

Servant Leadership

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This is a modified transcript of the audio lesson from Dr. Boa's leadership series on the subject of servant leadership. This is part one.

We're going to look at servant leadership and that it is a major category in scripture. Much is said about servant leadership these days but it's nothing new. This category is embedded in a great tradition from Genesis through Revelation. Most clearly exemplified in the life of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ whose humility and whose servant hood is so extraordinary in light of His greatness. The greater you come to see who He really is as we'll see in a moment, the more amazing it is that this One could be called a servant. He paid a dear and great price to actually make that possible.

I'd like us to turn to John 13 as we're considering Jesus as in fact the exemplar of what it means to be one who serves others and puts the needs of others above His own.

Pat Riley, the NBA coach, wrote about what he called the danger of me in the book he authored, *The Winner Within*. He talked about how it's easy whether it's in basketball or in other aspects of life to become selfish in a team environment. He wrote, "This is who I am and I'm going to open myself up and give myself to you." That's exactly what you've got to do. Willingness to sacrifice is the great paradox. Here's what he says, "You must give up something in the immediate present – comfort, ease, recognition, quick rewards- to attract even something better in the future." It's this concept of grasping what you give up in the now to gain what is better in the end. You live your life with the end in view.

It's a good idea to play the tape of your life forward from time to time and see what it would look like and imagine what the outcome would look like. Play the tape in your own life process and see what it would look like now. Would you be happy with the outcome as you look back over your shoulder? If you wouldn't be then you have to ask yourself what changes need to be made now? If you don't make changes now they're not going to be made in the future. Now is the opportunity to review our own pattern.

We often talk, by the way, that men struggle with this idea of ministry. They often say, "How can I be in ministry? What kind of ministry can I be engaged in?" We are going to be talking about that very reality. The ministry you can be engaged in is servant hood to the people God has put in your life already. You actually minister to God when you minister to people because to minister is to serve. The idea here then is your ministry to God is your service to others. He attributes that as your service to Him.

Consequently we'll be looking at this concept by looking at this visual parable of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. Keeping in mind again this old truth that He never invites us to do what He hasn't previously done for us. He doesn't invite us to serve others without already having served us. Nor does He invite us to love others without having loved us, to forgive others without having forgiven us and all the things He invites us to do.

I believe that the most effective leaders are people who are servants of other people especially from a biblical point of view. Expending your energy and resources in the interest of others can be exhausting but biblically speaking this is how we're called to invest our lives.

Jesus did the unthinkable when there was no servant to fulfill the custom of washing the feet. Normally in the context of the supper room situation you would have someone who would be a servant. As people came into the house, someone would be there with a towel wrapped around them. They would have a little basin and they would wash the dirt off of people's feet. It was an oriental custom. Only then would they be able to go up and be seated to have the meal together- for table fellowship and hospitality that was a prerequisite. There was nobody there evidently. The disciples had already gone up and nobody had washed their feet. Certainly none of the disciples were going to wash feet because they've already been squabbling about who's going to be the best in the kingdom and who's going to have the highest seats. So if they are going to be squabbling about this, you can be sure that none of them are going to offer themselves as a servant because to do that, by their definition, would be of course to be the least in the kingdom.

They don't understand yet, even though Jesus has been teaching this upside down value. The upside down kingdom where you can take the world's value system, put it on its head and you have a pretty good approximation of what Jesus was talking about in the kingdom. It's totally counter intuitive. The way up is down. The way to be first is to be last. The way to be the leader is to be the servant. All these are things that frankly don't make sense from our standpoint. The way one finds one's life is by losing it.

You can't really obey Jesus unless you take the risks of believing that what He calls us to pursue is going to be better than the world's rewards. There's no appeal to sacrifice without a corresponding appeal to a greater gain in scripture. The concept here is that you're not just called to give up something but to actually gain something far better than what you're giving up. Again it's that analogy of Him taking something out of your hand- maybe tinsel, aluminum foil or some piece of garbage- and opens it up finger by finger because you've been holding on so tightly to something you thought was so wonderful and only then, when He removes it, can He put something that is truly precious in your hand.

