

ALPHABET SOUP FOR THE VOLUNTEER'S SOUL

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Introduction

You are a volunteer. Whether you tutor children or deliver meals to seniors, whether your skill is accounting or coaching basketball, whether your ministry is located in a church office or in a prison, you are serving Christ by serving others. You are seeking to be "God with skin on" in a broken, hurting world. Your work is a vessel for God's transforming power and a witness to the Good News of the gospel.

It takes faith to step out to volunteer. But ministering to others is also one of the most powerful ways to strengthen faith. The experience of carrying out God's command to care for others deepens our devotion and desire to know God better.

How can "hands-on ministry" enrich our spiritual life?

- It yields new insights into the Scriptures, as we see them brought to life in our ministry experiences. When we practice compassion, we more fully appreciate what it means to worship a "compassionate and gracious God" (Exodus 34:6).
- It allows us to enter into God's heart of mourning for sin and brokenness. We realize in greater depth the deadly power of evil, and the even mightier power of the cross.
- It brings us closer to God's passion for justice. When we minister to people who lack access to quality, affordable health care, housing or education, we join with Jesus and the prophets in the cry to "release the oppressed" (Luke 4:18).
- It confronts us with areas in our own lives where we need to repent and seek God's transforming grace: lack of faith, materialism, all forms of prejudice, hardness of heart, laziness, the idolatry of comfort, a shame to confess the gospel.
- It strengthens our faith by giving us tangible evidence of God's hand at work, while at the same time demanding a deeper level of trust and dependence on God.
- It drives us to draw closer to Christ through prayerful reflection on our experiences, and closer to others in the body of Christ through shared service.
- It allows us to be blessed by brothers and sisters in Christ among those we seek to bless, who offer prayers of thanksgiving on our behalf (2 Corinthians 9:12-14).
- It helps us discover and develop spiritual gifts we might not otherwise have known about: compassion, hospitality, evangelism, intercessory prayer, administration, healing.

- It opens our eyes to God's healing, transforming power in the world, and deepens our appreciation for our own salvation.
- It prevents our faith from becoming self-centered and shallow by expanding the scope of our discipleship beyond our personal relationship with God.
- It leads us to learn from those who are economically poor but spiritually rich: how to have contentment in scarcity, joy in adversity, and faith in times of struggle.

Like the seed that grows "all by itself" (Mark 4:26-29), the experience of serving others can bear spiritual fruit even when we least expect it. But if we invest in cultivating the soil of our souls, by connecting the word of God with our acts of compassion, we may expect a rich spiritual harvest.

May these short biblical reflections encourage you to carry on the work of the Kingdom with increasing love, faithfulness and joy. As the writer of Hebrews 13:20-21 prays:

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

As you put your faith into action doing God's will in the world, God will equip you with "everything good" ... from A to Z.

A

Attitude

Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your **attitude** should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.

Philippians 2:4-7

Doing ministry is important to God, but so is the attitude with which we do it — we are to care for the interests of others with the servant heart of Christ.

B

Blessing

There should be no poor among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, He will richly **ble**ss you. ... Give generously to [those in need] and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the LORD your God will **ble**ss you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to.

Deuteronomy 15:4, 10

God blesses us so that we can share with others ... God's blessings rest on those who give to others. We are blessed to be a blessing, because God does not want anyone to be poor.

C

Clay

O LORD, You are our Father. We are the **clay**, You are the potter; we are all the work of Your hand.

Isaiah 64:8

But we have this treasure in jars of **clay** to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us.

2 Corinthians 4:7

We do not serve by our own power, but as clay vessels in the hand of the Master Potter. God is shaping us as we yield our lives to Him in service to others.

D

Dorcas

In Joppa there was a disciple named Tabitha (which, when translated, is **Dorcas**), who was always doing good and helping the poor. About that time she became sick and died, and her body was washed and placed in an upstairs room. ...

When [Peter] arrived he was taken upstairs to the room. All the widows stood

around him, crying and showing him the robes and other clothing that Dorcas had made while she was still with them.

Acts 9:36-39

Like Dorcas, you are making a difference in the lives of others through your faithful service, even if you do not get to see the full impact of your good deeds in your lifetime.

E

Enthusiasm

For I know your eagerness to help, and I have been boasting about it to the Macedonians, telling them that since last year you in Achaia were ready to give; and your enthusiasm has stirred most of them to action.

2 Corinthians 9:2

Enthusiasm for the ministry of service is contagious! Follow the example of the Corinthians to whom Paul was writing, and serve not just as a duty, but with eagerness and joy.

F

Friendship

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ... You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit — fruit that will last.

John 15:12, 14-16

A friend is someone who cares about the same things that matter to you. As we share God's heart of sacrificial love for others, Jesus is inviting us to be his friends! Friends of Christ produce lasting fruit.

G

Gift and Grace

Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

1 Peter 4:10

You are a gifted giver! When you use your gifts to serve others, you are a steward not only of your own resources but also God's grace. Grace means the unmerited favor of God. Service, like grace, is given out of love regardless of whether it is deserved.

H

Healing

Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen: to loose the chains of injustice and untie the cords of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and break every yoke? Is it not to share your food with the hungry and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter — when you see the naked, to clothe him, and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? Then your light will break forth like the dawn, and your **healing** will quickly appear. ... Then you will call, and the LORD will answer; you will cry for help, and He will say: Here am I.

