



Why Do We Do That? Serve
1 Peter 4:7-11 & James 2:14-18
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Over the past month, we've been asking the question, "Why Do We Do That?" Too often, we maintain traditions and practices with the only rationale being that *it's always been done that way*. That's not to say that these practices and ways of engaging are wrong, but when we don't know *why* we do something, it's hard to do it well because we are never fully engaged. Like a high schooler taking physics or a middle schooler taking pre-algebra, when we don't know why something like $3a + 2b = 5c$ matters in our life, or why we might need to know that the force of gravity is 9.8ms^2 , it's hard to really engage. Too often, we just go through the motions; too often, we engage only because of things like, "I'm your momma and I told you to, that's why."

I don't know if you're like me, but for all the reasons I've been told *why* I should be doing something, I've never been a fan of shallow answers that avoid giving the meaning behind why something is the way it is. I can't stand answers like, "that's the way it's always been done," or, "that's they way I was taught how to do it." Such surface level answers have never convinced me I should be more interested or more engaged.

I have found the same problem in the life of the church. Too often, when asking, "Why do we do that," the answer we hear from church leaders is something like, "Because the Bible says so." Why do we go to worship on Sundays? *Because, that's just what we do.* ... Yeah thanks, but no. So, we're trying to take a deeper look and to really consider, why does the church engage in some of the practices we call foundational to faithful living? From worship, to Biblical study, to prayer, to financial giving, and to service – we're going deeper than saying, "that's how it's always been done," or, "the Bible says we should," we're asking the question, *WHY?* You can go back and read or listen to sermons from previous weeks on the website, but today, we conclude by answering the question, *Why do we serve?*

As a college student, I travelled to Guatemala with the Highland Support Project, a non-profit based out of Richmond. The organization sends teams into the Mayan regions of Guatemala, located in the higher mountain areas, where the residents, as descendants of the ancient civilization, still speak a Mayan dialect and live in fairly undeveloped communities. They survive through subsistence farming of the land. Many live in small huts, cooking over open fires inside their homes. The team I went with had a focus of building enclosed stoves in some of the homes. The cinder block stoves not only gave the locals a better way to cook, it also provided a chimney directing the majority of the smoke outside their homes, limiting their breathing in of the smoke and improving their quality and longevity of life.

If you asked any of the college students who attended that trip with me *why* we were there, they'd probably say something to the effect of, "these people need our help."

That might be true in some ways, but I find it hard to say that the living descendants of a civilization that has existed for over 4000 years need the help of residents from a country that has existed for only 240 years.

Why we serve others is not as simple as saying, “he, she, or they need my help.” They might need your help, but that’s not *why* we serve. Why we serve is rooted much deeper than what the surface level needs may demonstrate. Why we serve is rooted deep in our being. So, shy of going back on my own criticism and simply saying, “Because the Bible says so,” I think such a question warrants our consideration of what our faith’s foundational text offers.

There are many Biblical passages that talk about *how* we are to serve one another. In Leviticus, we find instructions regarding the “Year of Jubilee,” during which property and wealth were to be redistributed, and servant-hood to be lapsed, so that everyone would have returned to them what they needed to care for themselves and their families. In Paul’s letters, we find instructions for hosting one another in our homes, and giving financially to the church community so that everyone in the community can be provided for. We find numerous passages throughout the Bible that say things like: “Do not take advantage of an orphan or widow;” “Leave your land unplowed and unused so that the poor may get food from it;” “Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless;” “When you give a banquet, invite the lame, the poor, and the blind.” With so many texts of this nature, I could say, the reason *why* we serve is because the Bible is clear in giving instructions for serving. Many texts say serving is necessary, and many more tell us *how* we are to be serving.

Yet, I don’t know if such an answer is really sufficient for understanding the *why*. Especially in a day and age when we regularly contest the historically understood intent of the Biblical text because of its antiquated context, I don’t know that we can claim it sufficient that we do things simply because “the Bible tells me so.” In this pattern of thinking, the question has almost changed. We are not longer just asking, “Why do we serve?” Now we are asking, “Why does the Bible give so much instruction regarding service?” Should we still be living out these Biblical instructions? Sure, the Bible says so, by *why* do we serve?

I’ve always felt like the passage in James speaks well to answer this question. Long used in soteriological debates among theologians – that is, in debates regarding our salvation – the second chapter of James offers an assessment of what matters for us as a people of faith. “What good is it,” the author questions, “if you say you have faith but do not have works? Can faith [alone] save you?”

In some ways I find this question to be a trick question. If you glance back into James 1, you’ll find the author’s articulation of what he believes is the foundation of salvation. James 1:21 reads, “Therefore rid yourselves of all sordidness and rank growth of wickedness, and welcome with meekness the implanted word that has the power to save your souls.” According to this passage, it is the Word of God that offers salvation. So the debate in chapter 2 isn’t about

whether or not faith or works is the root of salvation – it's whether faith and / or works is the appropriate and necessary response to the Word of God, which makes possible salvation.

To push the issue, the author gives this example, "If you see someone who is unclothed and needs food, and you say to them, 'Go in peace; stay warm and eat up!', but do nothing to help them stay warm or to provide a meal, what good have you done?" What good is knowledge of the Biblical word that offers salvation, if it doesn't change the way you live? Perhaps James would say that simply having knowledge of the Biblical word is an intellectual assent, where one can have belief, but not faith. For James, faith cannot stand apart from responding to the Word. The actionable response reveals the attitude – the change of life that comes from having faith in the word that offers salvation. Such a change in action makes the belief in the Word come to life. Or, put in another way, "faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead."ⁱ

So, if we take the next logical step in asking *why* we serve, one could conclude from James that we serve because we have faith. Our service, our works, our deeds: these stem from and are, according to James, a necessary response to the Word of God. We serve because we have faith in the Word of God.

