

The following is a reprint of a series of articles on the “family serving together” (from Focus on the Family)

Serving as a Family

by Grace Fox

A few nights ago, I read my three kids a bedtime story about a missionary who spent 30 years of his life serving in Nepal. I realized it wasn't much of a lull-them-to-sleep story, though, as I fielded excited questions and enthusiastic interest.

How will God use my children to build His kingdom? I wondered. Will they serve Him overseas, immersed in a foreign culture? Will they remain in North America, shining as lights in a secular workplace? Whatever their futures hold, how can I help mold them into world changers?

As I pondered the latter question, one thought came swift and clear: **Teach them to think beyond themselves and their own needs.** World changers, like the storyteller, follow Christ's example through service. They practice kindness and are willing to sacrifice convenience and comfort for another's sake.

Serving right where we were

I soon discovered that countless service opportunities surrounded our family, albeit on a simple scale:

- When missionary families on furlough stayed with us, our kids shared their bedrooms with the children.
- We provided transportation to Sunday school and midweek kids' club for children who wanted to attend but whose parents couldn't take them.
- We invited friends to invade our lakefront home, on scorching summer days.
- We delivered meals and drove one pregnant woman's children to school when she was ordered to bed rest.
- When an acquaintance's husband deserted her, we invited her family for dinners and table games.
- We purchased fabric and sewed a dress for a girl whose single mom couldn't afford to buy her one.

Bringing it to the Father

Serving others helped our kids see beyond themselves. Still, we could do something more: pray for our children's spiritual well being.

Frankly, sometimes I felt like a parrot with a limited vocabulary: "Lord, please bless my kids." My sentiments seemed so generic.



Things improved when we began praying God's Word. Specific Scriptures addressed our concerns.

Because we wanted our children to exemplify Christ, Philippians 2:3-8 became a favorite prayer guide:

"God, teach our children to humbly consider others better than themselves. May they look not only to their own interests, but also to the interests of others."

We also asked the Lord to bless our kids, not necessarily with wealth or fame or an easy life, but that through them, His way would be known on Earth and His salvation among all nations (Psalm 67:1-2).

Seeing that it sank in

God honored our efforts and answered our prayers. More than a decade after that unforgettable bedtime story, our eldest boarded a ministry ship to participate in God's work around the world. As I write this, the ship sits in hurricane-devastated Grenada, its crew building shelters for the homeless.

The second, a Bible college sophomore, hopes to teach English overseas after graduation.

The third, now 18, spent three weeks teaching Bible clubs in Mexico last summer. She plans to return in July.

Raising world changers begins at home. From there, only God knows — and that's exciting!

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Teaching Service

Practical ways kids can serve in your family, your community and the world

by Grace Fox

Jesus set the standard of selflessness for His disciples when He told them to be His "witnesses, in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8). Such a command implies a life lived for others.

While it may be too early to burden young children with such a weighty imperative, parents can teach them the beauty of Jesus' model.



Jerusalem — Serving right where you are

God's Son challenged His followers to go back to the city of His crucifixion and be witnesses to His good news.

- Switch your children's chores for a week. They'll likely be glad to try something different, and maybe they'll learn to appreciate what the other does around the house. Consider letting them teach the tasks to each other.
- If you have an only child, give her the responsibility of taking on one of your chores. Explain that you trust her to do it right, and watch her give it her best. Make sure you choose something simple at first to promote the feeling of accomplishment.

Judea and Samaria — Serving right where you don't want to

- Have your kids work together to take out the trash or bring in the mail for an elderly couple. (Make sure you go with your children the first time.)
- On your next trip to the park, spend 30 minutes cleaning up litter together. Your kids can redeem the recyclables they find to contribute to the church mission fund.

The Ends of the Earth — Serving right to the edge of the world

Children have difficulty comprehending the vastness of the world, so bring a little bit of the world home to them.

- Show your kids a globe or map and have them point to a country.
- Research the people who live there and their greatest needs.
- Encourage your kids to pray for the children in that country each night.
- Challenge your kids to set aside a portion of their allowance each week. At the end of the year, send their savings to missionaries who serve in that country.

