

Servant Leadership

Copyright © 2005 by [Tony Garland](#)

Jesus: the Servant Leader

Please turn in your Bible with me to John chapter 13.

Last week, Pastor Greg began teaching on this famous passage in John's gospel which records Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. John chapter 13 verse 3:

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe [them] with the towel with which He was girded. (John 13:3-5)

Continuing at verse 12:

So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for [so] I am. If I then, [your] Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you." (John 13:12-15)

Jesus indicates in the same way He served the disciples, they should serve one another.

Yet there is something more here than an example about service between peers: for Who is Jesus? And who are the disciples? Scripture records God Himself stooping to wash the feet of sinful men! The Perfect Creator willingly becoming the servant of the sinful creature in an act of ultimate humility. The Maker of ten thousand galaxies stooping to wash sweat and dust from men's feet.

Jesus, as God incarnate, powerfully illustrates a theme which runs throughout Scripture: the theme of the leader as servant.

The ultimate historical act of Servant Leadership is found in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi. Philippians 2 beginning in verse 3:

[Let] nothing [be done] through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, [and] coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to [the point of] death, even the death of the cross. (Philippians 2:3-8).

Notice how the actions of Christ in His death at the cross are in direct opposition to typical ideas concerning leadership: (1) His lack of selfish ambition; (2) His looking out for the interests of others; (3) although being in the form of God, making Himself of no reputation; (4) humbling Himself.

These are the marks of God-ordained leadership: rarely seen in the world and infrequently found in the church at large which seems eager to adopt principles from the business world rather than from Scripture.

On this Father's Day, I would like to consider God's call to Servant Leadership as it relates to being a father and a husband.

Leadership through Humility

How might one best describe this act of Jesus recorded by John? The Maker of all creation, the object of all glory, power, and authority -- washing men's feet? In a word: humility.

Humility is a "lack of vanity or self-importance," "the quality or state of being humble." To be humble is to be devoid of pride and haughtiness, to be neither arrogant nor assertive—as if ranking low in hierarchy or scale. Servant Leadership knows nothing of "the Power of Pride." Instead, we could consider it as "the Power of Humility."

In Jesus' washing of the disciple's feet we see ultimate humility because the One lacking in self-importance, assertiveness, and rank is in fact the most important and powerful figure ever to walk the planet. This illustrates another aspect of the humility found in the Servant Leader: capability and power which remains subservient, at all times, to the character and will of God.

Leadership by Example

Although the Servant Leader has the authority and power to demand, he chooses instead to motivate through love and to educate by example. Remember the explanation given by Jesus after washing the disciples' feet:

"You call me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for [so] I am. If I then, [your] Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. **For I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you.**" (John 13:13-15)

Leadership by example is an important element of Servant Leadership. Especially in the midst of difficult circumstances.

After having spent 70 years in exile in Babylon, the Jews were finally allowed to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. The book of Nehemiah records their efforts to rebuild the wall surrounding Jerusalem in the midst of opposition from surrounding peoples. Chapter 3 of Nehemiah records a long list of families who worked side-by-side to rebuild the walls. Each family worked on a different part of the wall. In Nehemiah 3:4 we read:

And next to them Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz, made repairs. Next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs. Next to them Zadok the son of Baana made repairs. Next to them the Tekoites made repairs, **but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their LORD.** (Nehemiah 3:4-5).

The "Nobles" -- men considered to be of high estate, influence, and power -- considered themselves to be above the menial work undertaken by the common people. As J. Vernon McGee observes, "These nobles thought they were too good to do this type of work—or perhaps they had some other excuse. You suspect that they had lily-white hands and would not think of lifting stones to repair the walls of Jerusalem."

Contrast the unwillingness of the nobles to work alongside the common people with the example of Nehemiah in chapter 4 verse 21:

So we labored in the work, and half of [the men] held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared. At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day." So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, [except] that everyone took them off for washing. (Nehemiah 4:21-23)

Nehemiah exhibited Godly leadership principles, he was a Servant Leader who did not consider any task "beneath him" and demonstrated by example what needed to be done.

