

The Christian Leader, Part One: Power vs Service

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Good morning! It is a pleasure to be with you this morning.

For the past twenty-five years, I have been doing my best to write and teach about servant leadership. This is my passion. It is based on my understanding that the central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God, and a servant's heart is central to the kingdom. My passion is also based on my belief that we were created to lead with a servant's heart. It is not only the right thing to do spiritually, we have plenty of evidence that it is also the most effective way to lead. I am convinced that all Christian leaders should be servant-leaders, whatever kind of group or organization they may be leading.

I have the privilege of being with you this morning and again next Sunday. So I have put together a two-part series on "The Christian Leader." Today we will talk about the power model of leadership versus the service model of leadership. Next week we will talk about being in the world, not of the world.

The Kingdom of God

Let's start by looking at the world around us. Yes, there are many good people, loving and helping others, and we thank God for them. But we also know that there is a lot of pain and suffering, a lot of war and violence, a lot of starvation and disease, many crushed dreams and untapped talents, many problems unsolved, and many opportunities ignored. In short, this is not the world that God wants for us.

Scholars agree that Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than anything else. And the kingdom of God is not like the world in which we live today. It turns our secular world upside down. You remember the words of Jesus. He said the last will be first, and the first will be last. He said that we must be like children to enter the kingdom of heaven. He said that if we find our lives, we will lose them, but if we lose our lives for his sake, we will find them.

Even more important, the kingdom of God is a transformed world, a world in which domination systems no longer exist. Power is no longer used to oppress or enslave. The kingdom of God is not for power, the kingdom is for love and servanthood. Bible scholar N.T. Wright said that this teaching about the servant's heart is at the center of Christ's vision of the kingdom of God. It is the core message.

One more thing: Scholars agree that the kingdom of God is for earth, not just heaven. Jesus taught us to pray, "thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." So the kingdom of God is not for later, it is for now. We should be helping the kingdom of God to break into our world. We can do that with love and a servant's heart.

The power model

I am not surprised that the kingdom of God is not about power. The world in which Jesus walked and taught and healed was a world built on power—the power of the Roman Empire and the power of the Jewish temple hierarchy. Both of those power systems caused great suffering, and Jesus was against them. He told us that we should not be like those power leaders.

His teaching on this is found in all three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Here is the passage from Matthew 20:25-28. Jesus gathered his disciples and said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whomever would become great among you must be a servant, and whomever would be first must be a slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Bible scholar Aubrey Malphurs, said that "we could sum Jesus' life up with the one word *service*. One purpose for his incarnation and life on Earth was to serve and thus model what service is all about."

We need to remember that servanthood is not servitude. Servitude occurs when people are forced to serve. We are not forced to serve. Instead we choose of our own free will to be servants. We choose of our own free will to love and help

others. We choose of our own free will to follow the example of Christ. We choose of our own free will to be servant-leaders.

Disadvantages of the power model

Jesus rejected the power model of leadership. Let's look at that model a little more closely. The power model says that leadership is about acquiring and wielding power—mostly for oneself. It is about making people do things. It is about how to attack and win. It is about coercion and manipulation.

The power model assumes a pyramid, a hierarchy in which power is in the hands of the leader at the top. The focus is on the leader, who issues orders to his or her subordinates.

This is the dominant model of leadership in our culture, and it was the dominant model of leadership in the time of Jesus. But Jesus was clearly against it. Why? Let me suggest some reasons, based on my own experience.

During the past thirty years I have worked in the public sector, the private sector, the non-profit sector, and the academic sector, and I have learned that there are some severe problems with the power model.

First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely. There is no purpose or moral content. Power is seen as an end, not a means. Second, the power model glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. If leadership is about acquiring and wielding power, anyone who wants to be a leader assumes they have to build a power base. So he builds his, and she builds hers, and after a while, you have all these power groups that are paying so much attention to their rivalry with each other, that they have little time or energy to solve problems or seize opportunities. As a result, organizations and communities get stuck, unable to move forward. Finally, the power model defines success in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes the most for their group or organization or community. These are severe problems.

Other problems with power relate to the leader herself or himself. People who seek power often become irrelevant as leaders. They focus on what *they* want, instead of what other people need, and they lose touch with the people they are supposed to be serving. Even worse, people who seek power can never get enough of it. It becomes a kind of addiction or disease. They always want more, and more,

and more. This easily results in spiritual corruption and an unhappy life of self-torment.

However, the biggest problem with the power model of leadership is that it *does not advance the kingdom of God*. The kingdom of God does not break into our world by fighting power with more power. That just leads to more battles, more pain, and more suffering. No—the kingdom of God breaks into our world through love and service, not power.

