith practice. Through these verses, the Spirit encourages us, “In humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.” The text further explains that we should have the same attitude toward others that Jesus had when he emptied himself of his rights as God by “taking the very nature of a servant . . . by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross.” **Service toward others is framed as the fitting way for us to respond to the gift of God's love to us in Jesus' sacrificial death.** [Ephesians 2:8-10](#) affirms this connection by teaching us that God freely extended grace to us, creating us in Jesus Christ, not because of our good works but so that we might do good works as our way of life.

We can describe the faith practice of service this way: **Service is a response to God's love for us in Jesus Christ that teaches us to live like Jesus through specific, tangible actions that contribute to the dignity and well-being of the people we serve.**

Three questions to shape service as a faith practice

In many ways we don't need a faith commitment to Jesus in order to help others. Lots of people whose religious affections and spiritual orientations are disconnected from Jesus Christ act in genuine and meaningful ways to seek the good of people beyond themselves. Yet serving others is an essential practice of our Christian faith. **To say this differently, not everyone who serves is a Christian, but everyone who follows Jesus Christ is called to serve.**

In learning to engage service as a practice that shapes our own formation as Jesus' disciples, we can benefit from asking three questions:

1. How will I remember and respond to God's love for me in Jesus Christ today?
2. What specific, tangible actions can I take to live like Jesus?
3. How can those actions be directed in ways that "look to the interests" (or, to the dignity and well-being) of others?

These questions cannot guarantee that we will suddenly love others as Jesus loved us. In fact, if your experience is similar to mine, you might even become more aware of how often you don't live like Jesus. **But by keeping these kinds of questions in front of us, we are giving our attention to the Holy Spirit and the type of work the Holy Spirit does in conforming us to the image of Jesus Christ.**

How can I engage in the faith practice of service?

In Scripture we see a wide variety of ways in which God's people are called to serve others. There is room to experiment with what the faith practice of service can look like in your life. The Faith Practices Project contains some ideas and additional resources related to service that can help you discern some potential next steps for you, your family, or your small group in your church. Please feel free to make use of these resources and to share them with others.

As you engage in the faith practice of service, we would love to learn and grow alongside you. Share your practices with #CRCFaithPractices and tag us on Twitter @crc_ffm and Facebook (@faithformationCRC).