All it takes is one act of selflessness to open children's eyes to the joy of service. God can use the seeds you plant in their hearts to feed the souls of others — even to the ends of the earth.

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What Is Service?

I never want my children to count their blessings in lieu of reaching out.

by Grace Fox

As we fight traffic on the way home from school, my 7-year-old son, Dillon, and I often play the game "What would you rather do?" Usually the questions are similar to "Would you rather clean toilets with your toothbrush or scrape dead bugs off the windshield with your teeth?"

Like I said, he's 7.

One day he asked, "Mom, what would you rather do? Would you rather be a street person or dead?"

"What?" I asked.

"You know," he said casually as he looked out the window at our inner-city neighborhood. "If you had to choose, would you rather be dead or begging for money?"

His tone told me that he would rather choose death, and it troubled me.

Living where we do, our children have seen more drug addicts, alcoholics and mentally ill people than most kids their ages. City life has benefits, but it also has costs that involve explaining complicated issues.

I ignored his question and launched into my well-practiced spiel about how we give to shelters and churches that help the homeless. I explained that life always holds hope for the future, but death is permanent for our physical bodies.

He may have been satisfied with my words, but I wasn't.

Dillon said, "I guess we should count our blessings."

"Yeah," I agreed, but his words made me uncomfortable.

Thankfulness should move us to action

I know the importance of stopping to appreciate our loved ones, job, shelter, food, clothing and all the extras we don't really need. Yet, counting our blessings while passing a young meth addict holding a sign about her children and abusive husband seems selfish and arrogant. Should gratitude be thankfulness for another's misfortunes that we escaped?



I told my son, "I don't think it's enough to count our blessings and be thankful. Thankfulness should move us to action."

"What does that mean?" he asked as we passed another young woman on the street corner with a cardboard sign.

"Counting your blessings can be a selfish act. It doesn't help the people begging for spare change to buy food, get a job or feel cherished. To appreciate what we have is good, but more than that, we need to give back."

I glanced at him.

My son seemed to understand, but I still wrestled with what I had said. I thought about the good Samaritan. When he saw someone who needed help, he was spurred to action.

My family is re-examining what it means to be thankful this holiday season. I never want my children to count their blessings in lieu of reaching out. We decided it's not the season to gloat over our gifts and mumble a few grateful prayers.

As we look for ways to serve the people in our community, we intend to turn our gratitude into action and pass the hope we have been given in Christ to others.

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What Service Looks Like

Christ calls us to live our faith by loving and serving the people He brings into our lives.

by Grace Fox

She works part time at a diner, waiting tables. When her lunch shift is over, she picks up the kids at school. Today, her 10-year-old daughter has soccer practice. She and her 12-year-old son sit in the bleachers and talk while the girls practice.

Afterward, they rush home. She fixes dinner, with the kids helping out. Her husband comes home from his long commute. He's worn out, and he's worried about layoffs. *He needs a break*, she thinks, *and so do I*.

On Saturday, she stuffs envelopes for a pro-life rally, drops the kids off at her mother's, and finally she and her husband have an afternoon to themselves. When they pick up the kids that



evening, her mother mentions her appointment with a specialist the next week. Her mom looks worried. *I'd better take off work and go with her*, she thinks.

Sunday morning she has coffee duty, so she leaves early for church. During the sermon about the love of Christ, she is filled with a desire to serve the Lord. *But we are already so busy. Besides, how does God want me to serve Him?*

She does not realize she *has* been serving Him. What she does for her kids, her husband, her mother, her church, her community and even her customers at the diner is serving her neighbor. And God has placed her in each of these roles.

Called by God

One of the most profound and yet strangely neglected teachings of Christianity is the doctrine of vocation. The term is simply the Latin word for *calling*, and it has to do with God calling us into many different tasks and relationships, all of which become specific avenues for service.

Ephesians 4:16, says, "From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work," and Colossians 3:23-24 says, "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving."

Together these Scriptures say much about God's thoughts on work.

Serving where you are called

Martin Luther unpacked what the Bible says about how we are to live our Christian faith in our different callings.

He said, for example, that when we pray the Lord's Prayer and ask God to give us our daily bread, He *does* give us our daily bread. And He does it through the vocation of the farmer, who grew the grain; the miller, who ground it into flour; and the baker, who cooked the loaf.