I want to show you what I believe to be the secret of Jesus' capacity to serve others. The secret is going to be found in verses 1 and 3 of John 13. As I said, this is a visual parable. He does it silently. It's a stunning thing because it was just before the Passover Feast. Jesus knew that the time had come for Him to leave this world and go to the Father. As I pointed out before in this group, the theme of time and His hour is very important in John's gospel. Previously He would say, My hour has not yet come, My hour has not yet come. Now the hour had come and He knew this. The timing is impeccable. "Now before the Feast of the Passover, Jesus knowing His hour had come that He would depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end." (John 13:1) Then it goes on, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God and was going back to God." (John 13: 3)

Jesus knew that the Father put all things under His power, that He'd come from God and was returning to God. Knowing these three things then, He was capable of getting up from the meal, taking off His outer clothing and wrapping a towel around His waist. Then He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples' feet and drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him. (John 13: 4-5) That's an incredible concept. They who were unwilling to consider even the possibility of being servants of others now are being rebuked in one way but instructed in another way to embrace the kingdom perspective that you die to your own ambitions and you find your life by losing it in the service of others. Jesus Himself was the exemplar of this.

Peter first objects but then Jesus says, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you." (John 13: 10) After He finished washing their feet (v. 12), He put on His clothes and returned to His place. You can imagine how stunned they must've been.

Remember one of these peoples' feet He washed was Judas Iscariot, a very significant word. Even then I think there was a hint that there was still an opportunity for Judas to change before it was too late, a last minute kind of service.

Then He asked them this question in their silence, "Do know what I have done to you? You call Me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is not greater than his master, nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them. (John 13: 12-17)

I believe the key to Jesus' power and ability to do this was that He understood several things. He understood all things had been put into His hand. He understood His true identity and His great dignity before God. He understood that He had come from God. He knew who He was in this world. He had dignity. He had an identity. He also had a destiny because He knew also that He was returning to God. He had a profound security. In fact He was secure enough to serve men without actually needing the accolades of men. This is how secure He was.

He was secure in the Father's love and the more secure you are the greater you grasp that all things have been given to you. Every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places has been given to you. (Ephesians 1: 3) The more you grasp that you come forth from God- indeed the scriptures say the one who is born from above now has come forth from God- and the more you grasp that you're going back to God because Romans 8 and other texts make it very clear that that is your destiny as well. He is preparing you for His eternal dwelling place. I go and prepare a place and will receive you to Myself so that where I am there you may be also. (John 14: 2-3) So you too have security, dignity, identity- all these things are yours as well. The more you lay hold of God's riches, the more you're capable of serving others.

The more insecure you are the more you want others to notice you and the more you want to manipulate people somehow in a desperate need to get your needs met. We know what insecure people can be like- namedroppers, manipulators, people who if they wrote an autobiography would entitle it, Ten Great People Who Have Known Me! Their

whole identity is wrapped around people's identity. They're not secure enough to serve other men.

You and I are called to a true fundamental security. You should grasp your security because God has defined you and when God defines you, you don't have to prove anything to the world. When you allow God to tell you that you're His beloved son and with you He is pleased, you don't have to impress others. You've got nothing to prove. Knowing that you've nothing you have to prove, you're capable of serving men.

In this marvelous picture we see how He loved His own who were in the world to the very end. Listen to this imagery from the Holy Thursday matins in the orthodox tradition where it refers to this event in washing the feet of the disciples. The wisdom of God that restrains the untamed fury of the waters that are above the firmament that sets a bridle on the deep and keeps back the seas now pours water into a basin and the Master washes the feet of His servants. The Master shows to His disciples an example of humility. He who wraps the heavens in clouds girds Himself with a towel. And He in whose hand is the life of all things kneels down to wash the feet of His servants. It's a beautiful image, isn't it? He holds all things together and orders all things and yet He reduces His world to the realm of the lowest of the low. Typically, as you know, a servant is going to be overlooked and taken for granted. We have this extraordinary picture here in Jesus' life.

