

The Christian Leader, Part Two: In the World, Not of the World

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

Last week we talked about the Christian leader and compared the power model of leadership with the service model. I said that the central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is not for power, it is for love and servanthood. In fact, a servant's heart is at the center of Christ's vision of the kingdom of God. That's why Jesus was against the power model of leadership, and pointed us instead to the service model of leadership, or servant leadership. Scholars are now conducting empirical studies that prove that Jesus was right—that the service model really works. So servant leadership is not only the right path spiritually, it is also the right approach practically.

However, servant leadership is not easy. One reason it is not easy is that it is counter-cultural. To be who Jesus calls us to be, we must learn how to be *in* the world, not *of* the world. That is what we will be discussing this morning in the second part of our two-part series on the Christian leader.

Servant leadership is counter-cultural

We live in a secular, commercial culture that considers power and wealth to be symbols of success. That is what our culture tells us to strive for, and people measure us by how much we get. But power and wealth are false idols, and they do not make people deeply happy. They can be used as tools to serve others, but in and of themselves, they offer little meaning or happiness.

As followers of Jesus, we know that he refused earthly power—he declined to become a secular king. Satan could not tempt him when he offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. We find this at Matthew 4:8-11:

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him: “Away from me, Satan! For it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’” Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Jesus rejected all earthly power. We read at John 6:14-15, that after the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force. But Jesus escaped from the crowd. He withdrew to a mountain by himself. He didn’t come to be an earthly king.

As for money, Jesus made it clear at Luke 12:15 that “life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” At Matthew 6: 19-21, he said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

After his interaction with the rich young man described in Matthew 19, Jesus told the disciples: “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.” So Jesus rejected earthly power, and he taught us not to seek treasures on earth. The goal is to be spiritually rich, not rich in material possessions.

In short, the teachings of Jesus are counter-cultural. That’s why Christian leaders don’t start with the way the world is; they start with the way *Christ* is. Christ has taught us how to live and lead. If we follow him, we will lead a meaningful life. We will bring hope and joy to others. We will help those who need help the most. And we will do it without worrying about what the secular, commercial world thinks. We will be successful in more important ways than the secular, commercial world can imagine.

Yes, it is hard to avoid the values of the secular, commercial culture, because they surround us every day. It is easy to get drawn in. The Christian writer Chuck Swindoll, in his book, *Improving Your Serve*, said:

Probably the greatest tragedy of Christianity through its changing and checkered history has been our tendency to become like the world rather

than completely different from it. The prevailing culture has sucked us in like a huge vacuum cleaner, and we have done an amazing job of conforming.

Mother Teresa

I have great admiration for Mother Teresa. When I teach servant leadership at Pacific Rim Christian University, I like to show a clip from a movie about her, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta*, starring Olivia Hussey. At the end of the movie, Mother Teresa makes an important decision.

The scene shows Mother Teresa at a board meeting in a fancy hotel. It is the board of the multinational association that is dedicated to advancing Mother Teresa's work around the world. By that time, there were nearly 300 centers serving hundreds of thousands of people. Mother Teresa had started by simply helping one person, then another, on the streets of Calcutta. Now, her movement was evolving into a corporation with all its trimmings. In an especially telling moment, she turned to a waiter and asked him the cost of each bottle of water that was on the table at the meeting room table. "Three dollars," he said. "With three dollars I can send a child to school for a whole year," Mother Teresa answered.

When a priest explained how they could save money on their telephone bills, Mother Teresa said: "I have not taken a vow of value for money, I have taken a vow of poverty." As the board chair argued that they needed long-term plans, Mother Teresa said she did not criticize those who made plans, but "we have chosen another way to serve the Lord." She dissolved the association, telling her colleagues to close the bank accounts. "We are going back to our roots, back to being with the poor, the poor among the poor."

Mother Teresa's decision was startling because it was counter-cultural. She decided that she was not going to be drawn into the secular commercial culture. She wasn't going to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars—perhaps millions of dollars—on an international office, staff, magazines, hotels, and meeting rooms, in order to coordinate and consolidate the work of her hundreds of centers around the world. No—she went back to her roots, back to the decentralized, person to person love and service that had always characterized her work.

In December 2013, my wife and I visited India, and spent time at the Mother Teresa Center in Calcutta. While we were there we saw her room—a small room with a bed, a dresser, a desk, and a chair. I guess we could say that that small room

was her world headquarters. She didn't need a big fancy office to inspire people all over the world to follow her example.

In the world, not of the world

So the pressing question is this: How do we follow Christ, and not get sucked into cultural norms and symbols of success like power and wealth? I think Jesus gave us the answer. To lead the way Jesus calls us to lead, to lead in a way that is both counter-cultural and effective, we must be *in* the world, not *of* the world.

Jesus shared this idea during the Last Supper, first when speaking to the disciples, and then when he prayed for them. At John 15:18-19, he said:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Later, as recorded at John 17:13-17, Jesus prayed to his Father for the disciples, and he said:

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

This idea of being in the world, not of the world, has meant a lot to me for the past forty years. I think the message is clear. Jesus was in the world, teaching and healing and saving. We need to be like him. We need to be in the world, fully engaged, loving and serving others the way Jesus did. However, we do not have to measure ourselves by the secular world's values or its measures of "success." We do not have to be *of* the world.

