

Servant Leadership

Kenneth Boa Th.M.; Ph. D.; D.Phil.

The following is a modified transcript of the teaching by Dr. Ken Boa from the leadership series on the subject of servant leadership. This is part two.

This morning we're going to be talking about servant leadership. This is the last session of the leadership series. We've done 52 sessions and we've looked at a variety of categories. We've looked at the issue of personal development; skill development and now we're ending up with the relational development side of leadership.

There was a bleak and cold day in which George Washington stepped out of his headquarters. It was cold so he drew on his great coat, turned up his collar and pulled his hat down to shield his face from the cold, blowing wind. He walked down the road to where the soldiers were fortifying a camp and no one recognized this tall muffled man who was in fact the commander of the army. He came across a group of soldiers who were under the command of a corporal. They were building a breast work of logs and the corporal, all filled with himself as being important and superior, kept on barking orders. "Up with it," he cried. "Now altogether push!" They were trying desperately to push this final log up on top of the crest. Each time they tried just at the last moment, the thing would fall back. They were exhausted. The corporal would again say, "Up with it! What ails you? Up with it!" The men would tug again and again and the log came crashing down because they weren't quite strong enough to do it. Finally, the third time when he starts barking at them, Washington himself goes up to them and exerts all his strength to push the log and it falls into place. The exhausted men were about to thank this unknown soldier and at that point he turned to the corporal and said, "Why don't you help your men with the heavy lifting when they need another hand?" The corporal replied, "Don't you see that I'm a corporal?" Washington said, "Indeed," as he opened up his coat and revealed his uniform, "I'm the Commander-in Chief. The next time you have a log too heavy for your men to lift, send for me!"

That to me is an example of servant leadership. The corporal is all filled with himself. It's an amazing analogy of our own lives in a way, isn't it? Sometimes we get so filled with our self-importance. I want you to know that the most important position on this planet is totally trivial in comparison with the kingdom. None of those positions really matter much at all relative to the power of the kingdom. We need to get that in perspective. Don't have too high of an estimate of yourself and think more highly of yourself than you ought to think.

Remember the banquet story from the last session? Someone had a dream where there was scrumptious food set before people at a banquet but no one could bend their elbows. Somebody got the idea that they could feed each other. You see the idea- instead of serving yourself- you serve each other. Everybody wins. It's a biblical model of servant hood.

I think of servant hood a great deal when I think of the text in Matthew 25: 34-40. I won't read all the verses but Jesus refers to the fact that, "The King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of brothers of mine, you did for me.'" (v. 34-40) Jesus attributes our servant hood to others as servant hood to Himself. What we do to serve people in need is in a very real way our service to Him. If we could only buy into that philosophy we would change our attitude to people who are closest to us in our lives. We'd realize again that even though people might sometimes be annoying, our service to them is our service to Christ. Our attitude toward them is our attitude toward Christ. In my view, I think we experience a lot of missed opportunities. My suspicion is even in the last few days we've missed some opportunities to do something for the least of these who are in our midst.

I fear we think of God's calling in terms of the dramatic, the large things, then what we tend to miss is the subtle day-to-day opportunities. Most of life is really woven out of those small opportunities rather than the big events. Is it not? The big decisions we make will be shaped by what we do in the small decisions. Your character is going to be formed by the day-by-day process rather than just the big events. Similarly with God's will we suppose somehow we'll only approach God for big decisions in our life. In my view, God's will is not actually a technique but a way of living where we look for Him in the small things. Then we discover that if we're faithful there, He'll reveal other things, as they're needed.

We need people don't we? We need them to embrace us, to carry our loads and to encourage one another. All of us at times struggle and are hurting. Sometimes we become the poor and the needy and others will need to help us. Just as others in the room here will be the ones that will serve others, others will serve them. There's mutuality here.

Martin Luther in his Table Talk described how two goats when they met on a narrow bridge over deep water had a decision to make. They can't go backwards and if they thrust at one another then they might both fall into the water and be drowned. Luther wrote, "Nature has taught them that if the one lays himself down and permits the other to go over him, both remain without hurt. Even so people should rather endure to be trod upon than to fall into debate and discord with one another." This is the idea again of putting the needs of another person before our own.