General Eisenhower would demonstrate the art of leadership with a simple piece of string. He'd put it on a table and say: "Pull it and it will follow wherever you wish. Push it and it will go nowhere at all. It's just that way when it comes to leading people. They need to follow a person who is leading by example."¹

Fathers and husbands: can we say the same for our leadership in the home? Are there certain tasks we would never consider doing for our wives? Is the phrase "women's work" a part of our vocabulary? Are we willing to follow the example of our Lord who stooped to wash the dirty feet of men?

Perhaps the most important example we set is the role we play as "father." It is no mere accident that the term which describes our role in the family coincides with that of God: "Abba, father."

¹ Green, M. P. (1989). *Illustrations for Bilical Preaching : Over 1500 sermon illustrations arranged by topic and indexed exhaustively* (Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file.). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

To the degree we fail to exhibit Servant Leadership, we risk distorting the understanding by our children of their Ultimate Father, God. Consider the testimony of a woman who suffered as a young girl within a household with a father who undermined her understanding of what it means to be a "father." Writing decades later, as an adult, she painfully observes:

Father is not a nice word to me. On Sunday our pastor spoke about Jesus and his relationship with the Father and how that mirrors our relationship with him. It was a hard sermon for me and I did end up crying a little. . . . It's also very hard for me to see God as a loving Father since my own father set such a bad example. I love the Lord with all my heart, but I don't like to call him Father since that is still a bad word in my vocabulary. . . . Maybe someday I will be able to call him father, but I don't feel like I can right now.

How God's heart must ache for the children exposed to such a damaging example of what it means to be a father--a father who seriously damages their eventual relationship with our heavenly Father!

The story is told of a little boy, frightened by a thunderous lightning storm, who called out one dark night, "Daddy, come. I'm scared." "Son," the father said, "God loves you and he'll take care of you." "I know God loves me," the boy replied. "But right now I want somebody who has skin on." It is the role of the father to be and demonstrate God, with skin on.²

We must never underestimate the influence our example sets within our household. Not so much what we say, but what we do.

A study reveals that if both mother and father attend church regularly, 72 percent of their children remain faithful. If only dad attends regularly, [only] 55 percent remain faithful. If only mom attends regularly, [the number drops to only] 15 percent [who] remain faithful.³

Yet how frequently it is the father who is content in sending the rest of the family off to church while he, by his example, undermines the work of God within his own family.

Motivation of the Servant Leader

How can one most easily differentiate a **Serve-ME** Leader from a **Servant** Leader? Autocratic leadership rather than leadership by example is often the telltale evidence that a leader is not following in the footsteps of Jesus. If the leader emphasizes his mandate rather than his example, beware: worldly leadership is afoot!

Why is leadership by mandate rather than by example such a reliable indicator of the quality of leadership? Because it reveals a key characteristic which differentiates a Servant-Me from a Servant Leader: the motives of the leader.

2 Green, M. P. (1989). *Illustrations for Bilical Preaching : Over 1500 sermon illustrations arranged by topic and indexed exhaustively* (Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file.). Grand Rapids: Baker Book House.

3 Paul Tan, *Encyclopedia of 15,000 Illustrations*, p. 334.

Although the differences between Servant Leadership and Serve-ME Leadership may be less obvious externally, their internal motives are worlds-apart.

EXAMPLE vs. MANDATE

The Serve-ME Leader prefers to lead by mandate rather than example because serving by example involves two actions which the Serve-ME Leader wants to avoid at all costs:

1. First, leading by example provides a frequent reminder that the leader is a mere man, "just like us." It completely punctures the hierarchy distinctions which a Serve-ME leader seeks to build and maintain. The Serve-ME leader desires, even requires, those under his leadership to consider him to be above their level.
2. Second, leading by example means getting one's hands dirty. Cleaning toilets, washing dishes, changing diapers, and a host of other tasks are activities which the Serve-ME leader believes are "below him." In contrast, the Servant Leader remains willing to take on the most menial tasks while at the same time spending the necessary time in prayer and God's Word to remain qualified to lead.