This gives us great freedom. We don't have to be rich and famous. We don't have to have prestige. We don't have to be members of the social elite. We don't have to be politically powerful. Isn't that a relief? I think that's great. If we do acquire power and wealth, we can use them as tools to serve others. If we don't

acquire power and wealth, that's fine. It doesn't matter. We are not here to be a success as the world defines it. We are here to be who God wants us to be, not who the world wants us to be. We are here to follow Jesus. If we do, we will be blessed, whether or not the world thinks we are "successful."

Going against the secular norm

Of course, when you are a servant-leader, in the world not of the world, some people will not understand. Some people will see you as a weak leader, or not a leader at all, because you are not pacing the floor, barking orders at your subordinates. Instead, you are listening, identifying needs, and working together with others to meet the needs you identify.

Even worse, when you lead with the heart of a servant, some people will feel threatened. After all, those who live the power model of leadership may not want to admit that there is another way—a *better* way. They may mock you, attack you, try to silence you, or simply make it hard for you to lead.

I learned this early in life. In the summer of 1966, I served on the staff of a summer student council workshop in the Midwest. I had just graduated from Roosevelt High School here in Honolulu, where I had been active in student government. The summer workshop was for high school students who had been elected to lead their fellow students in the fall. The 300 student leaders at the workshop were divided into groups, and I was a counsellor working with one of the groups. I was 18, the youngest counsellor they had ever hired.

Because I was young, the director of the workshop thought that it would be a good idea if one evening I addressed all of the students. Of course, he was a little worried. After all, it was the *sixties*. He told me that he didn't want me to be an "activist" and attack "the establishment." He wanted me to say something nice.

When the night came, I did not attack the teachers or counsellors or the establishment. Instead, I attacked the students. I told them the truth as I saw it. I said that too many of their student councils were self-congratulatory cliques, focused only on themselves. They were just busy building their resumes for their college applications. I said they just took the easy way out, and did the same activities year after year, whether anybody else wanted those activities or not. I told them that they were a hoax, pretending to care about their fellow students, when in fact they didn't care at all—they were too wrapped up in themselves. I told them that if they *did* care, if they *did* reach out to other students, if they *did*

listen to the rest of the student body, they could really make a difference in the lives of their fellow students. They could find ways to make the school experience better for them. They could improve the quality of education and the quality of life at their schools.

When I finished half an hour later, there was total silence. It was clear that I had broken through the barrier of polite pretending. I had looked them in the eye and challenged them to do something more important than hold parties for themselves.

They began to clap. And then, much to my surprise, they began to come forward, down the aisle, and up onto the stage. They lifted me on their shoulders, and carried me outside. It was exhilarating. We had an exciting, honest conversation about how we could *do* more, and *be* more. We didn't have to spend the whole year just deciding on the theme song for the prom. We could connect with people. We could actually change lives for the better.

We talked, and then, one by one, the students shook my hand and headed toward their dorms for the night. As they left, I began to walk back to my room. Suddenly, I was stopped by four men. One of them was the director of the workshop. He told me I was fired and would be leaving immediately. They marched me to my room, closed and blocked the door, and told me to pack. I was not allowed to make any phone calls, or speak to anyone, or leave any messages.

When I was packed, they marched me to the parking lot and put me in the back of a station wagon. I recall that they did not turn on the car's headlights, perhaps to avoid attention as we left the parking lot. They drove 20 miles and then dropped me off at a roadside bus stop, an open shelter with a bench, at the edge of a corn field. It was 9:30 at night. I sat alone in the dark, watching the headlights of the passing cars, waiting for the next Greyhound bus. I was eighteen years old, and I had just learned a few things.

The first thing that I learned was that I didn't like being run out of town. It was very awkward, and certainly inconvenient.

The second thing I learned was that it was worth it. I had no regrets. I knew that I had connected with the students. We had a meaningful, exhilarating conversation. They understood the service model of leadership. I was sure that some of them would remember, and a few would do something about it. They would figure out ways to serve their fellow students. To me, that was worth it.

Other awkward moments

Because the secular, commercial world is so focused on power and wealth, it has its standard career patterns. You are supposed to start at the bottom of an organization or profession, and work your way up, as high as you can go before you retire. You are supposed to make more and more money, and have more and more power over more and more people, as you move up in your organization or profession.

I haven't done that. During the past thirty-eight years, I have worked for nine different organizations, and my work has been in law, economic development, land development, higher education, programs for children and families, and leadership training. Several times I have accepted jobs that paid less, and involved leading fewer people, than my previous job. (You need a supportive spouse to pull that off.)

All along, I was focused on jobs in which I felt I could make a difference—the kind of difference that I thought God wanted me to make. But I have not had the kind of career that the secular culture recommends. Actually, I met a headhunter once who informed me that I have not had a career, I have just had a bunch of jobs. I told her that I was really happy with that, because the jobs were really meaningful. She just shook her head.