What is the power to do that? How can we chose to walk in the way that Jesus Himself walked because surely we know that Jesus is the exemplar of servant leadership? He's made that very clear in the gospels. I want to look at a man who exemplifies that kind of servant leadership. Barnabas whose real name was Joseph was a Levite from Cypress. The apostles called him Barnabas which means son of encouragement. He took on that name. He sold a field that he owned, brought the money and put it at the disciple's feet. (Acts 4: 36) In the next scenes about Barnabas in the Book of Acts we see how he

has a way of sponsoring and lifting people up. He surely did that with Paul when he was Saul. When everyone suspected this young Pharisee who is now a convert, Barnabas lifted him up. We ultimately see how he then encouraged them to remain true to the Lord in their hearts in Acts 11:23 when he moved to Antioch. He had a contagious witness that people came to believe. We also see that when Paul was at loggerheads with John Mark because John Mark had bailed out on an earlier missionary trip and now wanted to join them, Barnabas stepped in. He decided to take John Mark with him instead of going with Paul. We see a man who refused to abandon good people who needed sponsorship, encouragement and development. He saw something in Mark that would ultimately need to be brought out. Instead of picking another champion, he invests his life in a man who can become a man who becomes a champion. He's mentoring into a relationship and building into others. Paul then later says Mark has become very useful to me. Peter refers to him in the same way. Barnabas saw something in him and believed and invested in him. That is a mark of a servant leader.

A passage that is parallel to Matthew 20: 20-28 which we looked at last week is in Mark 10. Remember the mother of James and John came up with this modest request. She wanted Jesus to grant that her sons would sit on His right and on His left. The same conclusion is reached when Jesus talks with the disciples and takes them aside. Mark 10:41-45, "You know that those who are regarded as 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 the slave of all. For 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 marvelous word was actually evoked by their selfishness; otherwise we wouldn't of possessed it. Jesus uses this selfish act as an opportunity to make a teachable moment and to communicate to them. Look, I have become an exemplar among you.

That is illustrated also in Luke 22; the same kind of squabbling is going on. A dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest. They didn't do it with Jesus right there. They kind of walked behind Him a little bit and had these discussions. To me one of the evidences of the authenticity of the gospels is how they tell on themselves. They basically reveal that they're a bunch of spiritual dolts, blockheads! If we were there we too would be blockheads! It's interesting that often the Pharisees were more on to what He was about than the disciples. The women caught on more quickly than did the disciples. It's intriguing evidence. Here they are fighting over their place in the sun again. In this dispute Jesus says to them, (the problem with Jesus is He always knows what you're talking about!), "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. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. (Luke 22: 25-27)

I believe He said this just prior to His taking off His outer garments, putting on the towel of a servant, taking up a bowl of water and washing the feet of the disciples because there was no servant in the Upper Room. Evidently they'd gone up to the Upper Room with dirty feet because no servant was present as normally there would have been.

You can be sure if the disciples were fighting about who was the greatest in the kingdom none of them were going to take that position. Jesus in a powerful way offers a visual parable and reveals these words in practice. Soon after He says this in the John text, we see that He then washes the disciples feet, a very embarrassing kind of thing indeed to reveal that.

We've looked at this before in John 13. The text explains why Jesus was able to do this. Jesus, knowing that His hour had come when He would go out of the world, knowing that all things had been given to Him from the Father and that He had come forth from God and that He was going back to God, He was able to actually take on the garment of a servant. He knew who He was, where He came from and where He was going. He knew His dignity, His destiny, His security, and His identity. He knew who He was. Because He was secure, He was secure enough to serve. I want you to know that you and I will not serve people well unless we are secure enough in Christ's relationship where we do not need to be impressive to people. Rather when we're secure in Him we can take the place of the lowest. We can take the place of the youngest. We can take the place of the servant. God will esteem that service as service to Himself. There's a power in this. He empowers us to become better than we otherwise would have chosen to be. He not only becomes our exemplar but the one who empowers us.

