



FOUR

How to Serve, by Rod Cosgrove, Lead Pastor

Sometimes, getting things in the right order matters a great deal. For example, in education, some courses have prerequisites that need to be accomplished first. This is because the later courses build on previous ones and you have to know the content of the first before the second. Or, to build something usually requires assembling some parts before others, and if you don't do it in the right order, it won't go together correctly.

With this in mind, how's this sound? "On your mark." "Go!" "Get set."
It just doesn't sound right at all...

Believe it or not, getting things in the right order also applies to the question of how we as Christ followers are to serve. If we get things in the wrong sequence, we can find ourselves isolated, exhausted, ineffective and mad at everybody. But if we get things right, together we can see God do amazing things through us.

Luke 6:12-19

One day soon afterward Jesus went up on a mountain to pray, and he prayed to God all night. At daybreak he called together all of his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. Here are their names:

Simon (whom he named Peter), Andrew (Peter's brother), James, John, Philip, Bartholomew, Matthew, Thomas, James (son of Alphaeus), Simon (who was called the zealot), Judas (son of James), Judas Iscariot (who later betrayed him).

The narrative continues on to tell us that when they came down from the mountain, the disciples stood with Jesus on a large, level area, surrounded by many of his followers and by the crowds. There were people from all over Judea and from Jerusalem and from as far north as the seacoasts of Tyre and Sidon. They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases; and those troubled by evil spirits were healed. Everyone tried to touch him, because healing power went out from him, and he healed everyone.

Ponder what we've just read in the text and consider our question again: How do we serve? It sounds easy enough to answer at first: simply find a need and go meet it, right? But maybe there's more to the question than meets the eye in general, or maybe there's more to it when considered from the perspective of our Savior Jesus? In terms of this passage, we see three key movements that help us answer the question of how to serve. Following the foundational observations of Henri Nouwen, I'd like to point these movements out to you and discuss each.

So...one evening, Jesus goes up on a mountain to pray. His disciples appear to be up there as well, but they're not directly with him. Yet again, he's driven to be alone with God. The narrative tells us that he "prayed to God all night," seeking Communion with his Heavenly Father, hearing the Voice telling him that he is his Loved Son. Remember those wonderful words spoken by God to Jesus at his baptism, when the Spirit in bodily form descended on him like a dove and the words rang out, "You are my dearly loved Son, and you bring me great joy." It was amazing for him, strengthening his identity as the loved Son and filling him with desire to connect with God and all the more in facing challenges like these.

Next, at daybreak...Jesus called together his disciples and chose twelve of them to be apostles. This was no small decision. These men would be future leaders of his gospel movement; but more importantly, they would be together with him. They would spend a lot of time together. They would be ministering together. So out of the overflow of his relationship with God, Jesus formed a group of people in relationship to him and with each other. "You are my friends," he tells them. "I share everything with you that the Father shares with me." Out of the overflow of his Communion with the Father, Jesus formed Community.

Later when they came down, the text explains that these disciples stood with Jesus, surrounded by many of his followers and the crowds...and, he healed them. He spoke words of care and he touched people and he did miracles and healing power went out of him. His new Community ministered alongside of him in Service.

Communion → Community → Service.

In other words, *what Jesus received from the Father, he shared with others, who then joined him in service to the world.* It's how Jesus established it, and it's how it needs to continue working for us today:

Communion with the Father
leads to
Community in the Son
which compels us as a group to
Serve alongside of Him in this world.

Unfortunately, we easily get this out of order, even opposite! We see the needs of the world; we worry and stress about injustice. We grow anxious, believing Jesus would want us to bring positive change, so we get involved...usually solo. We do things. We join organizations that we think will help. We volunteer and we donate funds and we do whatever we can but before long, we find ourselves tired out, exhausted and unfulfilled in our service – and to top it off, the needs only seem to have grown larger. So...what do we do next? We call others and say, "I need help!" It's true. We really do need help, and maybe the other person feels guilty and chooses to come along, and we dive in together doing sacrificial things, but it can be difficult to work together and it's hard to fix all the problems out there and things may not go well and people don't meet our expectations and so what do we do next? Exhausted and wondering why it's all so hard, we pray. Finally, we go to God, all thrashed and exhausted and pleading with him to rescue us and do something about all the mess.

"On your mark." "Go!" "Get set."

It's so easy to get things out of order – even opposite.

Instead of this, here's what we really need to remember:

Life Truth: The order matters! Communion with God leads to Community in Christ leading to Service in His name...NOT the other way around.