I want you to notice something as well when He said, "I have given you an example to do as I have done." (John 13: 15) He didn't really say I've set an example to do what I have done for you but to do as I have done for you. That is to say we're not necessarily full-time foot washers but rather full-time servants. That's the example, to do as He did for you, you're called to do in that way by serving the needs of other people. I encourage you to do as He said to make a commitment to do as He did by spending your energy in the service of others. He's inviting us to do that. To the degree to which you grasp your security you will be willing to begin to invest by ministering to others. Therefore you are going to be called to full-time Christian ministry in your arenas of influence.

Moving on to our next text, I want to give the ultimate example as we look at servant leadership and who God is and it's found in Isaiah 53. We see immediately is scripture that leadership is intended for use in another centered way. God gives us and entrusts us with a measure of leadership and authority so that we can use it and be empowered to use it for others. The passage about the Suffering Servant begins in Isaiah 52: 12 and runs through Isaiah 53: 12. In this picture My Servant will act wisely, He will be raised and lifted up and be highly exalted. The text goes on to say just as there were many who were appalled at Him, His appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any man, His form marred beyond human likeness; so He will sprinkle many nations. Kings will shut their mouths on account of Him; for what they were not told they will see and what they have not heard they will understand. This is the song of the Suffering Servant written 700 years before Jesus was actually born. It's important to keep this in mind because it's so very, very vivid; a picture of the work of Christ. This is really the gospel according to Isaiah.

Isaiah goes on to say in 53: 1-2 “ Who has believed our message; to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed? He grew up before Him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground.” It’s an image here of His rejection. It’s an image of how He, this root, planted by God, would grow up in the dry soil of Israel’s rejection and externalism and religious legalism and therefore not receive a receptive audience. Ultimately His own people rejected Him and consequently He would make the message available to you and me, to the Gentiles.

He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to Him, nothing in His appearance that we should desire Him. (Isaiah 13: 2b) The only physical description we have of our Lord. That He wouldn’t of been something to cause us to be amazed at His physical appearance.

Isaiah goes on to say, “ He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces He was despised, and we esteemed Him not.” (Isaiah 53: 3) By the way I’ve said this before, you and I are also going to be called to become men of sorrows and acquainted with grief. The more we understand that grief and suffering can be redemptive the more we progress but we’re called to participate in the sufferings of our Lord. It’s as if this is a past tense event yet it’s predicting something in the future: 700 years before. Yet it is a people who seem to be collectively saying we rejected this One.

Isaiah 53: 4-6, “Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. But He was pierced for our transgressions, He was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon Him, and by His wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.” It’s my own conviction that this is what Israel will say when they finally recognize their Messiah. This is a prediction of what Israel will finally admit. He says I will not come again until you say; speaking to the leadership of Israel, Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. This is a prediction of that reality. It’s a remarkable text.

The text goes on to say, Isaiah 53: 17-12, “ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth, He was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so He did not open His mouth. By oppression and judgment He was taken away. And who can speak of His descendants? For He was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of My people He was stricken. He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in His death, (they were going to throw him in a pit with the thieves and yet with the rich, Joseph of Arimathea you recall, arranged for Him to be buried in his tomb) though He had done no violence, nor was any deceit found in His mouth. Yet it was the Lord’s will to crush Him and cause Him to suffer, and though the Lord makes His life a guilt offering, He will see His offspring and prolong His days, (Significantly by the way all five kinds of offerings in Israel are actually portrayed in this chapter. It’s quite remarkable) and the will of the Lord will prosper in His hand. After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light of life and be satisfied; (It’s an image here of His return) by His knowledge my Righteous Servant will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give Him a portion among the great, and He will divide the spoils with the strong, because He poured out His life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. (The imagery, numbered with the transgressors, as you know He

was crucified between them) For He bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (This day you will be with Me in paradise for example and He made intercession for us as well.)

So as I see it, this powerful and remarkable text is beyond imagination that God Himself would offer the sacrifice for us. This we do not see in ancient literature, ancient religion or in some contemporary religion systems. The very idea that God would be the One who would make the sacrifice for us rather than us to Him is something really unimaginable.

