

People Need Servant-Leaders

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented to provide an overview of the humble servant leadership style modeled by Jesus.

But when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion for them, because they were weary and scattered, like sheep having no shepherd.

Matthew 9:36

PASTORS ARE SHEPHERDS and shepherds are leaders. With this in mind, it is clear from the text above that people need leadership. Without it they become weary and scattered.

Some definitions of leadership are:

- 1. To go before others and show them the way.** Leaders must step out and take the initiative.
- 2. To turn vision into reality.** Leaders must be visionary, and must be able to apply what they see in the real-life situations they face.
- 3. To take people where they would never be able to go on their own.** Leaders must have skills and capabilities beyond those of the ones they are leading.
- 4. To influence people to accomplish certain purposes.** Leaders must have influence. If they do not, they may be leaders in title, but they are not real leaders. They must also understand the eternal purposes of God. They do not lead people to accomplish their own purposes, but God's purposes.
- 5. Leadership is a force that provides direction and forward movement to a group.** Leaders are not always conspicuous as they exercise their leadership skills. Like the force of gravity, much of the most important work leaders do takes place quietly, in the background.

One of Jesus Christ's missions during His earthly life was to prepare His disciples to be effective leaders. But like many today, the disciples had a tendency to show

a competitive and arrogant spirit. On one such occasion Jesus said to His disciples: “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant. And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

Christian leaders are not called to rule over people in the manner of a king. They are called to lead by serving. They are not to compete with one another but to work together in fulfillment of God’s eternal purpose. This style of leadership can be called humble servant leadership.

Jesus, the Model of Leadership

As Christian leaders, we must model our leadership style after the ultimate humble servant leader, Jesus Christ. He is our example. The way Jesus led must be the way we lead. Jesus described His kind of leadership in John 10 when He said, “The sheep hear his voice; and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. And when he brings out his own sheep, he goes before them; and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (V.3-4). In the Jesus model, the leaders know the led and the led know their leaders. This tells us that leadership is a personal ministry. It cannot be accomplished from a distance. Leaders must get close to the people and allow the people to get close to them.

Jesus went on to say, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (V.11). To lay down one’s life for others has some very practical implications. It means sacrificing your personal time, energy, and resources for the sake of others. It means doing some things you really don’t want to do. It means not doing certain things that you do want to do. It may mean not making as much money as you otherwise could. But such is the nature of godly sacrifice.

In contrast to the good shepherd is the hireling, who “sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf catches the sheep and scatters them” (V.12). And why does the hireling flee? Because “he is a hireling and does not care about the sheep” (V.14). There are always those around who are only in leadership for what they can get out of it. It may be a paycheck, or recognition, or power, or adulation; it doesn’t matter. If a man is serving in leadership primarily for his own benefit, he is a hireling and not a humble servant leader.

Jesus reiterated, “I lay down My life for the sheep” (V.15). He then explained, “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it

down, and I have power to take it again” (V.18). Self-sacrificing, servant leadership is not something that can be forced from a person; it must be freely given. Each leader must lay down his own life by his own choice.

Leadership is Influence

Leadership is influence, and the type of influence leaders use can be characterized as servanthood. We serve God’s people by teaching them God’s Word, by encouraging them, by praying for them, and, perhaps most importantly, by providing them with a godly example. Paul wrote to Timothy telling him, “Be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). This was to be a primary aspect of Timothy’s ministry.

Of course he also instructed him, “If you instruct the brethren in these things, you will be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished in the words of faith and of the good doctrine which you have carefully followed” (1 Timothy 4:6). We must not teach as hypocrites—people who say one thing and do another. For our teaching to have credibility, we must be carefully following the doctrines we are teaching to others.

We must also teach from the position of humility. Paul told Timothy, “And a servant of the Lord must not quarrel but be gentle to all, able to teach, patient, in humility correcting those who are in opposition, if God perhaps will grant them repentance, so that they may know the truth...” (2 Timothy 2:23-25). He also told him, “Preach the word! Be ready in season and out of season. Convince, rebuke, exhort, with all longsuffering and teaching. 2 Timothy 4:2). The key words in these verses are “patient” and “with all longsuffering.” The servant leader is one who is gentle, patient, humble, and longsuffering in his presentation of the Word.

Peter described the essential elements of humble servant leadership when he instructed the elders: “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” (1 Peter 5:2-3). Those who oversee the assembly must not do it “by compulsion,” that is, because there is some sort of pressure on them to do it. Maybe a man’s father was an assembly leader and the man feels pressure to live up to his father’s expectations. Such motives will end up defeating the purpose of ministry. Neither must a man serve in oversight simply for the money, simply as a means for making a living. We all need money to live, but this is not a valid motivation for becoming a leader. Finally, Peter cautioned against being a lord, but says instead to serve as an example.

During the Last Supper, after Jesus had broken the bread and passed the cup, the Bible says, “Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest” (Luke 22:24). Here they were again, arguing among themselves. So Jesus reminded them once again saying, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called ‘benefactors.’ But not so among you; on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:25-27).

In John’s account of the Last Supper, he records an incident that Luke left out. Could it be that this incident happened in between verses 24 and 25 of Luke’s account? John tells us, “Jesus...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). The Bible then says, “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. Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them’” (John 13:12-17).

It is not those who intellectually agree with Jesus Christ’s example who are blessed. It is those who actually follow through and do what Jesus did. People need to see that their leaders really care about them. They need to see visible expressions of love. This is best done by following Jesus’ example of humble, self-sacrificing, servanthood. This is the kind of leadership that draws people closer to our loving Savior.

Leaders Are Not the Head

Some Christian leaders see themselves as the head of the assembly. But the Bible states clearly that Jesus is the head and the rest of us constitute His body (Ephesians 1:22-23). If the leaders are not the head, then what part of the body are they? They are the feet! Ephesians 6:15 tells us, “Having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace.” And Romans 10:15 says, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the gospel of peace.” Those who minister the Word are the feet. They support the body and move it wherever the head wants it to go. That is what leadership is all about.

Hebrews 13:17 speaks of leaders as those who “watch out for your souls, as those who must give account.” This does not mean that as leaders we are accountable for the final destiny of those we lead. It means that we are accountable for how conscientiously we do our work as leaders: how carefully we teach, what kind of an example we provide. Whom God calls, He equips. Let every Christian leader walk in the grace God has given for the task.

Speaking through Jeremiah the prophet, the Lord said, “And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15). May our leadership always be according to *His* heart.

Note to the reader:

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