We must establish Communion – Community – Service as spiritual disciplines in our lives...and in this order. Spiritual disciplines are human efforts that create spaces where each of us can experience and receive the grace of God. In such spaces we can hear God's Voice assuring us that we are God's loved daughters and sons. In such spaces we can draw together as the Christ Community, healthy and intact, and join Jesus in community service to the world. But again, we must remember that everything will fight against our ability to keep this properly ordered:

In terms of our Communion with Father God, the world wars against us receiving these assurances from God, against receiving the nourishing bread of life from God through his Word, against making spaces of solitude, silence and stillness to pray. Everything will war against your desire for the Lord in an effort to keep you busy-busy-busy or occupied with anything except what matters most. Our modern culture is afraid of emptiness, so we have constructed our culture to keep us so distracted or self-satisfied that we are actually pre-occupied – filled up and busy with something before you're even there. Aristotle once taught that "nature abhors a vacuum." We feel the emptiness and uncertainty inside of us and there is no shortage of options to which we can turn to fill our minds, worry our hearts and busy your hands. But underneath all this effort to fill your life to the fullest, there is the still small Voice, whispering that you are God's beloved daughter or son...that He is pleased with you...

Meanwhile, the Christ-Community, the people of God called to mission, gets attacked as well. It is essential that we practice listening to God together, receiving what he has for us so we can give of ourselves in mutual love for one another. True community only gets established when we know we are loved, that we are safe. Unfortunately, we usually build community on a failing foundation. We see our loneliness, emptiness and need, and we encounter someone else who is lonely and empty and needy, and we say, how about we get together? It seems so great at first. But in time we realize we're still lonely and empty and so are they, and perhaps we conclude that the other person isn't all we once thought they were. Friction results, and maybe we think we need distance from each other.

Relationships formed on these tenets become greedy and possessive, and love becomes violence, and kissing becomes biting, and helping becomes manipulation and kindness becomes suspicion. But when we receive the Voice of the Father telling us we are the beloved, now can come together – alone but not lonely – and intersect with others who are alone but not lonely and the two can hear the Voice of God together and build Community...a team...a marriage...a family...a home...a church...and mutual love can overflow and others can enter in and children can join the family and strangers can be welcomed. The Christ Community is a gift!

Yet even our ministry Service comes under attack as well. All this wasn't designed to end with us; the Community of Christ is sent out to Serve, to minister in Jesus' name and by his power. We were never intended to simply create a safe little home to hide out from the world, a comfy little moralistic space where we can listen to our Christian radio, read our Christian books and drink milk from our Christian cows. Jesus calls his community together and sends us into the world to proclaim, as Isaiah envisioned: "Good news to the poor, release of captives, the blind coming to see, the oppressed being set free and the time of the Lord's favor." Jesus himself went with his Community of disciples to serve the sick, the poor, the dying and the hurting, saying that people who were ill were the ones who needed the hospital, not the ones who were healthy. He's still pursuing these people, and he's charged his Community to join him in the highways and byways and find the oppressed and the marginalized and invite them to his big, awesome dinner. It may be easier to serve alone, but don't do it: that would just be you. Take a brother or sister in Christ and you bring the Church. So much of our society these days is built on the individual, but this must be resisted, for until Jesus returns there will always be work to be done to serve people in the name of Jesus, but it MUST be done alongside of the Community, itself being empowered by Communion with God.

May the Lord grant us His grace to: Earnestly seek Communion with him, alone and together – we MUST listen to our Heavenly Father assuring us that we are truly loved as his favorite sons and daughters; may we also build Community on the love that empowers the Triune God: True Community in Father, Son and Spirit; and finally, may we Serve in Jesus' name to those caught up in the grind of it all. This is a fallen world and we are the people of God on mission.

DISCUSSION: How to Serve

1. Much like, "On your mark." "Go!" "Get set," what's something in your life that you easily get out of order? What are the ramifications of that for you?
2. In your past, at times when you've served somewhere or helped out in some way, have you ever had a frustrating experience that left you feeling isolated, exhausted, ineffective and mad at everybody? Why did that happen?
3. In this talk, Pastor Rod contends that Jesus' way with his disciples was to flow from Communion → Community → Service. In what ways does this connect with you? Do you think that's how it works, or should work? Why or why not?
4. Which of these is easiest for you: Communion, Community or Service? Which is most difficult? Why do you answer as you do?

5. Consider the following: "We see the needs of the world; we worry and stress about injustice. We grow anxious, believing Jesus would want us to bring positive change, so we get involved...usually solo. We do things. We join organizations that we think will help. We volunteer and we donate funds and we do whatever we can but before long, we find ourselves tired out, exhausted and unfulfilled in our service – and to top it off, the needs only seem to have grown larger. So...what do we do next? We call others and say, "I need help!" It's true. We really *do* need help, and maybe the other person feels guilty and chooses to come along, and we dive in together doing sacrificial things, but it can be difficult to work together and it's hard to fix all the problems out there and things may not go well and people don't meet our expectations and so what do we do next? Exhausted and wondering why it's all so hard, we pray. Finally, we go to God, all thrashed and exhausted and pleading with him to rescue us and do something about all the mess."

To what degree does this express the way it's often gone for you? Why does it often work out this way?

What could change this pattern for you?

How would you like your service to be in the future?