Remember after the Upper Room discourse, He explains to them that it's necessary for Him to go to the Father so that He can now be with them at all times. Where two or more are gathered in My Name there I will be among you. No longer would He merely be in the localized body but He would be fully present in their lives. The "in Christ" relationship, the deep mystery, is this, Christ in you the hope of glory. Frankly I don't fully grasp that. The idea here is that the One who spoke the worlds into being is also making us into His dwelling place. We also are in Him. That is a source of power. That power is released by the indwelling of the third member of the Trinity namely the Spirit of God. We are given not only an exemplar but we are given the source of power to enable us. We are also given a grasp of who and Who's we are which gives us a significance, a security and a satisfaction that empowers us to become servant leaders.

We also have another example of servant leadership in 1 Timothy 5:1. In this case, Paul instructs Timothy, "Do not rebuke an older man harshly, but exhort him as if he were your father." He is instructing Timothy and explains to him how to serve the congregations over which he has been given authority. In this particular chapter, treat older men as fathers, younger men as brothers, older women as mothers and younger women as sisters with absolute purity. Then he goes on to talk about other details concerning the church about the elders and so forth and finally he says, "I charge you, in the sight of God and Christ Jesus and the elect angels, to keep these instructions without partiality, and to do nothing out of favoritism. (v. 21) This is a real challenge and downfall for our lives. In James 2, the first half, He talks about favoritism, an attitude of treating people with personal favoritism.

He says in effect and this is a wonderful way of looking at power, we have to consider an important understanding. While no one ever had more power at their disposal than our Lord Jesus we see again from His life that though He could calm the raging storm and cast out demons and open the eyes of those who were blind yet He also used this power in other centered ways. What I see Him doing here, He has a power to treat

others as His own. We're invited now of taking any position of leadership we have and seeing those as members of our own family. If you begin to look at the people and perceive followers as members of your family it brings a new dimension there. What will happen then? You look at those who are in need and it brings them into a sharper focus. What happens here in the church could also be true in the market place, in the classroom and in the neighborhood. As a leader then the qualities of care, the quality of concern and the quality of love becomes very, very critical in our lives. We have a way of seeing in our lives something we didn't see before. We have a way of understanding that God has called us to treat people in a family way. We see them as people who are co-sharers in these concepts.

There was a book that was written by Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership, A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. Greenleaf wrote, "The servant leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from the one who is a leader first perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire mere material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve after leadership is established. The leader first and the servant first are the two extreme types and between them are shadings and blends that are part of an infinite variety of human nature." You see this concept here? There are those who become servants first and leadership follows. There are those who want the leadership position first and they may serve as necessary.

The real mindset is to ask yourself the question, are the people that you lead, people who are growing as persons? That would be a test of true servant leadership. Are you serving them in that way? Are you serving them well so that they can begin to be people who experience care, concern and compassion?

The final text we'll be looking at is Philippians 2: 19-24. In this text we have Timothy being commended to the Philippians by Paul while Paul is in a jail in Rome. He sent this letter to them, "I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, that I may be cheered when I receive news about you. I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know that Timothy has proved himself, because as a son with his father he has served with me in the work of the gospel. I hope, therefore, to send him as soon as I see how things go with me. And I am confident in the Lord that I myself will come soon." He's saying something about Timothy; very few people take a genuine interest in other people first like he is. Their typical mindset is that they're more concerned about their own interests rather than those of others. This text tells me that if I'm more focused on the interests of Jesus Christ then I will also be capable of focusing on the needs of others as well. If I know Whom I serve, if I'm serving Jesus Christ, then I will also be capable of focusing on the needs of others as well. If I know Whom I serve, if I'm serving Jesus, I can understand then that I'm given a position of influence and of power to serve them as well. I'm called to lead with God's kingdom in mind. Those kinds of servant leaders are rare because typically they're only thinking about their own welfare, position and power.

I want to go back to Luke 22: 24-30 and read the rest of it. Jesus was saying, "I am among you as one who serves." In verse 28, "You are those who have stood by me in

my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” That’s the part they like to hear! They enjoy that bit about where you’re going to get this kingdom and you’re going to eat and drink at My table in the kingdom and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel. I truly believe that will yet be and that Jesus will bring that about in a very real way through those men. At the same time, this is telling them something, “I’m the One who confers power.” I’m the One who confers leadership. Understand that if you have any position of leadership, authority and influence, it is God who ordains and confers it. I must be willing to share in God’s kingdom values when I pursue these kinds of things.