HUMILITY vs. PRIDE

The Serve-ME Leader believes his capabilities and position are an indication of what he has known all along: his own natural superiority. This is vanity and pride. He finds the locus of his achievements and role within himself rather than within the sovereignty of God Who placed him there despite his lack of qualification. The Serve-ME Leader sees himself on a ladder reaching upward on which most people are on rungs below. He is keeping his eye on the next rung upward as his pride continues to build and he routinely amazes himself concerning what he is able to accomplish.

In contrast, the Servant Leader is convinced, apart from God, that he is inadequate for the task set before him. He recognizes that it is only by God's sovereign hand and calling that he occupies a leadership role. The Servant Leader is on a ladder reaching DOWNWARD toward the servant example of Christ. His rallying cry is that of John the Baptist: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

OTHERS vs. SELF

Another difference in motivation between the Serve-ME leader and the Servant Leader is found in the focus of his interest.

The Servant Leader is concerned with the wellbeing of others. His influence upon those he leads is primarily through prayer and example. They, in turn, realizing that their leader has their own best interest in mind, respond with love and devotion. The Servant Leader recognizes they have been entrusted by God to his care.

In contrast, the Serve-ME Leader uses others to enhance his own well-being. He influences those he leads primarily by autocratically asserting his control and often uses fear and

uncertainty to manipulate those under his influence. The Serve-ME leader is convinced of his superiority over those under him and believes that without him they would be much worse off.

As fathers and husbands we must ask ourselves: where is our focus? Are we looking to enhance our own interests? Or are we focused on building up others in our family?

For example, what message do we send our wives when we express our affection? Are we demonstrating lust -- interested primarily on gratification of self? Is physical intimacy expected, but without participation in the necessary foundation of relationship and support? Or is our sexual relationship with our wife a natural outgrowth of a clearly demonstrated foundation of love and care for her?

TRUST vs. CONTROL

Another difference between Servant Leadership and Serve-ME Leadership is found in how the leader interacts with those under his influence.

The Serve-ME Leader seeks to control others in an attempt to manipulate the outcome of events. He lacks trust in God and is, in his innermost person, insecure. Thus his need to manipulate and control. Because he is focused on a destination rather than the journey, he feels the need to impose restrictions on those he leads in order to achieve his goals.

In contrast, the Servant Leader trusts that God owns the results of his actions. Therefore, he can rest in whatever destination God has in mind. Unlike the Serve-ME leader, his focus is on the journey. His trust in God frees him from the need to control and manipulate.

Fathers and husbands: do we trust in God to guide our households? Are we stifling our wives and children because of insecurity or jealousy? Are we restricting our wives, like a beautiful bird in a golden cage? A bird designed to fly and be free, but because of our need to control, we find ourselves unwilling to set her free? If we desire to be a biblical Servant Leader, we must learn to trust God to manage our family. Our job as a Servant Leader is to lead by example with an open hand and to cover our family in prayer and trust God for the rest.

INTIMATE vs. DISTANT

Another key difference between the Servant Leader and Serve-ME Leader is found in the distance between the leader and those he leads.

The Serve-ME Leader has a vested interest in maintaining a separation between himself and those he leads. This distance is established and reinforced in order to keep himself on a different, higher plane than those he leads. His self-centeredness and need to control undermine the trust of those he leads and an uneasy separation and distance develop. The result is an unhealthy atmosphere of mutual suspicion.

In contrast, the Servant Leader has grown beyond the need to control those he leads. Because he is focused on their well-being, his relationship with them cultivates trust and intimacy. This, in turn, becomes the basis of open communication producing an atmosphere of well-being and

peace.