We would add the factory workers who built the farmer's tractor, the bankers who lent him the money to buy the field, the truck drivers, the warehouse workers, the stock boy, the lady at the checkout counter and the person who prepared our meal.

When we sit down at the table, we return thanks to God, and, indeed, He is the one who provides for all of our needs. But God uses human beings to distribute His blessings.

To use another of Luther's examples, when God resolved to populate the earth, He could have just created as many people as He wanted from the dust, just as He created Adam. But instead, God chose to create new life — one of His most stupendous miracles — by means of mothers



and fathers. God established the family, calling specific men and women into the vocation of marriage and then giving some of them the additional vocation of parent.

It is still God who creates and cares for children, but He does so through ordinary men and women.

Directed by God

We have callings in the family, the workplace, the church and the community. Even within these areas, our vocations are many — in the family, the same person may have a calling as a wife, mother and daughter.

In the workplace, a person exercises particular God-given talents. We have callings in our churches, whether we are pastors, choir members, committee members or have coffee duty. And since God has placed us in a particular society, our citizenship is also a vocation.

Luther rightly said that God does not need our good works but *our neighbor does*. Christ calls us to live our faith by loving and serving the people He brings into our lives, our neighbors (Matthew 22:34-40).

Not only that, but Christ also says He is *present* in our neighbor in need.

What it looks like

Jesus said, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it for me" (Matthew 25:40).

So, when you feed the hungry, clothe the naked, care for the sick, visit prisoners and welcome strangers, you are serving Christ.

This can happen on the road to Jericho, as with the good Samaritan, or it can happen when we serve people at a homeless shelter or the local pregnancy resource center. It also happens every day in our various offices and businesses.

The purpose of every vocation, from God's perspective, is to love and serve others. No company could stay in business unless it turned out a product or a service that helped people in some way.

- In our jobs, we love and serve our customers and fellow employees.
- In the vocation of marriage, we love and serve our spouse. Parents love and serve their children.
- In the church, we love and serve our fellow believers.
- In our citizenship, we love and serve our fellow citizens in the way we vote and in the policies we support.



The Christian life is one of service — be it serving in an organized fashion or in quieter, day-to-day tasks and relationships, which God has called us to.

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Why Service Is Necessary

We serve others because of the example Christ set for us.

by Grace Fox

Jesus created us for relationship, and He knew that if we'd get in step with the way He wired us, we'd meet a God-given need inside us.

In Genesis 1:26, "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness.'" As the Trinity — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — God is One, and He exists in complete unity. He is also a completely social being who enjoys an eternally perfect, loving and holy relationship between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Because He made us like himself, we also hunger to know such a perfect relationship.

Today, many of us are so busy, competitive or distrusting that we often avoid relationships, at least on the deeper level God intended. To further the dilemma, our communication technology distances us from personal interaction.

Usually we have to schedule time to strengthen our relationships amid the busyness of our daily grind, and our transient culture means we may be thousands of miles from family and friends. It's often easier to fill our lives with music, movies, television and other entertainment, rather than take the time to develop and deepen relationships. Of course, these are just symptoms of the real problem.

The real problem

When Adam and Eve fell, relationships — those between man and God as well as those between human beings — were broken by sin. Sin hinders relationships because sin is selfishness and drives us to fulfill our own desires instead of loving and serving others.

"An unfriendly man pursues selfish ends" (Proverbs 18:1).

Unfortunately, the world creates a relationship model that is "all about me." We often think of relationships in self-centered ways. *What's in it for me? Why should I care?*

How to make it right



God wants us to love, serve and care for others — unconditionally and completely — just as He did. When we do love, serve and care for others — spouse, children, parents, friends, family and strangers — we're fulfilling God's plan for relationship.

As the Trinity, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit work together in perfect harmony to show us that loving, serving and caring for each other is how a relationship works best. The Son is submitted to the Father, coming to earth and serving humankind by modeling a godly life and dying for our sins — the ultimate, unselfish act of love.

"Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Ephesians 5:1-2).

The Holy Spirit is likewise submitted to the Father and the Son, making intercession for us, teaching us and guiding us.