I guess the biggest transition I have made in my non-career came in 1995, after I completed six years of service as President of Chaminade University. I became so interested in higher education that I decided to go back to school to get my doctorate in higher education leadership. So one week, I was the president of a university, and the next week I was a student in a dormitory at the University of Southern California—with an 18-year-old room-mate. I am willing to certify that he was the most disappointed freshman in the history of higher education! He traveled all the way from Virginia to Los Angeles for freedom, and he got a roommate older than his father.

What was interesting was how many people really didn't understand. People told me that the purpose of education was to get a job, and I had a job, so why did I give it up to get an education? They said I was doing it all backwards. I told them that I wanted to be a lifelong learner. They told me that education was for the young—the 18-to-22-year olds. What they were really telling me was that the

secular, commercial world has its expectations, and I wasn't following those expectations very well.

At any rate, for two years, I was a full-time unemployed graduate student with a wife and three children. My wife Elizabeth was very supportive, and I am very grateful to her for that. She was working, and we drew down savings and investments we had made over the years, so we were okay financially. But I didn't have a job.

In our culture, jobs provide people with social status. People are often defined by the organizations for which they work. For a couple of years, I had no social status, no organizational affiliation, no business card. This meant that, according to the secular commercial culture, I wasn't really a person. There was evidence that I existed, but the evidence was flimsy. Furthermore, there were those who thought that I was a failure, and my life was mostly over, even though I was only 47. Here's an example.

One day, I was at home doing some writing, and the phone rang. It was a reporter. He asked to speak to Kent Keith, and I said he had found me. He said he was writing a story about people whose careers had had a meteoric rise, and then fizzled. "Oh," I asked, "who did you want to talk about?" *You*," he answered. "Me?" I said. "I'm still young, I'm getting my doctorate, I will be back at work again. What do you mean, fizzled?"

I don't think he liked my attitude. It was clear to him, in any case, that he wasn't going to get the kind of interview he wanted. So he hung up, and I went back to writing.

What was I writing when the reporter called to tell me my career had fizzled? I was writing a book. Years later, that book became a national bestseller that has been translated into 17 languages. The book was called *Anyway: The Paradoxical Commandments*. Some of you know the back story.

As I mentioned, I was run out of town in the Midwest when I was eighteen. However, that didn't stop me from continuing to work with high school student leaders when I was in college. When I was nineteen, a college sophomore, I wrote a short book for them titled *The Silent Revolution: Dynamic Leadership in the Student Council*. It was published by Harvard Student Agencies. As just part of that booklet, I wrote 149 words that I called "The Paradoxical Commandments."

We sold 25,000 or 30,000 copies of that short book around the country between 1968 and 1972, and then I went on with my life.

What I didn't know then, but know now, is that people were lifting the commandments out of that little book and were putting them up on walls, and including them in speeches, and reprinting them in books. The commandments spread all over the world, until today, millions of people have used them.

In 1997, thirty years after I first wrote the Paradoxical Commandments, I learned that Mother Teresa had put them up on the wall of her children's home in Calcutta. That changed my life. I thought that was some kind of a message, a big hint from God that I was supposed to do something. So I started speaking and writing about the commandments again, thirty years after I first wrote them.

When my new book was launched in 2001, 23 publishers around the world bought the rights to publish my book in their countries and languages. Penguin Putnam bought the rights in the U.S. They got me on the *Today Show* with Katie Couric, and they got my photo and an article on the front page of *The New York Times*, as well as feature articles in *The Washington Post* and *People* magazine. By the way, when *People* magazine did a two-page article on me, my respect for the magazine shot way up. I didn't know *People* magazine was about finding personal meaning and the life of the spirit!

So there I was, having my fifteen minutes of fame. I was suddenly a success as defined by the secular, commercial culture. I wish that I had written down the name of that reporter, because I could have called him up and said, "Guess what? I *un-fizzled*!" But I couldn't remember who he was, and it didn't really matter. What mattered was that I felt called to write, so I did. I didn't know what would happen. All I knew was that writing the book was a meaningful thing to do.

The assurance of Christ

Let me close this way. Obviously, being in the world, not of the world, can be challenging, and occasionally amusing. But that is how we must live, and that is how we must lead. We cannot waver. Jesus Christ is our model, and he has called us to be servant-leaders in the world, not of the world.

When we choose to lead like Jesus, we have his assurances. One of those assurances is found in John 5:5-8:

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

So let us go forward and bear much fruit. After all, it is by our fruit that others will know us.

Let us pray.

Lord, we know that you have commanded us to love, and you have called us to serve. When we see the opportunity to serve by leading, give us the courage and humility to become servant-leaders. Give us the courage and humility to be counter-cultural, to be *in* the world, not *of* the world. We thank you for the immense freedom that comes from knowing that we do not have to seek secular symbols of success like power and wealth. We know that we are here to be who you want us to be, not who the world wants us to be. Help us to bear much fruit, so that we may glorify you and advance your kingdom. We ask all this in the name of Christ, Amen.