

## Some Spiritual Exercises

(from Adele Calhoun's *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*)

- Every morning for two weeks ask your spouse, roommate or a work colleague: What can I do for you today? Then do it. Each night talk to God about what is has been like for you. What do you see about yourself?
- Make a three column table. One is to be labelled **For Me**, the second, **For Others**, the third **For God**. Think back over the past week or month. Jot down things you have bought or done for yourself, others and God. What does the inventory reveal about your life? Take time to read the story of the Passion in Luke 23 and think about what God has given for you. How would you like to see your answers change over the next few months? Listen to your longings and God's promptings.
- Spend some time meditating on the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10: 25 – 37. Give your imagination to God. Read the story aloud slowly, savouring the words. What stood out to you? Read the story a second time, imagining you are the Levite. What are your concerns? Why are you in hurry? Then put yourself in the place of the priest. What are your concerns? Why do you pass by? Imagine you are the Samaritan. Why do you stop? What will it cost you? Which of these three characters are you most like? Who in your life needs your care?
- Sign up to set up or take down an event. These tasks are often the least sought after. What does it feel like to help with a task that require any specialist skill or expertise? What does this tell you about your attitude to service?
- Develop a yearly practice of identifying one intentional service, mission or relief project. Try and find one that resonates with your own heart.
- Find out where your spiritual gifts lie (ask someone who knows you). When possible serve in an area that uses those gifts. You will experience deep gladness.

### WANTED:

**Gifted volunteers for difficult service in the local expression of the Kingdom of God. Motivation to serve should be obedience to God, gratitude, gladness, forgiveness, humility, and love. Service will rarely be glorious. Temptation to quit place of service will sometimes be strong. Volunteers must be faithful in spite of long hours, little or no visible results, and possibly no recognition except from God in eternity.**

Resources Used for this paper:

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline* (Harper & Row, 1978),  
Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (Harper & Row, 1989)  
Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (IVP 2005)  
Donald Whitney *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Navpress, 1997)

*Vivian Coleman*

DISCIPLESHIP COACH

[www.godshapedlife.com](http://www.godshapedlife.com)

Email: [reverendviv+website@gmail.com](mailto:reverendviv+website@gmail.com)

*godshapedlife*

# Spiritual Practices

## Practice Four



## Serving Others

*"Love your neighbour as yourself"*

“Practice” means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul. But when we think of Spiritual Practices, we usually think of something inward, solitary, subjective. We don't realise that the intensely practical Serving of Others is also a discipline that benefits from deliberate and attentive practice.

*“A godshaped life is a flourishing tree”*

Proverbs 11:28

Vivian Coleman

[www.godshapedlife.com](http://www.godshapedlife.com)

## WHY SERVING?

We live in a world where those with the most authority do the least amount of work. Those with the power don't serve others. They are the ones that are served. Most of us have a secret desire to be served more than to serve. We think we deserve it. We dream of having enough power and wealth so that we never have to work again. Our culture sees the blessed ones as those who get waited on and served.

Jesus showed us that in the kingdom of heaven, it is quite the opposite. The all-powerful God became a human being and served us by dying on the cross. Jesus modelled to us the life of a man for others. He constantly served those around himself. While his disciples were arguing about who is the greatest, Jesus healed people, fed thousands, and humbly washed the dirty feet of those that were fighting for rank in the kingdom of heaven.

God's plan from Abraham to Acts is that his people will bless others. *Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him.* (Gen 18: 18) To show us what he has in mind, he comes among us as one who serves (Luke 22: 27). then calls us to serve:

*Jesus called them together and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."* (Matthew 20: 25 – 27)

Serving others requires new eyes, for we need to see that the needs of our neighbours are as real and important as our own. Most of the time we look right through others, never see them, or hear their cries for help, let alone care about what they need. When we are preoccupied with our concerns, much of the world is simply invisible to us. Seeing others is what the contemporary song calls 'having our Father's eyes' and the Bible calls having the 'Mind of Christ' (1 Cor 2: 16) This is what helps us to see as God does, poor people and rich people, productive people and non-productive people, educated and non-educated people. The Spirit of Jesus is one of compassion, grace and hope.