People say you have to fight fire with fire. Sometimes that makes sense. But there is an alternative, and in the long run, it is a better alternative—that is to fight fire with water. We need to replace an addiction to power with a commitment to service.

If we wish to follow Jesus and truly be Christian leaders, we must reject the power model of leadership. Power cannot be our goal, nor can it be our most important tool when we lead. On the rare occasions in which we must exercise power, we must exercise it *with* others, not *over* others, and we must exercise it to *serve and protect* others, not to benefit ourselves.

The movie “Babe”

One of my favorite movies is *Babe*. Babe is a small pig that farmer Hoggett wins at a farm fair, and decides to raise as a pet. Babe is adopted by Fly, the female sheepdog, who tries to teach him the ways of the world. In the movie, the animals can talk to each other, but not to humans.

One day, farmer Hoggett looks out the window and sees that Babe has apparently separated the white chickens and the brown chickens. He becomes curious. Can Babe do what a sheep dog does?

Shearing the sheep one day out in the field, he calls on Babe to move the sheep out of the pen. Fly, the female sheep dog, gives Babe quick instructions on what to do. She tells Babe that the sheep have to know who’s boss. Babe has to dominate them. So Babe tries, but the sheep laugh at him. Fly tells him: “You’re treating them like equals. They are inferior. We are their masters. Let them doubt it for a second and they’ll walk all over you. Make them feel inferior. Abuse them! Insult them! Bite them! Be ruthless! Bend them to your will.”

Babe doesn't agree that the sheep are inferior, but he tries again. He calls the sheep buttheads, and even bites one of them. The sheep want to know what has gotten into him, because he used to be such a nice pig. When Babe explains that he is trying to be a sheep dog, Maa, one of the sheep, replies: "There are enough wolves in the world already. All a pig like you needs to do is ask." So Babe asks them, and they line up and leave the pen in perfect formation. "Thank you very much," Babe tells them. "It was very kind of you."

Later, on the way home, Fly wants to know how Babe did it. "I just asked them and they did it," Babe replied. "I just asked them nicely." Fly wasn't happy. "We don't ask sheep, we *tell* them," she responds.

Fly is a perfect example of someone who believes in the power model of leadership. She assumes that the sheep are dumb and lazy, and won't do what needs to be done unless you threaten them. You have to be ruthless. Babe discovers the service model of leadership. He treats the sheep with respect, listens to them, and then leads them in the way that is most effective for him and for the sheep. He does what servant-leaders do, and it works.

Embracing the service model

Jesus calls us to be servants. Let's take a closer look at the service model of leadership. What more can we say about it?

The service model says that leadership is not about acquiring and wielding power, it is about making a difference in the lives of others. So servant-leaders don't ask, how can I get power? How can I make people do things? Instead, servant-leaders ask, what do people need? How can I help them to get it? What does my organization need to do? How can I help my organization to do it? Rather than embarking on a quest for power, the servant-leader embarks on a quest to identify and meet the needs of others.

The service model of leadership is moral because it is about serving others, not using others. Servant leadership is not about the organizational hierarchy, because anyone, anywhere in an organization, can be of service. It is not about an individual leader, it is about teams. Teams develop and implement the mission, which addresses the needs of employees, customers, and society at large.

Because of the focus on teams, the servant-leader is not isolated, but is first among equals. Leadership is shared, reducing the hazards and burdens of the single

leader. The servant-leaders help individuals and organizations to grow and develop their God-given gifts. The advantage for the organization is that people grow in their capacity to serve—they perform at their highest levels. The advantage to society is that servant-led institutions are effective. They address real needs. They respect all stakeholders, and strive to make a difference in the lives of those they serve. They promote a more just, caring, productive, sustainable society.

A network of love

Jesus was against hierarchies that allowed people to lord it over others. So servant-leadership is not hierarchical. As theologian Howard Snyder said, “the church is not a chain of command but a network of love.” That network of love is based on mutual respect. Would we lord it over people if we respected them? No, we wouldn’t. When we respect people, we listen to them, consult with them, include them, and team up with them. When we recognize their value, and view them with respect as Jesus does, we realize that we can lead by serving, not commanding. We can serve others so that they can contribute to the organization at their highest levels.