Isaiah 58:6-9

Henri Nouwen calls those who serve in Christ's name "wounded healers." We who help others also have needs ourselves. God promises that as we show compassion and work for justice, He will provide for our own help and healing.

I

Image of God

So God created man in His own image, in the **image of God** He created him; male and female He created them.

Genesis 1:27

People who suffer from poverty or disability are often treated with disrespect. Many suffer from low self-esteem. Affirming the image of God in each person, treating each person as God's precious creation, is a powerful witness to our Creator, and can have a transforming effect.

J

Justice

Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let **justice** roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

Amos 5:23-24

The prophet startled the people of Israel by announcing that God rejected their worship, because they failed to seek justice. When we work against poverty, oppression, and idolatry, our worship becomes more meaningful.

K

Know

Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you **know** that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.

1 Corinthians 15:58

Sometimes you may wonder whether your all your hard work is really accomplishing anything. But God knows the value of our service, even when we can't see it. Be encouraged by the affirmation that your effort does make a difference.

L

Love

If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not **love**, I gain nothing.

1 Corinthians 13:3

God has poured out his **love** into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

Romans 5:5

If we volunteer out of guilt, rote obligation, pride, or other self-centered reasons, our charitable acts are ultimately hollow. Love for God and others is a gift of the Spirit. God pours out His love into our lives, so that it may overflow into active compassion and faithful witness.

M

Mercy

But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His **mercy**. ... I want you to stress these things, so that those who have trusted in God may be careful to devote themselves to doing what is good.

Titus 3:4, 8

Does God love us more because of the good we do for others? No! God's love for us flows wholly from His mercy. None of the ministry work we do brings us one iota closer to salvation. Service is the devoted response of a trusting, grateful heart.

N

Neighbor

"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: "Love your **neighbor** as yourself."

Matthew 22:37-39

Service agencies help "clients". Jesus calls us to go a step further by thinking of the people we serve as neighbors (Luke 10:36-37). We are to view everyone as equals, and treat them as well as we ourselves want to be treated. Are you loving your neighbor, or merely serving clients?

O

Offering

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually **offer** to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess His name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Hebrews 13:15-16

Like singing songs of worship, helping those in need brings praise and pleasure to God. We offer our service as a sacrifice: we do good even when we don't feel like it, even when we don't see the fruit, simply because it pleases God.

P

Preach, Proclaim, Provide, Praise, Plant!

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to **preach** good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to **proclaim** freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to **proclaim** the year of the LORD's favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn, and **provide** for those who grieve in Zion — to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of **praise** instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a **planting** of the LORD for the display of his splendor. They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; they will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

Isaiah 61:1-4

In Luke 4:17-19, Jesus declares that he fulfills this amazing purpose statement for the Lord's Messiah ("anointed One"). Jesus then anoints his followers with the Spirit to continue this calling. As one who is anointed by God for service, how does your ministry reflect this vision?

Q

Quality

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the **quality** of each one's work. If what they have built survives, they will receive their reward.

1 Corinthians 3:11-14

Quality ministry has Christ as its cornerstone. Whatever we lay on this foundation must be done with excellence. If we serve half-heartedly, our ministry will not bear lasting fruit.

R

Reward

When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you.

Matthew 6:3-4

It's not wrong to expect a reward for helping others. Scripture promises that good deeds will be rewarded. The question is whether you seek accolades from other people, or look forward to hearing the Father say, "Well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21)

S

Spirit

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

Romans 8:26

Involvement in ministry may confront you with your weakness in the face of overwhelming needs. When you feel driven to pray, it isn't important to find the right words; bring the cry of your spirit before God's Spirit, and trust that God is listening.

T

Thanks

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of God's people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, people will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. ... Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

2 Corinthians 9:11-15

It's natural to want to be thanked for our volunteer efforts. But the ultimate goal of service is that the praise goes to God, not us! How can your ministry multiply thanksgiving to God?

U

Unity

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Ephesians 4:11-13

One of the purposes of the church is to prepare God's people for service. And one of the fruits of service is that it builds the unity and maturity of the church. The more Christ-like we become in our servanthood, the more oneness we should enjoy with one another.

V

Value

For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any **value**. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.

Galatians 5:2

People in every generation debate over "values" . Our values reflect what is most important to us. What matters most in God's eyes? Faith in Christ that inspires acts of love.

W

Walls

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing **wall** of hostility.

Eph. 2:13-14

Jesus breaks down the walls that divide people. Ministry volunteers often encounter people of a different race, class, neighborhood, or ability. These differences may be barriers to authentic relationship. What walls does Christ need to bring down in your ministry?

X

eXample

Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an **example** that you should do as I have done for you.

John 13:14-15

Before going to the cross, Jesus chose a humble act of service to show his followers the depths of his love. When we serve others, we do no more than what Jesus has already done for us. Imagine Jesus washing your feet ... then sending you to follow his example through your volunteering.

Y

Yoke

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my **yoke** upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my **yoke** is easy and my burden is light.

Matthew 11:28-30

When you feel overwhelmed by the needs to be met, and overburdened by the work to be done, hear the invitation to enter into Christ's rest. Is the yoke you are bearing the Lord's — or your own?

Z

Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."

Luke 19:8-9

Short Zacchaeus grew rich, and lonely, by cheating others. But instead of rejecting him, Jesus invited Zaccheus to serve him — and Zaccheus was never the same! Inviting the contributions of people at the margins can be a pathway to their spiritual and social restoration.