

# **The Christian Leader**

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Good afternoon! It is a pleasure to share some ideas about servant leadership with you. I have organized my remarks into three categories: (1) the Scriptural basis for servant leadership; (2) empirical research supporting servant leadership; and (3) the challenge of being in the world, not of the world. I plan to stop after each section, for questions or comments and discussion.

## **The Scriptural Basis**

First, the Scriptural basis. There is an excellent book by Arthur Boers, who teaches leadership at Tyndale Seminary in Canada. The title of the book is *Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*. In the first part of his book he argues that the Bible is not interested in leaders in the way that we are fascinated with them today. Today we expect leaders to be dynamic, charismatic, full of vision and drive, characterized by their command presence, and capable of solving all our problems. We expect them to have magical abilities.

Boers argues that this fascination with and near adoration of leaders is a modern phenomenon. The Bible is very suspicious of leaders and what they accomplish. The Bible dwells more on leadership failures than successes.

We can start with Moses. A great prophet, no doubt, but a mixed record when it comes to leadership. He didn't want to lead the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt, and God had to ask Aaron, his brother, to speak for him. The Israelites didn't seem to trust Moses. They kept talking about how it would be better if they went back to Egypt instead of wandering in the desert. And when Moses went up on Mt. Sinai to receive the tablets, the people became impatient and started worshipping a golden calf—not what Moses wanted his followers to do. As a result, he had to execute 3,000 of them. And Moses disobeyed a direct command from God regarding the rock, striking it instead of speaking to it in order to get

water. Again, Moses was a great prophet, but in many ways a failed leader and even a disobedient person. God would not let him enter the Promised Land.

There were judges for a time, military leaders who also adjudicated disputes. But the people of Israel wanted to have a king like other countries. We read at 1 Samuel 8 that God was not happy that the people were rejecting him as king. He told Samuel to listen to the people, but warn them against having a king. Samuel explained to the people how badly a king would behave (1 Sa 8:10-18). The people would not listen, so the Lord reluctantly agreed. Israel changed from a theocracy, a country run by God, to a monarchy, a country led by human royalty.

Boers says: “The bible is full of accounts of God defeating kings.”<sup>1</sup> Kings are seen negatively, starting with Saul, the first king. Saul’s reign was tragic. He disobeyed God, and instead of anointing David as his successor, Saul tried to kill him. After Saul and his son Jonathan were killed in battle, David became king.

David was the slayer of Goliath and singer of psalms. But David committed adultery and murder, and was alienated from his spouses and children. One of his sons raped one of his daughters, and then another son killed the first, and his favorite son rebelled against him and was killed. Again, it was a tragic mess. David was not allowed to build the temple. It was Solomon, his son by Bathsheba, who built the temple.

Solomon was known far and wide for his wisdom, but he wasn’t very wise. He taxed and burdened his people very heavily in order to build a royal palace as well as the temple. His sins included idolatry and turning away from Yahweh. He had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines. The Bible says that his wives led him astray. He built shrines for the gods of his foreign wives, and no longer followed the Lord completely. The Bible says that Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord. God was angry, and said he would take away part of the kingdom from Solomon’s successor (1Ki 11:1-13). Indeed, after Solomon died, the whole northern Kingdom of Israel was lost forever. Only the southern kingdom of Judah remained. It was a disaster.

Here is something I find astonishing. Boers reports that of the 36 kings mentioned in First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles, 28 of them are described by the Bible as “evil.” The *Bible* calls them evil. Only eight are good—and among the eight, only two are above reproach.<sup>2</sup> That’s only two out of 36, or 6%, that are above reproach.

The kings were so flawed that God sent the prophets. Prophets were significant leaders in the Old Testament. They emerged as a major force during the rise of the monarchy. Their role was to counterbalance the kings, because the kings were mostly evil people. Boers says: “Hebrew scriptures clearly show that kingly rule requires prophetic criticism.”<sup>3</sup>

So God did not want kings, and the kings that the Bible describes were seriously flawed. In light of the sad history of kings in the Bible, how are we to lead?

### *Jesus and servant leadership*

Well, Jesus told us how to lead. He told us how to lead in a different way—not the way of kings, but the way of servants.

As followers of Jesus, we know that Jesus called us to serve, and he demonstrated that service. Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples as an example of how we are to serve (Jn 13:1-15).

Jesus told the parable of the sheep and the goats, in which those who spend eternity with Jesus are those who have served others—those who give drink to the thirsty, give food to the hungry, provide clothing to the naked, provide hospitality to the stranger, care for the sick, and visit those in prison (Mt 25: 31-46).

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.”<sup>4</sup> At Luke 22:27, Christ said, “I am among you as one who serves.”

This idea of serving, of a servant’s heart, turns out to be the core message of Jesus. That is not what most people think. If you ask a group of Christians today, what was the central message of Jesus?—they might answer: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” Or they might answer: “I came to die for you, that you might have eternal life.”

Those are important messages, but scholars would answer differently. They agree that the central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God. 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. Jesus said many things to help us see how different the kingdom of God is from the world we live in. For example, 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.

Even more important, the kingdom of God that Jesus described is a transformed world, a world in which domination systems no longer exist. Power is no longer used to oppress or enslave. That's because 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.<sup>5</sup> It's the core message.

One more thing: Scholars agree that the kingdom 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.

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.

So we are called to serve. When we see the opportunity to serve by leading, we must *lead* with a servant's heart. The teaching of Jesus on this point is found in all three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, and Luke 22:25-26. For example, in 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.

This is the passage in which Jesus calls us to be servants when we lead. He calls us to be servant-leaders. And he is against hierarchies. Hierarchies allow people to lord it over others, and Jesus says we are not to do that.