This is not simply religious rhetoric, it is a way of life – the cruciform or cross-shaped way of life, a life of service and sacrifice. The Christian discipline of service is the way the world discovers the love of God. We are the way God blesses the earth.

**Everybody can be great... because anybody can serve. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You only need a heart full of grace, a soul generated by love.**

**Martin Luther King Jr .**

## How to Serve?

Pastor Greg Qualls describes serving as a 'kinetic learning experience' that helps us grow in our understanding of God's heart for the lost and hurting people of this world. I've appropriated and adapted his 'tips' for developing a discipline of service:

**Tip #1:** Aggressively look for places to serve. This won't be much of an issue for those of us raised with a strong work ethic. The rest of us need to constantly seek places to serve, both in the church and out of the church. Seek ways to serve fellow Christians, but also seek to serve those in your community and at work. If you ever catch yourself saying, "I wish someone would..." perhaps you need to take it upon yourself to be that someone.

**Tip #2:** Use your stuff to serve others. Everything that we have in our lives is a gift from God. Therefore we should see our stuff as a gift from God not just for us but also for those around us. Serve those around you by sharing your stuff with them. Open your home to share meals with friends and family and host events. Use your garden or DIY tools to care for and maintain more than just your own backyard. Give people rides in your car. If you have two of something, give one away. Develop yourself to see the stuff you have as being used more than just for you but for those around you.

**Tip #3:** Serve first and ask questions later. Our tendency is to ask the question "Why?" Why should I serve those around me? Is this my area of gifting? How is this going to develop my relationship with Jesus? The reality of it is that these questions can't truly be answered on paper. You can read countless Bible verses. You could hear stories from people's lives. You could hear hundreds of hours of sermons about Jesus humbling himself as a servant. But you won't get it until you mow your elderly neighbour's yard without them asking or paying you. You won't get it until you pick up rubbish in your neighbourhood without anybody asking you. You won't get it until you mind twenty preschoolers in the creche. If you aren't going to serve until you fully understand why, you'll never get round to it. The reality is you need to serve first and then ask questions, because by serving you'll find the answers. Many people have discovered their spiritual gift and passion by volunteering to do something that at first seemed unappealing.

**Tip #4:** Seek a change of heart. 1 Corinthians 13 says that if we do anything without love, it is pointless. If you have a heart that is begrudging towards service, seek God to change your heart. Jesus wasn't reluctant in his service. It was his joy to serve. Seek God to give you a heart that takes deep joy in serving those around you.



## It takes Discipline!

Confront the temptation to serve only when it's convenient or exciting. That's not disciplined service. Ask God for a servant's heart and eyes so you are compelled by his love to serve in ways and times beyond the bounds of any "official" ministry. You may feel inadequate, you may be limited by an unusual schedule, you may be physically incapacitated, but there's still a way for you to serve. People with unusual schedules or physical limitations often make powerful intercessors in a prayer ministry. Despite their limitations, those with a heart to serve always have a way to serve.

## Motivated by Forgiveness not Guilt

In Isaiah's famous vision of God, notice his response once God had forgiven him: "*Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, 'See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin is atoned for.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!'"* (Isaiah 6:6-8). Isaiah was desperate to serve God in some way, any way. Because he felt guilty? No! Because God had taken his guilt away.

The great Baptist preacher C. H. Spurgeon said in a sermon in 1867:

"The heir of heaven serves his Lord simply out of gratitude; he has no salvation to gain, no heaven to lose; ... now, out of love to the God who chose him, and who gave so great a price for his redemption, he desires to lay out himself entirely to his Master's service. O you who are seeking salvation by the works of the law, what a miserable life yours must be! ... You toil and toil and toil, but you never get that which you toil after, and you never will, for, 'by the works of the law there shall no flesh living be justified.' . . . The child of God ... does not work to be saved, he works because he is saved."

