

The Scriptural Basis for Servant Leadership

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Jesus calls us to serve. The parable of the sheep and the goats makes it clear that we should feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide hospitality to the stranger, clothe the naked, look after the sick, and visit those in prison (Mt. 25:31-46). The parable of the rich man and Lazarus reminds us that we should care for the poor (Lk. 16:19-31). When his disciples argued about who was the greatest, Jesus responded by saying that “if anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all” (Mk 9:35).

Jesus demonstrated humble service to others during the Last Supper. We read at John 13:3-5:

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.

When Peter resisted, Jesus told him, “Unless I wash you, you have no part with me” (Jn. 13:8). Peter relented, and Jesus continued washing.

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. (Jn. 13:12-15)

There are many ways to serve. One way to serve is by leading. When we lead, we need to remember that we are servants. Jesus called his disciples together 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, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your 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. (Mt. 20:25-28)

A nearly identical passage is found in Mark 10:42-45. We find the same message in different words in Luke 22:25-26, when Jesus spoke to his disciples during the Last Supper:

Jesus said to them: ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.’

As for himself, Jesus made it clear: “I am among you as one who serves” (Lk. 22:27).

Thus, all three of the Synoptic Gospels include this key teaching. Jesus calls us to be servants when we lead.