John Piper in his book, *Desiring God*, told about a seminary professor who served as an usher in the balcony of a large church. Once as part of a service the pastor extolled him about his willingness to serve in this unglamorous role even though he had a doctorate in theology. The professor simply deflected the praise by quoting Psalm 84:10. “For a day in Thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.” So he saw his service, even though he had a Ph. D. in theology and he was a seminary professor, as being just as great and having just as much dignity. What gives your servant hood true dignity and greatness is the One that you’re really doing it for. It’s really the Audience to whom you play. That is what will truly make the difference- if you’re seeking to be pleasing to God. In other words he’s saying, I’m not heroically overcoming great obstacles of disinclination to keep the doors of the sanctuary. The word of God says it brings great blessing to take that position.

I think about William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army. He lived from 1829-1912 in the slums of London in 1865. At that time Victorian England was not very kind to it’s poor. Hence the Dickens’ novels, which were constantly excoriating the structural evil, that was rife in England at that time. Booth was actually arrested as he practiced his charity. He persevered and by 1880 the organization had grown so much that he was now ready to send his troops to America as well. He sent them over there and of course now the Salvation Army numbers thousands of members in all 50 states. On an anniversary, Booth wanted to send an inspiring message by cable to the Salvation Army posts that were all over the world. He knew he had to keep the message very brief because it would otherwise be too expensive. As a result, he chose to cable just one word. Guess what word he might have chosen? The word was “others”. That’s all he had to say and you get the message, others first. Your servant hood to others is really your servant hood to Jesus Christ.

I have a book called *The Oxford Prayer*. It’s a wonderful book that I strongly recommend for your reading because it is filled with wonderful prayers that have been collected throughout the centuries in all parts of the church. I have found it to be very useful. I found this little poem by Michael Quoist and I think it will illustrate what we’ve been talking about as we kind of tie our thoughts together.

Lord, why did you tell me to love all men, my brothers?
I have tried but I come back to you frightened.
Lord, I was so peaceful at home.
I was so comfortably settled.

It was well furnished and I felt cozy.
I was alone.
I was at peace, sheltered from the wind and rain and mud.
I would've stayed unsullied in my ivory tower.
But Lord, you've discovered a breach in my defenses.
You have forced me to open my door.
Like a squall of rain in the face the cry of men has awakened me.
Like a gale of wind a friendship has shaken me.
As a ray of light slips in unnoticed Your grace has stirred me.
And rashly enough I left my door ajar.
Now Lord I'm lost outside.
Men were lying in wait for me.
I did not know they were so near in this house and this street and this office.
My neighbor, my colleague, my friend.
As soon as I started to open the door I saw them.
Outstretched hands, burning eyes, longing hearts.
Like beggars on church steps the first ones came in Lord.
There was after all some space in my heart.
I welcomed them.
I would have cared for them and fondled them as my very own little lambs, my little flock.
You would have been pleased Lord.
I would have served and honored you in a proper respectable way.
Till then it was sensible.
But the next ones Lord!
The other men I had not seen them.
They were hidden behind the first ones.
There were more of them.
They were wretched.
They overpowered me without warning.
We had to crowd in.
I had to find room for them.
Now they have come from all over in successive waves.
Pushing one after another.
Jostling for position.
They have come from all over town, from all parts of the country, of the world.
Numberless and inexhaustible.
They don't come alone any longer but in groups.
Bound one to another.
They come bending under heavy loads.
Loads of injustice, resentment and hate, of suffering and sin.
They drag the world behind them with everything rusted, twisted or badly adjusted.
Lord they hurt me.

They are in the way.
They are everywhere.
They are too hungry.
They are consuming me.
I can't do anything anymore.
As they come in they push the door and the door opens wider.
Lord, my door is wide open.
I can't stand it anymore.
It's too much.
It's no kind of life.
What about my job and my family, my peace, my liberty and me?
Lord, I've lost everything.
I don't belong to myself anymore.
There's no room for me at home.
"Don't worry," God said.
"You have gained all.
While men came into you,
I your Father, I your God,
Slipped in among them."