An unending supply of service

Though our ability to love unselfishly runs dry all too quickly, we can always draw from God's love — love that Psalm 136 reminds us endures forever. We just have to learn to let His love flow through us, choosing to die to ourselves and to think of others first, every day, in our marriages, our families, our friendships and with our fellow man.

That looks like sharing the fruits of the Holy Spirit that He has instilled in us:

- Showing **love** to the unlovely
- Passing on God's **joy** to the brokenhearted
- Imparting **peace** to those in turmoil
- Modeling **patience** in frustrating situations
- Demonstrating **kindness** to everyone you meet
- Revealing God's **goodness** in thought and deed
- Walking in **faithfulness** every day
- Living with **gentleness** and **self-control** in every situation, even when we have to confront wrongdoing or hurt.

First John 3:18 says, "Let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth."

Actions do speak louder than words when it comes to relationships. From an earthly perspective, you may not receive back as much as you give — but loving, serving and caring for others in Christ's name and for His sake is God's plan for relationships.

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Practical Service

How can you as a parent practically instill principles of selfless love and sacrifice in your child?

by Grace Fox

Right Now Love

Elizabeth forgot who we were every time we visited — something my daughter Sami often struggled to understand after each trip to the nursing home.

"Mom," she said once. "Why do we go to see her when she forgets us as soon as we leave? Isn't it like we weren't even there?"

"Well," I said, "it depends on how you look at it. She enjoys us when we're there, right?"

"Right."

"She smiles big and tells you stories. In fact, every time she sees you, her eyes light up, even though she thinks she's meeting you for the first time." I struggled for a minute, trying to think of a way to explain it to a 6-year-old. I leaned over and rubbed her back. She curved it like a kitty cat, nearly purring with delight. "You like when I rub your back, right? Even if you couldn't remember it afterward, would you still want me to do it?"

"I wouldn't care if I forgot halfway through. I love when you rub my back."

"Well, that's why we love on Ms. Elizabeth. She likes it when we're there. And that's enough."

Sami thought for a minute. Then her face lit up. "Oh, I get it! It's right-now love! Like when you eat ice cream or watch a really funny cartoon. It may not last very long, but you love it while you have it." She smiled. "And that's enough."

She got it.

And that's enough.

Teaching children to love selflessly and with no expectation of reciprocation, cultivates others-centered adults and people who truly demonstrate Christ's love and sacrifice as Paul explains in Philippians 2.

So how can you as a parent practically instill Philippians 2 principles in your child?

Here are some ideas from other parents:



Teach them to serve to serve, not to serve for praise:

Our next-door neighbor Debbie asked, "Which of you has been bringing in our trash can?"

"Not me," I said.

I saw her husband, Frank, smile at our daughter. "You've been doing it, haven't you?"

Katelyn nodded sheepishly. I knew she retrieved our can from the curb when she got off the school bus but never imagined she'd done the same for our neighbors.

Later, tucking her in bed, I said, "That's really sweet that you're bringing the Jeldys' can from the curb."

"I remembered you doing it for that single mom when we were walking the dog," she said. "Plus, I've heard all the stories of how you and Dad started doing *secret service* things when you were in college."

I left her darkened room with a warm glow, determined to continue modeling secret acts of kindness.

— by *Cyndi Lamb Curry*

Encourage your child in selfless projects:

When my 9-year-old son Andrew came home from school excited about the Thanksgiving food drive, I suggested, "Why don't you make a flyer asking the neighbors to help? You can tell them when you'll be by to collect, and maybe they can help you give to more people."

Andrew went from house to house, explaining the project and leaving a flyer as a reminder. Four days later, he set out with his red wagon to collect and came back loaded with food. From this, he learned how to let others in on serving and how to multiply his efforts.

— by *Laura Groves*

Make it a family thing:

During the holidays, my husband and I wanted our kids to know that Christmas was about giving. We purchased chips and salsa, packaged them in decorative bags and added cards that read, "This is a gift for your family to enjoy, from another family who loves you very much." Then, we chose four families who we thought could use a little demonstration of God's love. Our family then gave them the gifts anonymously.

— by *Marcy Lytle*