The Jews missed this as they were expecting the Messiah to come with power and to deliver them from Roman bondage. They were expecting Yeshua Ben David, Messiah the Son of David, not Yeshua Ben Yosef, Messiah the Son of Joseph. This is an image of the Suffering Servant whom they called the Son of Joseph. They did not want the Suffering Servant. They wanted the Son of David to come and overcome the oppression of Rome. Naturally He was rejected because He did not come as they anticipated and because they were selective in their hearing of the texts that were necessary for them to grasp this. In fact, Jesus said on the road to Emmaus in Luke 24: 25-26, “How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter His glory?” Didn’t the scriptures teach this as we see clearly in Isaiah? It is so. If you were selective and listen to those texts you wanted to hear, the part about the kingdom you would fail to see is that before the crown the cross must proceed. The disciples were selective. They enjoyed the part about the kingdom. They were jockeying for position in the kingdom, grant that we may sit on Your right and on Your left in the kingdom of God (Mark 10: 37). What they failed to see though is before the crown the cross must precede. The one who would exalt themselves would be humbled. The one who humbles himself now will later be exalted. The triumph will come through the pain and the glory will come then through the loss. God is redemptive in His way of working in our lives so that He actually takes your pain, sorrow and loss and makes that the material of grace and glory. In the alchemy of grace God is capable of transmuting the lead of your suffering into the gold of glory. An alchemist tried to turn lead into gold; they had a thing called the philosopher’s stone. But there really is a philosopher’s stone and His name is Jesus Christ. God is somehow able to transmute your suffering through His grace and grace transmutes suffering into glory. If you have that perspective then you realize you really lose nothing that cannot ultimately more than be made up for.

I invite you, Jesus says, to sacrifice nothing that will not lead to greater gain. You will not have regrets when you have served Me. You may have pain. I didn’t guarantee you’d have an easy life. I didn’t guarantee a happy life. I’m interested in your holiness and your character- in your joy rather than in your happiness, comfort and the idea of your pleasure.

In looking at this we have to see what the scriptures focus on. Mark 10: 45, “Even 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 His role. I came here specifically for the purpose of serving and you are called to do as I have done for you. You are also called now not to be served in this world but to serve and give your life away and thus by losing your life you discover it. We see this portrait here that transcends any that the world has ever seen before or since.

While we were powerless, just at the right time, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” (Romans 5: 6-8) Even while we were His enemies He died for us. He took our infirmities and carried our sorrows.

Now we will look at servant leadership and move from who God is to who I am. I invite you to turn to Mark 9: 33-37. At some point in the future every knee will bow at the name of Jesus. But still He expects those who serve Him, since He came as a servant, to serve other people as well. We have this interesting view of leadership that makes evident that the service we render to others is really a measure of the service we render to God. When they came to Capernaum, He was in the house and asked them, “What were you arguing about on the road?” I just love this question. Of course He knew what they were arguing about but they kept quiet because they were embarrassed. Why? They were arguing about who was the greatest. I love the honesty of these disciples here. Again, this is not the band of men I would’ve chosen to be perfectly frank with you. I would’ve chosen more impressive men than this. God sees the heart and He knows that what’s impressive to the world is not really impressive to Him. The thing that impresses God is when you have the faith of a little child and walk in humility. Don’t confuse humility with weakness. There is an awesome power but it’s power under control that’s involved.

Somebody had a nightmare about this awful banquet here where they were all around the table and suddenly everyone discovered that they had no elbows on their arms. They couldn’t bend their arms. So how were they going to eat when they couldn’t put the food in their mouth? (Apart from putting their mouth right in their plate!) They came up with a brilliant idea that if they served each other and fed each other, they did quite well! That’s not a bad idea! If you’re called to serve one another and if you do that, then ultimately you will be benefited as well. You do it primarily for the benefit of others.