Fathers and husbands: what atmosphere are we establishing in our homes? Is it one of well-being and peace? Is our home a haven from the harshness of the world--a place where trust and openness flourish? Or are relationships under our roof distant and mechanical? Do misread motives and suspicions frequent our domain? Has trust, the fruit of ongoing intimacy, been repeatedly sacrificed on the altar of selfishness and jealous control?

The Servant Leader is a Pastor

Scripture establishes that the head of the home is the husband. As Paul tells the Corinthian church:

... I want you to know that the head of every man is Christ, the head of woman [is] man, and the head of Christ [is] God. (1 Corinthians 11:3)

If "the head of woman [is] man," how is that headship to be characterized? What does it mean to be a "husband?" The American Heritage Dictionary gives the following definitions: (1) "a manager or steward of a household" and (2) "to use sparingly or economically, to conserve."

The husband is primarily a steward. He manages something which is not his. A primary aspect of his job is conservation, in the sense of wise use and preservation. This is the concept behind the term "husbandry" which encompasses the idea of cultivation. That which is under the care of a husband is to flourish and grow!

Within Scripture, the husband is like a pastor in his relationship within his household. He is the shepherd of his own "little flock." This parallel is seen in the qualifications given for an elder which are based on being an effective husband. The elder or pastor must be:

one who rules his own house well, having [his] children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?) (1 Timothy 3:4-5).

The qualified elder has already demonstrated his shepherding ability in the home. As a result, his children are in submission "with all reverence." But how is this submission of his children to be brought about? By autocratic mandate as some husbands might infer?

Peter's instructions to elders among the dispersed Christians also provides insight into the role of a husband within the home. Peter writes, in 1st Peter, chapter 5:

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (1 Peter 5:2-4)

Peter reminds the elders that a true shepherd serves. His service is not for his personal gain. Nor does he Lord over those he serves. By his example he leads those who God has entrusted to his care. The role of a husband in the home is much like that of an elder in the church. His

actions in the home are to be like that of the Chief Shepherd.

Fathers and husbands: are we exhibiting the leadership of the Chief Shepherd? Or do we have more in common with the worthless Shepherd described in the 11th chapter of Zechariah:

For indeed I will raise up a shepherd in the land [who] will not care for those who are cut off, nor seek the young, nor heal those that are broken, nor feed those that still stand. But he will eat the flesh of the fat and tear their hooves in pieces. (Zechariah 11:16)

Are we caring for those who are cut off within our own household? Are we seeking the young? Do we endeavor to heal that which is broken? Are we feeding our own little flock? Or are we, in our selfishness and insensitivity, eating their flesh and tearing them for our own gain?

When the disciples were requesting elevated positions in the coming kingdom, Jesus corrected their perception of leadership by pointing to the servant aspect of Biblical leadership:

... Jesus called them to [Himself] and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave-- just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many. (Matthew 20:25-28)

Notice the recurring theme of Servant Leadership: the leader does not Lord it over those he leads -- his leadership is affected through his example in service.

If we as fathers and husbands truly followed our biblical mandate to be Servant Leaders, how differently might this familiar passage from Ephesians 5 sound in the ears of our wives?

Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is head of the wife, as also Christ is head of the church; and He is the Savior of the body. Therefore, just as the church is subject to Christ, so [let] the wives [be] to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, (Ephesians 5:22-25)

Fathers and husbands, are we ourselves subject to God so our wives and children can safely submit to our leadership as to the Lord? Will they willingly submit to our leadership because they are convinced we are motivated by love in consideration of their best interest? This is how Christ loved the church: he gave Himself for her. We wonder why our wives balk at following Paul's instructions in Ephesians 5. Might it be because we are not demonstrating by example, the Servant Leadership of Jesus?

As one man observed: "When a wife realizes that her husband is the guardian of her soul, then she is free."⁴

Husbands and fathers: may God move our hearts to make it so!

4 Dr. Mal Couch, Nov 7, 2001.