Admittedly, that sounds a little better than saying, "we serve because of the Bible," at least faith is an actionable item. But perhaps we're not quite deep enough yet. What it is about our faith in the Word of God that articulates *why* we are to serve?

Let's look to our second passage in 1st Peter, which begins, "The end of all things is near." Perhaps for different reasons, we've never believed such a saying more so than in this generation.

The Christian Church in the first century had a strong belief that Christ's return was not far off – indeed imminent – so they had to get right in their living in faith without hesitation, because any hesitation might be too late.

In that mindset, that we don't have time to delay, what follows in verses 8 through 11 are instructions on how to live in the anticipation and expectation that Christ is coming soon. As we walk through these four passages, beyond simply saying, "the Bible says so," or "because we have faith in what this says," I think these four statements point to a deeper rooted foundation of *why* we serve. These four verses describe faith in action as a response to God's Word, which we have already said is *why* we serve.

Verse 8 reads, "Maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins."

We serve because as people of faith, we are a people of Christian love. If we are prepped and ready to welcome the return of Christ, it will be firstly because we have love for one another – a love so deep it will cover one another's sin. This scripture is written to a congregation – to a specific church body – so it could be said that the emphasis of the author is love for one another within the church. "If within the congregation there is love, sincere and constantly

growing for one another, almost all of its sin will fade into the background because love is the most important character of the individual life and the life of a congregation.”ⁱⁱ

Yet, love for one another in the congregation doesn’t seem to be the limit of the author’s intent. “[The love named in verse 8] is clearly for fellow Christians within the church. But love cannot stop at the border of the community.”ⁱⁱⁱ So it is not surprising that if *love* for those in the church is the first reason *why* we serve, then the next would be *hospitality*.

Verse 9 reads, “Be hospitable to one another without complaining.”

We serve, because as people of faith, we are called to welcome those beyond the walls of the physical church. Just as Jesus exemplified his welcome of those the temple had cast out – from lepers, to bleeding women, to foreigners, to people possessed by demons, and more – the love we have for one another is not to be limited to those who already share in our belief patterns or communities of faith. We’re to extend such love to those who do not already belong or participate in the church. And, we’re to welcome others without complaining. The love we share with one another should overcome any hesitation we have toward those who may live, look, or believe differently than ourselves – and in so doing, we can extend great hospitality toward others in the community.

So we serve because we share the kind of love that Christ demonstrated with one another in the church, and with those in the community beyond the church. One could summarize that by saying, we serve because every person, created in the image of God, is worthy to be loved.

But we serve not only because of who others are, we also serve because of who we are.

Verse 10 reads, “Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received.”

We serve because as we have been made by God, we have been given gifts to participate in God’s work. “The right use of the gifts God has given is for mutual upbuilding.”^{iv} Go back and read through Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, the twelfth chapter, and it’s becomes clear that the gifts we have been given by God are by no means for serving ourselves or our own glory. We are one member of the larger body of the church, and of God’s greater creation, and we have been given gifts for the purpose of sharing in the upbuilding of others. We serve because we have gifts that are intended for the purpose of serving.

We serve because we are witnessing to the love of God for one another, and because we have gifts that have been given us for the purpose of serving one another.

Finally, verse 11 reads, “Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ.”

Among all other possible reasons, I find this is the foundation of *why* we serve.

At the core of the reason behind *why* we serve is the very person of God. When we speak, when we engage with others, when we are sharing in community with others, we should do so as if we were speaking the very words of God. We are to speak to others as the creator has spoken to us. ... When we engage with others in a way that offers help, when we serve, it should be done with the strength of God. “Since it is God who gives the gifts, gives the words, gives the strength, then all these things – in all things indeed – it is God who is to be glorified.”^v

And there, in that statement, we find the root of *why* we serve. Whether it be because of love (which is taught us by God in the witness of Jesus Christ,) or in hospitality (which is seeing God in all persons, for all were created in the image of God), or in sharing of our gifts (which is the faithful response as stewards over that which is Gods, given all things for the good of the community), each of these comes back to one core focus: *we serve so that God may be glorified*.

Our service, at its core, is to recreate what God first created - a place, an environment, a space, wherein each person is treated with justice and equality, where each person is valued as much as the next, where no one goes hungry, where no one lives without, where each person is housed and cared for, where no person is rejected necessary healthcare, and where each person has made available equal educational opportunities. We serve because sharing such life-giving support with others glorifies God, and celebrates the beauty of the fullness of God’s creation. We serve because in doing so, we live fully into the ideal as created ones of God, who have been called to share in God’s creating and life-giving process.

Why do we serve? You are right to ask. We serve because serving is the work of God, and as such, is the very foundation of who we have been created to be as God’s beloved. For the glory of God, let us be faithful and serve.

ⁱ Stan Mast. cep.calvinseminary.edu. Retrieved May 2, 2018.

ⁱⁱ Catherine Gunsalus González. *Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible; 1 & 2 Peter and Jude*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} David L. Bartlett. *The New Interpreter’s Bible: Hebrews – Revelation (Volume XII)*. Ed. Leander E. Keck. Abindgon Press, 1998.

^v Ibid.