



National Benevolent Association

XPLOR
FAITH, JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY

How Can We Serve?

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I want you to imagine what it would have been like to be on the road with Jesus. Starting from your first encounter, where you decided to drop everything and follow a man wherever he takes you. You have seen him heal people right in front of you. The crowds get larger and larger, but as they disperse, you stay. You have watched Jesus command demons to stand down. And you were there when he told the waves of the sea to ‘be quiet.’ You were terrified when you saw him walk on the water. And we come to now, where the road is rough and you will have to make choices. Some of you don’t know where it is you will find yourself. Others are frightened by this trip. We are on our way to Jerusalem.

In today’s gospel, we deal with a major issue the disciples would have been questioning: what should I be expecting from my devotion to Jesus? James and John ask Jesus to be seated at his right and left in the Kingdom. Jesus responds that they don’t know what they are asking for. The second part of verse 38: Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? That verse translated for simplicity: Are you capable of following me? Do you not realize the price? James and John want the glory but do not know the price. This question comes on the heels of Jesus’ third and final prediction of what will happen to him in Jerusalem. Did James and John not understand what awaited them? Did Jesus not explain well enough?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German Lutheran pastor who was martyred in a Nazi concentration camp, said that we do not receive cheap grace, but rather receive grace through costly discipleship. How can we look at this story without understanding what first it means to follow Jesus? If Jesus asked us today if we were capable of following him to the cross, what would be our answer? It can be a scary question with more frightening responses.

But now that we have heard Jesus’ response to the question, let’s step back and look at the motivation of the question. James and John are ambitious! They know that they have been loyal to Jesus since the beginning, and they want to make sure that their spots have been reserved. Now, I am not saying to not be ambitious. It makes a worker work harder to get promoted, a salesperson push to make more sales, a student study longer for better grades, an athlete go through grueling training to claim the prize. Ambition can be like fuel to the heart.

We want to get promoted, get better grades, or claim the win. It’s the human condition; we strive to succeed in everything we do. Where ambition gets to be a problem is when it makes us self-centered, less aware of others, closed to where God might want to lead us. It can blind us to what God can do in our lives and through our lives. And when we are blinded by ambition, we can miss the greater prize. One can be so busy making a living that one loses one’s life. We can be so busy seeking recognition that we fail to recognize those most important to us—our family, our friends, our neighbors.

There could be another motivation behind this request: FEAR. What if instead of assuming that James and John haven't been understanding Jesus and what it means to follow him, we look at this as a chance to make some guarantees for their future. Scared of what may happen in Jerusalem, the brothers explore the opportunity to be rewarded for their troubles ahead of time. Even asking Jesus to say yes before the question is asked. This response is similar to any that we have made in a time of uncertainty. We try to keep control of anything steady in our lives and be one step of the suspected uncertainty in our lives. James and John were in crisis after hearing what would happen to Jesus and to them and wanted to reserve the best place for them.

I ask: Is there a reward for our discipleship? Is it the same for all of us?
Do we need to know what it is now?

James and John answer that they are capable of this discipleship, and Jesus says, in order to be great, one must be a servant of all. It is this call to servanthood that can assist us in exploring this sense of costly discipleship.

A large group of European pastors came to one of D. L. Moody's Northfield Bible Conferences in Massachusetts in the late 1800s. Following the European custom of the time, each guest put his shoes outside his room to be cleaned by the hall servants overnight. But, of course, this was America, and there were no hall servants.

Walking the dormitory halls that night, Moody saw the shoes and determined not to embarrass his brothers. He mentioned the need to some ministerial students who were there, but met with only silence or pious excuses. Moody returned to the dorm, gathered up the shoes, and, alone in his room, the world's only famous evangelist began to clean and polish the shoes. Only the unexpected arrival of a friend in the midst of the work revealed the secret.

When the foreign visitors opened their doors the next morning, their shoes were shined. They never knew by whom. Moody told no one, but his friend told a few people, and during the rest of the conference, different men volunteered to shine the shoes in secret. Perhaps the episode is a vital insight into why God used D. L. Moody as He did. He was a man with a servant's heart, and that was the basis of his true greatness.

In this story we find an act of selfless service to our fellow man. As we explore our roles as Christians in this service, I am reminded of an acronym a mentor taught me when I was in high school. J.O.Y. It was his way to remember what his priorities were. 'J' reminded him that he was first to serve Jesus. Next, the 'O' reminded him to think of others and to help them. And finally, the 'Y' to think of yourself, but not before Jesus and others.

So then how can we, as Christians, serve? James 2:18 says, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do." This influences our understanding of our faith through service to others. We can volunteer to help at our church. We can donate to our local shelters. We can deliver a meal to someone who needs it.

How can we, as residents and staff at Juliette Fowler Communities, serve? In this community we find that it may be a difficult task to think of yourself as being able to serve. Thinking of it purely in the physical, but there is so much more that can be done. The knowledge that persists in these halls is valuable. Generations upon generations of this gift live within us right now.

We can send someone an encouraging note to say they are in our thoughts and prayers. We can help other people shine, giving others a chance to showcase their gifts and talents. We can anticipate moments God sends us to be his servants.

Is there a reward for serving? I hope that it is simply able to put a smile on your face as you are a bright spot to someone in need. Others will say that one does not need a reward for an act of serving. Then, is this why Jesus places such emphasis on us as servants to all? It is clear that this is of importance to Jesus as he is coming to this end of his public ministry. Jesus also emphasized serving others and encouraged us to do so because serving brings us freedom. How does it work? You have to surrender selfishness and cling closer to Jesus so that you can serve others. You are set free from the stronghold of self. Serving others makes us give more of ourselves away. There is no greater freedom than decreasing so that we let Jesus increase in us (John 3:21). And the more He increases in us, the easier it is to serve. Our human nature wants to serve itself and promote self. Jesus wants us to serve others so we can be free and become more like Him. Let's serve Him with all our hearts by serving others as He asks. There is no better way to live.

Why are we called to serve? Instead of escaping like James and John into self-preservation and ambition, remember that Jesus served us with an act of selfless sacrifice on the cross so that we may know a life after this one. As we go out in the world, I send you out to be servants of our Lord. Amen.

*NBA XPLOR is a 10-month service residency opportunity for young adults ages 21-30, with the purpose of empowering young adults to discern and develop a "heart for care" as they live together in simple community, engage in direct service and justice work, engage in leadership development, and discern their vocational calls to honor the various communities they are called to serve. **Learn more and apply at nbacares.org/xplor.***