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Creating a Hunger to Serve

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I'll never forget the first service project I ever put together. I was so excited to create an opportunity for students to live out this part of the Christian walk. The church that hired me had about 20 students, and during my first few months, more and more students started showing up. Meetings were packed out and full of energy. However, the program lacked opportunities for the students to surrender themselves and step out in service. I was so pumped to complete the picture!

So I worked, planned and prepared. Then, on the day of the work project, I waited...alone. No teens showed up. As I stood out in front of the church by myself, half an hour after the project's supposed start time, I had a mixture of emotions bubbling inside me—disappointment, embarrassment, failure, frustration, anger. And if I'm honest, I was hurt that the teens had let me down. I went home and complained to my wife about these ungrateful kids who were only interested in fun events but didn't want to do anything serious for Christ.

I spent a lot of time over the next week praying and considering what my next step should be. I knew I could guilt, manipulate and bribe teens to show up to future service opportunities, but guilt didn't feel like the healthy alternative.

Instead, I started looking at how Jesus trained the disciples, and I noticed that he was incredibly patient.

Consider how Jesus taught on the topic of prayer. We know that prayer is one of the most important disciplines we can practice, yet the Bible doesn't record Jesus *telling* his disciples to pray as much as it shows him *modeling* prayer. Month after month of his ministry, the New Testament shows Jesus gradually bringing some of the disciples along so they can watch him pray, but he still doesn't tell them to do it themselves.

Only after a couple years of living and traveling with Jesus do the disciples finally ask him to teach them to pray. Instead of mandating it, Jesus demonstrates and lives out the importance of prayer month after month until the disciples are finally so hungry to have it in their lives that they ask him for it.

Christ created an environment where a hunger for prayer was fostered, and the result was far more meaningful.

I took Jesus' example to heart. I removed all of our service projects from the youth calendar. Nothing. And every Sunday morning and Thursday night, during our teaching times and Bible studies, whenever we brainstormed different ways we could practically apply the Scriptures we were studying, I connected them to service whenever it was appropriate and natural. After a few months, the teens started seeing and pointing out ways that the Scriptures demonstrated a call to service, a call to love others with actions. We still weren't there yet, but it was something they were discovering in the Scriptures instead of an idea forced upon them by adults.

Eight or nine months after that initial service project failure, something happened. We were studying a passage in the New Testament, and I mentioned several different ways we could live it out, including service. One of the sophomore girls stuck her hand up and erupted, "McNutt. If service is so important, why aren't we doing it?!"

It was awesome! A lot of the other kids reacted the same way. They finally understood that it was a priority, and they were hungry to serve—not because it was an event on the calendar or because I had talked them into it but because something finally clicked for them. They realized it was something of value, something important in their lives as Christ followers. The difference was incredible.

At the end of that journey, here's what I learned:

- I put too much pressure on myself and the appearance of the group. We were not failures; we still had growing to do.
- Spiritual growth and development does not happen overnight. God typically spent years or even decades preparing people in the Bible for ministry. We can't expect teens to arrive after one lesson or even several months' worth of lessons. Some kids might, but others may take years. Either way, our responsibility is to create an environment where that can happen.
- The big picture is key. Don't let your immediate desires shape the ministry. Think in the long term. Ask yourself, *What is the best path toward long-term impact?* It may not give immediate results, but the end payoff is much better.
- Patience is critical! Whenever you get frustrated or disappointed in the pace of spiritual growth, reread the passages where God leaves Joseph in prison for years, Moses in the desert for decades, the Israelites in Egypt for centuries – all of those had teaching purposes behind them. Jesus spent three years with the disciples, and they still didn't get it a lot of the time! God isn't expecting quick results. He wants lasting change, and that takes time and work.

There is something beautiful about young people who *get* service. The selflessness of it flies in the face of every teenage stereotype out there. Having the patience to shape servant hearts is a moving testimony to those lives touched by them!