The people of God do not serve Him in order to be forgiven but because we are forgiven.

## Motivated by Humility

Professing Christians shouldn't think it is okay to sit on the spiritual sidelines and watch others do the work of the Kingdom. Jesus was the perfect Servant. His greatness is seen in the lowliness He was willing to experience in order to serve the most basic needs of His twelve friends. With astonishing humility, their Lord and Teacher washed the feet of his disciples as an example of how all His followers should serve with humility.

**Mother Teresa: "I belong to Jesus. He must have the right to use me without consulting me."**

Deuteronomy 13:4 tells us "*It is the LORD your God you must follow, and him you must revere. Keep his commands and obey him; serve him and hold fast to him.*" We serve others because we want to obey our Lord, and we serve with humility because it leads to Christlikeness.

## Motivated by Love

At the heart of service, according to Galatians 5:13, should be love: "*You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love.*" There are things we do in the service of God that we would not do for money, but we are willing to do them out of love for God and compassion / empathy for others.



A missionary was asked if he really liked what he was doing. His response was shocking. "Do I like this work?" he said. "No. My wife and I do not like dirt. We have reasonably refined sensibilities. We do not like crawling into vile huts through goat refuse.... But is a man to do nothing for Christ he does not like? God pity him, if not. Liking or disliking has nothing to do with it. We have orders to 'Go,' and we go. Love constrains us."

## A Radical Lifestyle

Do you remember the Pony Express, the fast mail service that crossed the USA from East to west and back in the 1860's? It was in operation for only 18 months but its been immortalised in movies, TV shows and even in a Theme Park in California. This original courier service relied on horseback riders carrying messages between relay stations connecting the prairies, plains, deserts, and mountains of the Western US and played an important communications role in the Civil War.

A letter could get from Missouri to California in 10 days, because riders were expected to travel 70-100 miles a day, which they achieved by changing horses every 20 minutes and keeping the weight down on the horse. The riders travelled light carrying only flour and bacon, borax and cream of tartar, and always rode in shirtsleeves. How would you recruit volunteers for this hazardous job? An 1860 San Francisco newspaper printed this ad for the Pony Express:

**WANTED: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over 18.  
Must be expert riders willing to risk daily.  
Orphans preferred.**

Those were the honest facts of the service required, but the Pony Express never had a shortage of riders.

We need to be honest with the facts about Following Christ. Like the Pony Express, serving God is not a job for the casually interested. It's costly service. He asks for your life. He asks for service to Him to become a priority, not a pastime. The young men of 1860 who read that newspaper ad envisioned an excitement that was far from the reality - the routine of the long, hard hours alone. But they were part of something bigger, something that changed lives.

Most of us think of spiritual practices as meditation, recited prayers, mental disciplines and maybe fasting.

What you probably won't include on that list are things like:

- Listening to someone
- Learning a name of an adult or child
- Holding the door open
- Noticing someone across the room who is struggling
- Asking someone how they are doing and actually paying attention
- Feeding someone who is hungry
- Visiting with or advocating for someone who is in trouble with the law
- Dropping clothes off at an op shop or social service centre
- Adding your name to the cleaning roster for your Church, a list on which there are usually fraction of those who belong!

You may already think of these practices as spiritual. You may even do them intentionally, as part of your desire to follow Jesus, who clearly favoured the small, invisible and private over the flamboyant and public, who modelled paying attention to someone without drawing attention to ourselves. But I don't know if you think of it as a spiritual discipline, something we do purposely, to bring us closer to Christ, a practice in which we engage whether we are gifted in that way or not. A spiritual practice is a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul. It brings out the sacred in experiences that could otherwise seem just everyday. Down through the centuries the way of Jesus has been understood to require deliberate and attentive spiritual practices.

