

Servant Leadership

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We're going to look at servant leadership and that it is a major category in scripture. Much is said about servant leadership these days but it's nothing new. This category is embedded in a great tradition from Genesis through Revelation. Most clearly exemplified in the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ whose humility and whose servant hood is so extraordinary in light of His greatness. The greater you come to see who He really is as we'll see in a moment, the more amazing it is that this One could be called a servant. He paid a dear and great price to actually make that possible.

I'd like us to turn to John 13 as we're considering Jesus as in fact the exemplar of what it means to be one who serves others and puts the needs of others above His own.

Pat Riley, the NBA coach, wrote about what he called the danger of me in the book he authored, *The Winner Within*. He talked about how it's easy whether it's in basketball or in other aspects of life to become selfish in a team environment. He wrote, "This is who I am and I'm going to open myself up and give myself to you." That's exactly what you've got to do. Willingness to sacrifice is the great paradox. Here's what he says, "You must give up something in the immediate present – comfort, ease, recognition, quick rewards- to attract even something better in the future." It's this concept of grasping what you give up in the now to gain what is better in the end. You live your life with the end in view.

It's a good idea to play the tape of your life forward from time to time and see what it would look like and imagine what the outcome would look like. Play the tape in your own life process and see what it would look like now. Would you be happy with the outcome as you look back over your shoulder? If you wouldn't be then you have to ask yourself what changes need to be made now? If you don't make changes now they're not going to be made in the future. Now is the opportunity to review our own pattern.

We often talk, by the way, that men struggle with this idea of ministry. They often say, "How can I be in ministry? What kind of ministry can I be engaged in?" We are going to be talking about that very reality. The ministry you can be engaged in is servant hood to the people God has put in your life already. You actually minister to God when you minister to people because to minister is to serve. The idea here then is your ministry to God is your service to others. He attributes that as your service to Him.

Consequently we'll be looking at this concept by looking at this visual parable of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. Keeping in mind again this old truth that He never invites us to do what He hasn't previously done for us. He doesn't invite us to serve others without already having served us. Nor does He invite us to love others without having loved us, to forgive others without having forgiven us and all the things He invites us to do.

I believe that the most effective leaders are people who are servants of other people especially from a biblical point of view. Expending your energy and resources in the interest of others can be exhausting but biblically speaking this is how we're called to invest our lives.

Jesus did the unthinkable when there was no servant to fulfill the custom of washing the feet. Normally in the context of the supper room situation you would have someone who would be a servant. As people came into the house, someone would be there with a towel wrapped around them. They would have a little basin and they would wash the dirt off of people's feet. It was an oriental custom. Only then would they be able to go up and be seated to have the meal together- for table fellowship and hospitality that was a prerequisite. There was nobody there evidently. The disciples had already gone up and nobody had washed their feet. Certainly none of the disciples were going to wash feet because they've already been squabbling about who's going to be the best in the kingdom and who's going to have the highest seats. So if they are going to be squabbling about this, you can be sure that none of them are going to offer themselves as a servant because to do that, by their definition, would be of course to be the least in the kingdom.

They don't understand yet, even though Jesus has been teaching this upside down value. The upside down kingdom where you can take the world's value system, put it on its head and you have a pretty good approximation of what Jesus was talking about in the kingdom. It's totally counter intuitive. The way up is down. The way to be first is to be last. The way to be the leader is to be the servant. All these are things that frankly don't make sense from our standpoint. The way one finds one's life is by losing it.

You can't really obey Jesus unless you take the risks of believing that what He calls us to pursue is going to be better than the world's rewards. There's no appeal to sacrifice without a corresponding appeal to a greater gain in scripture. The concept here is that you're not just called to give up something but to actually gain something far better than what you're giving up. Again it's that analogy of Him taking something out of your hand- maybe tinsel, aluminum foil or some piece of garbage- and opens it up finger by finger because you've been holding on so tightly to something you thought was so wonderful and only then, when He removes it, can He put something that is truly precious in your hand.

I want to show you what I believe to be the secret of Jesus' capacity to serve others. The secret is going to be found in verses 1 and 3 of John 13. As I said, this is a visual parable. He does it silently. It's a stunning thing because it was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go the Father. As I pointed out before in this group, the theme of time and His hour is very important in John's gospel. Previously He would say, My hour has not yet come, My hour has not yet come. Now the hour had come and He knew this. The timing is impeccable. "Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." (John 13:1) Then it goes on, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God." (John 13: 3)

Jesus knew that the Father put all things under His power, that He'd come from God and was returning to God. Knowing these three things then, He was capable of getting up from the meal, taking off His outer clothing and wrapping a towel around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet and drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. (John 13: 4-5) That's an incredible concept. They who were unwilling to consider even the possibility of being servants of others now are being rebuked in one way but instructed in another way to embrace the kingdom perspective that you die to your own ambitions and you find your life by losing it in the service of others. Jesus Himself was the exemplar of this.

Peter first objects but then Jesus says, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." (John 13: 10) After He finished washing their feet (v. 12), He put on His clothes and returned to His place. You can imagine how stunned they must've been.

Remember one of these peoples' feet He washed was Judas Iscariot, a very significant word. Even then I think there was a hint that there was still an opportunity for Judas to change before it was too late, a last minute kind of service.

Then He asked them this question in their silence, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (John 13: 12-17)

I believe the key to Jesus' power and ability to do this was that He understood several things. He understood all things had been put into His hand. He understood His true identity and His great dignity before God. He understood that He had come from God. He knew who He was in this world. He had dignity. He had an identity. He also had a destiny because He knew also that He was returning to God. He had a profound security. In fact He was secure enough to serve men without actually needing the accolades of men. This is how secure He was.

He was secure in the Father's love and the more secure you are the greater you grasp that all things have been given to you. Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places has been given to you. (Ephesians 1: 3) The more you grasp that you come forth from God- indeed the scriptures say the one who is born from above now has come forth from God- and the more you grasp that you're going back to God because Romans 8 and other texts make it very clear that that is your destiny as well. He is preparing you for His eternal dwelling place. I go and prepare a place and will receive you to Myself

so that where I am there you may be also. (John 14: 2-3) So you too have security, dignity, identity- all these things are yours as well. The more you lay hold of God's riches, the more you're capable of serving others.

The more insecure you are the more you want others to notice you and the more you want to manipulate people somehow in a desperate need to get your needs met. We know what insecure people can be like- namedroppers, manipulators, people who if they wrote an autobiography would entitle it, Ten Great People Who Have Known Me! Their whole identity is wrapped around people's identity. They're not secure enough to serve other men.

You and I are called to a true fundamental security. You should grasp your security because God has defined you and when God defines you, you don't have to prove anything to the world. When you allow God to tell you that you're His beloved son and with you He is pleased, you don't have to impress others. You've got nothing to prove. Knowing that you've nothing you have to prove, you're capable of serving men.