Let me go on to this text where we see in Capernaum where He called the Twelve after they just admitted they were squabbling about their place in the sun. “Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, “If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.” He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in His arms, He said to them, “ Whoever welcomes one of these little children in My name welcomes Me; and whoever welcomes Me does not welcome Me but the One who sent Me.”(Mark 9: 35-37) Now I think that’s a very important verse because what He’s really saying is something that we have similar in Matthew 25:40, “In as much as you did it to the least of My brethren, you’ve done it to Me.” So what you do is you see your service to other people who are visible as a service to Jesus whom you cannot see yet. I came across this rune of hospitality and it went something like this; I saw a stranger today and I put food for him in the eating-place and drink in the drinking place and music in the listening place. In the Holy Name of the Trinity he blessed myself and my house, my goods and my family. The lark said in her warble, “Often, often, often goes Christ in strangers’ guise. Oft, oft, oft goes Christ in strangers’ guise.” You do not know when you’ll be serving Christ. It could be when it is a person who is despised by the world that may well be an encounter with the Lord Christ. So your service to men is your service to Christ. He invites us to see it this way.

He said this to the disciples on another occasion of their arguing over the very same point in Matthew 20: 26-28, “ 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.” This is very, very similar to the Mark account we read before. If anyone wants to be first then he must be the very last and the servant of all. (Mark 9:35) For whoever finds his life will lose it and whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. (Matthew 10:39)

Okay then, how does this work? We saw who I am and who God is. How do I think about this? One great text is going to be found in Revelation 5. It invites us to see this description of the exalted Christ. I would invite you to read chapter 5, the whole chapter, and prayerfully meditate on this. The thoughtful reader of this text will see the extraordinary position of the supreme Christ. The cosmic Christ is seen. You read about this description of Him with His awe and His power, and His glory. “Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircle the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they sang: “Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength and honor and glory and praise!” Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: “To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honor and glory and power, for ever and ever.” (Rev. 5:11-13) You know to call such a One a Leader seems demeaning, but to call Him a Servant goes beyond human comprehension, yet He paid an enormous price for that to be the case.

If we think about the reality of this Philippians 2: 5-11 is a good text. “ 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, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became 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, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” If men do not confess that Name now, they will then but by then it will be too late. All in heaven and on earth and under the earth will acknowledge Him. It’s an awesome picture of who He is. But again before the glory comes humility. We see this portrait here of Him who modeled the very service that He was advocating.

Let me end up with Hebrews 4 as we reflect on what it looks like in action. Jesus is portrayed especially in verses 14-16 as our great High Priest who can identify with us. “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who has been tempted in every way, just as we are-yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” That’s an important picture. He identifies with you. He understands your temptations, plight and travails. What we have here is Jesus’ tenacious pursuit of our

good. He consistently and constantly pursued our good at a great personal cost to Himself.

If you wish to be a leader, a great leader, the greater the leader you will be will be determined by your service to others. You aspire to be the servant of all and thus you leverage that in such a way that we see the values that are necessary for kingdom service.

I also invite you to consider Hebrews 2 at the end where it talks about how He had to be made like us, particularly verse 17 and 18, "For this reason He had to be made like His brothers in every way, in order that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that He might make atonement for the sins of the people. Because He Himself suffered when He was tempted, He is able to help those who are being tempted." He understands our condition because He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

Tim Hansel in his book, *When I Relax I Feel Guilty*, talks about how a war correspondent spoke of coming across a nun on her knees. This nun was patiently swabbing the gangrenous leg of a very sick young soldier lying on a mat, which is a gruesome thing. You know the smell of gangrene and the humility of doing such a thing. The scene repulsed him and the correspondent had to turn his head away. Finally he said, "Sister, I wouldn't do that for a million dollars!" The nun paused momentarily and said, "Neither would I." See it's a totally different orientation. She's not doing it for the money. If you were in it for the money there are better ways of going than that. She's doing it because as her Lord served her she's serving others. So we are also invited to serve other people and to be other centered and put the needs of others above our own.

That's a huge and enormous risk to take, to believe that God in this world will say that the one who gave his life away for My sake will find life. The world will tell you only the one who grabs and goes for the gusto will find life. They can't both be right. If you give your life in exchange for what the world declares to be important, it will end up in bitterness, despair and disappointment in the end. You will have seen that your one life has been poorly spent and squandered. Nobody wants that to happen. We all want to do something that will endure and have ripple effects for eternity and God's invited you to be a part of that action. He's inviting you to have a slice of the action that will last forever.