But you won't often hear the practices of serving being promoted with the same degree of reverence or fervency as what have become known as the interior spiritual practices. For some reason, when it comes to being a serious follower of Jesus, the spirituality of serving others doesn't seem to count as much as prayer, worship or church attendance. This in spite of the fact that Jesus said such things as *when you give don't let your right hand know what your left hand is doing, when you pray don't be like the Pharisees, and if you want to be my disciples do things like give those without the ability to thank you something as small and ordinary as a cup of cold water.* So let's make it our aim to be available to others. A guy called Jim Henderson calls this

## “otherlyness”

Practitioners of Otherlyness are *experts at serving others* – they're artists who use kindness and intentionality as their paint and whatever life hands them as their canvas. They notice, pay attention, pray for and listen to others. They join others in making their local communities and/or the larger world a better place. People who practice Otherlyness serve in big and small ways. Both are needed.

Richard Foster in his classic 'Celebration of Discipline' puts it starkly:

"In some ways we would prefer to hear Jesus' call to deny father and mother, houses and land for the sake of the gospel, than his word to wash feet. Radical self-denial gives the feel of adventure. If we forsake all, we even have the chance of glorious martyrdom. But in service we are banished to the mundane, the ordinary, the trivial."

The ministry of serving may be as public as preaching or teaching, but more often it will be as secret as creche duty or cleaning the toilets. It may be as visible as singing up front, but usually it will be as unnoticed operating the sound equipment to amplify that singing. Serving may be as appreciated as a good testimony in a worship service, but typically it's as thankless as washing dishes after a church lunch. Most service, even that which seems the most glamorous, is like an iceberg. Only the eye of God sees the larger, hidden part of it.

Beyond the church walls, serving is baby-sitting for neighbours, taking meals to families in transition, running errands for shut-ins, providing transport for the one whose car broke down, feeding pets and watering plants for holidaytakers, and - hardest of all - having a servant's heart in our own home. Serving is as commonplace as the practical needs it seeks to meet.

That's why serving must become a Spiritual Discipline. Our self-absorbed individualism rebels against its hiddenness and repetition. Two of the deadliest of our sins - sloth and pride - loathe serving. They blinker our eyes and chain our hands and feet so that we don't serve as we know we should or even as we want to. If we don't discipline ourselves to serve for the sake of Christ and His Kingdom, we'll "serve" only occasionally or when it's convenient or self-serving.

Foster also noted how pride and selfishness can get in the way:

“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.... Self-righteous service is highly concerned about results. It eagerly wants to see if the person served will reciprocate in kind.... The flesh whines against service but screams against hidden service. It strains and pulls for honour and recognition. It will devise subtle, religiously acceptable means to call attention to the service rendered.”

So if self-righteousness is the wrong motivation, what should motivate us to want to serve - or to decide to serve, whether we want to or not? Donald Whitney in his classic volume on the Spiritual Disciplines describes five **converging motivations** that will help align us with Jesus' servant heart.

## Motivated by Gratitude

The prophet Samuel exhorted the people of God to service with these words: "*But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you*" (1 Samuel 12:24). It is no burden to serve God when we consider what great things He has done for us.

Do we realise what our life would be like without Christ? Do we remember what it was like to experience his forgiveness and freedom? When the fire of a servant's heart grows cold, its time to consider what great things the Lord has done. If we cannot be grateful servants of Him who is everything and in whom we have everything, what will make us grateful?

## Motivated by Gladness

"Serve the LORD with gladness" says the Psalmist (Ps 100: 2) We are not to serve grudgingly or grimly, but gladly. In the courts of ancient kings, servants were often executed for nothing more than looking sad in the service of the king. (see Nehemiah 2.2) You didn't mope or sulk when you served a king. Not only does it give the appearance that you don't want to serve the king, but it is a statement of dissatisfaction with the way he's running things.

So something is wrong if you can't serve the Lord with gladness. Do you serve on that church committee with gladness or with gloom? Do you serve your neighbours willingly or reluctantly? Do your kids get the impression from you that serving God is something you really enjoy or merely endure? "*Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked*" (Psalm 84:10).