A network of love recognizes each person’s gifts. These gifts are contributed when the gifts are needed to serve the organization. It is not about a person’s status or position in a hierarchy, it is about which gifts are needed at which times to serve others. It requires attention to others, so you know which gifts they have, and it requires a willingness to allow people to share their gifts. People stand shoulder to shoulder, deferring to each other as different abilities become relevant to different needs. Individual members of the team step up, make their contributions, and then step back so the next person can contribute. Everyone has a role; everyone has a place; everyone can make the contribution he or she is gifted to make. So it is not a chain of command but a network of love; not a hierarchy but a team of equals who each contribute as their knowledge and leadership are needed.

I have seen this work in real life, and I can tell you, it is a joy to be part of a network of love instead of a chain of command. It brings out the best in everyone. Performance is higher, results are better, people are more fulfilled, and everyone finds more meaning in the work. One senses the Holy Spirit encouraging and guiding the team. I am sure that this is how the Creator designed us to work together. I am sure this is one way that the kingdom can break into our world.

Humility

This brings us to the importance of humility. Humility is essential to servant leadership. Unfortunately, it's not easy to be humble in today's culture. We live in a culture that says we should be assertive, put ourselves first, explain to others how great we are, strive to be better than others, try to be famous, try to get a prestigious job, try to get ahead, and if necessary step on others or put others down.

The problem is that people who lack humility simply don't do what servant-leaders do. People who lack humility are focused on themselves, and show little respect for others. They are not willing to listen, and are reluctant to build teams, share leadership, or grow people. They want people to serve *them*, they don't want to serve others.

But Jesus calls us to humility, and Jesus is the ultimate example of humility. As we read Philippians 2:5-9:

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 by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

When we lead with humility, we are not worried about our prestige or status, we just focus on whatever needs to be done, no matter what it is. At the Last Supper, Jesus gave us a vivid example. At John 13: 3-5 we read:

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

Peter didn't want Jesus to wash his feet, but Peter relented when Jesus said that if he did not wash Peter's feet, Peter would have no part with Jesus. The story continues at John 13:12-15:

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. ‘Do you understand what I have done for you?’ he asked them. ‘You call me “Teacher” and “Lord,” and rightly so, for that is what I am. 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.

During the time of Jesus, washing the feet of another person was a very humble, menial task. A lot of people went barefoot, or wore open sandals, and their feet were often covered with mud and filth from not-very-sanitary streets. The master of a house might wash his own hands and face, but not his feet. Slaves did that kind of dirty work. Also, to wash someone’s feet, you had to bend down, which symbolized obedience or subservience. Again, this was a very humble, menial task. But Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. He said he did it as an example for the disciples, to show them how they were to serve each other.

I think it is easy to misunderstand humility. I like the statement that humility is not thinking less of ourselves, it is just thinking of ourselves less. It is not putting ourselves down, it is raising others up. It is understanding that we have important roles, but so do others; we have contributions to make, but so do others; we have things to say, but so do others—and we need to listen to them. Humility reminds us that we do not serve alone, we serve with our brothers and sisters in Christ. We serve in and through our Christian community. We serve as members of the body of Christ.

Laura Reave, a scholar who reviewed 150 studies of spiritual values and practices related to leadership effectiveness, concluded that “in spite of all the fascination with charismatic personalities, it turns out that quiet, humble leaders who stay in the background are often the most effective...In fact, a high degree of personal humility is far more evident among exceptional leaders than is raw ambition.” By contrast, “a major cause for executive failure identified by executives themselves is personal vanity and pride.” Reave noted that “humble leaders do not seek to develop a personality cult with public attention and devoted followers. Instead, they direct people’s attention to the goals and values of the organization, creating a strong corporate culture and sustained excellence.”

Servant Leadership Works

During the past few years, scholars have begun doing serious empirical research about the impacts of servant leadership in the workplace. The research

results have been very positive, and I'm not surprised. Servant leadership is the right thing spiritually, and it works practically. It's the whole package. Above all, this is how Jesus taught us to lead. I am delighted that social scientists are now busy conducting empirical studies that prove that Jesus was right.

Let me close this way. We know that the world around us is not what God wants for us. There is too much pain and suffering, too much hate, too much war, too much sickness and poverty. We need to reject the power model and embrace the service model of leadership. Humbly, as a Christian community, we can serve each other, and then we can serve the larger community, loving and helping others, here and around the world. That is how the kingdom of God will break into our world. That is how the kingdom *will* come, on earth as it is in heaven.

Let us pray.

Lord, we know that you have commanded us to love, and you have called us to serve. We know that there are many ways to serve. When we see the opportunity to serve by leading, give us the courage and the humility to become servant-leaders. Give us the courage and the humility to embrace the service model of leadership, and focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others. Help us to live and lead the way Jesus did when he walked among us. In Christ we pray, Amen.