This teaching of Christ is so important that it is in all three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. And yet, it is possibly the most ignored passage of the Bible when it comes to leadership. I have come across a book on

Christian leadership that didn't mention it at all. I was at a two-day Christian leadership summit at which nothing that Jesus said about leadership was mentioned. And I have only once in forty years heard this passage quoted, even indirectly, in a sermon. Apparently, people still want to be kings. But the history of kings in the Bible is abysmal, and Jesus clearly pointed us in a different direction. He pointed us toward servanthood.

### *Rejecting the power model*

In pointing us toward servanthood, Jesus rejected what I call the power model of leadership. 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. Jesus told us that we should not be like those power leaders. He rejected the power model of leadership.

Why? Well, here's my own explanation. 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. However, I have no trouble understanding why Jesus was clearly against it. During the past 35 years I have worked in the public sector, the private sector, the non-profit sector, and the academic sector. Everywhere I worked, I saw problems with the power model.

First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely. Second, the power model glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. Third, 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. I have met many power-oriented leaders, and they are not happy people.

So there are a lot of problems with the power model—problems for society and problems for power-oriented leaders. 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.

I know that 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 much better alternative, and that is to fight fire with *water*. We need to extinguish the addiction to power. We need to replace the addiction to power with a commitment to service.

If we wish to follow Jesus and truly be Christian leaders, then, we must do what he did—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.

Jesus calls us to be servants when we lead. The service model of 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. That's the key concept: 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. The focus is not on the leader, it is on building and leading teams. The servant-leader is first among equals as a team member. Leadership is shared, reducing the hazards and burdens of the single leader.

So that is an overview of the Scriptural basis for servant leadership. I would like to stop, now, for questions, comments, and discussion before continuing on to the next section.

### **Empirical research**

The teaching of Jesus about leading with a servant's heart is a key teaching, one that turns our world upside down, just as other kingdom teachings do. It is radical, it is challenging, and—here is a surprise for many people—it turns out to be very, very effective in the daily reality of the workplace. It is practical.

Servant leaders help their colleagues to grow, so they can fulfill their potential and contribute their gifts at their highest possible level. Servant leaders listen to their customers, clients, patients, members, students, citizens, so they can figure out what people really need, and then provide it to them. It is really pretty simple. If you love people, and pay attention to their needs, you and your colleagues and your organization are very likely to succeed in fulfilling your mission.

There are many characteristics and skills of servant-leaders. One very important characteristic is humility—a characteristic modeled by Jesus when he washed the feet of his disciples. Laura Reave is a leadership scholar who reviewed 150 studies of spiritual values and practices related to leadership effectiveness. She concluded that quiet, humble leaders who stay in the background are often the most effective. By contrast, “a major cause for executive failure identified by executives themselves is personal vanity and pride.” Humility turns out to be effective.

During the past few years, scholars have begun doing serious research about servant leadership in the workplace. The research results so far are very positive. For example, research indicates that employees of servant-leaders are more helping and creative, have greater job satisfaction, higher job performance, and are more committed to the organization. Servant-leaders are good at building and facilitating effective teams. And one study of 126 companies in Silicon Valley found that companies led by servant-leaders were financially more successful than those led by narcissistic leaders. I think it is wonderful that social scientists are busy conducting studies that prove that Jesus was right.

Jesus, the Son of God, the Christ, told us how to lead. Leading with a servant's heart is the right thing spiritually, and it works practically. We should not

be surprised. Jesus knows who we are. He knows how we were designed by the Creator. He knows how we need to lead if we want to bring out the best in ourselves and others, and work together to advance the kingdom of God.

So that is a very quick look at the empirical research on the impacts of servant leadership in the workplace. I would like to stop, now, for questions and comments before continuing on to the next section.

### ***In the world, not of the world***

Servant leadership works, but that does not mean that it is easy. One reason it is not easy is that it 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 they are only tools, not goals.

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. 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.” In 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, Jesus told the disciples: “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 19:23). 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 assumptions and values of the secular, commercial culture. Those assumptions and values surround us every day. 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, when Jesus prayed to his Father for the disciples (Jn 17:13-17), 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."

Of course, being a servant-leader will often mean that your behavior will contradict the popular norms of the secular, commercial world. When you lead with the heart of a servant, 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 those needs.

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. So being in the world, not of the world, can be challenging. But that is how we must live, and that is how we must lead. We cannot waiver. Jesus Christ is our model, and he has called us to be servant-leaders.

In conclusion, the central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God, and central to that message is a servant's heart. If we want to help the kingdom of God to break into our world, we must reject the power model and embrace the service model of leadership. Humbly, we can serve each other, and then we can serve the larger community, listening and 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.

That completes my remarks. And now, I hope you have questions and comments. I look forward to our discussion!

## Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Boers argued that the Bible is very suspicious of leaders and what they accomplish. Do you agree? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Jesus taught us to lead in a different way, not the way of kings but the way of servants. What did Jesus say and do to explain the importance of serving others?
3. What are the author's reasons for rejecting the power model of leadership? What do you think? Do you agree or disagree. Why?
4. How would you define the service model of leadership?
5. Why does the author say that servant leadership is practical?
6. Do you think that Christ would teach us to lead in a way that is *not* effective? Why or why not?
7. What does it mean to you to be *in* the world, not *of* the world?
8. What are the benefits of being *in* the world, not *of* the world? What are the costs?

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Boers, *Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 67.

<sup>2</sup> Id., 74.

<sup>3</sup> Id., 83.

<sup>4</sup> Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2003), 38.

<sup>5</sup> N. T. Wright, *How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 227-228.