

Servant Leadership: Stewardship
Delivered October 14, 2012

Both Rita and I are the oldest children in our families. Rita had four younger sisters and I have 3 younger siblings – two brothers and a sister. As oldest children each with siblings quite a bit younger than us, we had the common experience of being left in charge of the kids at various times while we were growing up. I started watching my brothers and sister when I was probably 11 or 12 years old. My parents would be out of the house for a short period of time, and I would be left “in charge” of the other kids.

Most of the time I was probably a fair older brother, but if I was honest, I would have to confess that there were probably times that I took advantage of the situation. I lost sight of the fact that my leadership responsibility for my siblings was only a temporary one, and that eventually my parents would come home and I would have to give an account for how I had handled things in their absence.

They trusted me to act as their representative to my brothers and sister, and in saying that, I knew that they expected me to serve their interests and concerns rather than my own, but the temptation to get that mixed up was pretty strong. At times I looked at it as an opportunity for me to get my siblings to do what I wanted them to do, rather than trying to serve what I knew was good for them, or even my parents.

That would lead, as you can imagine, to nights where mom or dad would come home to ask me how things went. My initial response was usually to talk about how my brother had disrupted things by not listening to what I told him to do. Surprisingly he usually saw it differently. From his point of view I had abused my authority, and been unfair to him. It didn't happen often, but I remember the feeling I would get in my stomach when dad would have to talk to me about that – about making sure that I used my authority not to serve myself; that the leadership I had been given was a privilege that came with the responsibility of doing it well.

But we can all understand the temptation to do exactly what I did in those situations, right? Sometimes this happens in family situations where we find ourselves in the leadership position, sometimes in our workplaces, sometimes in a ministry in the church, or maybe at your school. There is a pull that comes from the title or the position of responsibility that makes us feel like this is our moment – we have to seize on it to make the best of our opportunity to shine, or to take back something that we thought we deserved but never got before. It's a subtle temptation, but one that we probably give in to more often than we even realize. We tell ourselves that our decisions are really for the benefit of everyone, while really we are the ones who benefit the most.

We seem to know instinctively that it's wrong for us to use our position or authority that way, but sometimes it doesn't stop us from giving into the temptation. And even if we can't recognize that it's wrong when we do it, we definitely recognize it when someone else does it. We have all seen the man or woman at work who gets the promotion and all of a sudden goes on the power trip, right? We look at that with such distrust and distaste because we see through it and recognize it for what it is – one person getting what's good for him, not for everyone else. Being on the other side of it is a terrible place to be, and we swear it will never be us until we get the power or the position and find ourselves tempted in exactly the same way.

We have all heard the old adage about power and leadership: “Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” While that holds true for the way of the world, the Scriptures actually hold out another ideal for us. In the picture of Jesus we are being shown the model of leadership in God’s Kingdom that looks very different. In fact, Jesus holds out the ideal that he could be at the same time absolutely powerful and still use his power and authority to serve others rather than himself.

Mark 10:35-45 is one of the clearest teachings Jesus gives in this regard. His adage for leadership sounds very different from the one that we have learned about absolute power and its corruptible nature. The story begins in **Verses 35-40** with two of Jesus’ disciples making a request of him. James and John are two of Jesus’ inner circle of disciples, and they approach him thinking that their position there essentially guarantees them a leadership position in the Kingdom of Heaven. They want to sit on his right hand and left hand when he is ruling in his power. It is actually quite the opposite of what we saw from Moses, Gideon, and David when we looked at their lives last week. They were reticent to take leadership, but James and John are actually seeking it out.

Verse 41 records the response of the other 10 disciples when they hear about this request, which is exactly what we think it would be. Peter is infamous for his ability to speak unfiltered, so it’s almost miraculous that the gospel writers didn’t record his reaction. They are all offended by the audacity of James and John to ask such a bold request. Jesus hears the chatter that’s happening and decides to address the issues about leadership in his kingdom head on.

So in **Verse 42** He begins by pointing to what they already know about leadership in the dominant culture. They see that leaders in that culture use the ones who are following in order to get what they want from them. They exercise authority over them, using their power in such a way that it makes clear who is leading and who is following. Knowing that they have power gives them the boldness to manipulate situations for their own gain and creates a leadership culture where people with power wield it at the expense of people without power. In that culture those without leadership positions and authority are treated as expendable and worth less than the leaders. It is the direct antithesis of the kind of leadership and attitude we saw from Moses, Gideon, and David and it would be fatal to Jesus’ movement if allowed to become the leadership norm in his kingdom, so he nips it in the bud right away.

That is what you see around you, Jesus says, but in **Verses 43-44** he makes clear that is not what he wants to see among those who are following him and leading according to his design. But what he doesn’t say is almost as interesting as what he does say. He doesn’t condemn their desire to lead outright, instead he takes the opportunity to shape their thinking about what greatness and leadership are really supposed to be about. He doesn’t tell them that they should shy away from leadership, or that they should give up leadership responsibilities, but instead tries to show them how they can view leadership as a divine calling rather than a cultural calling.

If you want to be great in the Kingdom of heaven, then you must be willing to be the greatest of the servants. Your first responsibility as a great kingdom leader is to be a great kingdom servant because in Jesus’ kingdom, greatness will be measured by the quality of our service, our willingness to sacrifice ourselves, and give of ourselves for

God's kingdom and the people he calls us to serve. Greatness in his kingdom will not be measured by how much power or reputation we accumulate for ourselves, or how big of a following we manage to acquire. How well we use our power to serve others, the least, the last – this is the measure of great leaders in God's kingdom.

To illustrate his point in **Verse 45** he simply directs their attention to his example. This is not a theory of leadership untested and untried, but an actual model of leadership which he has carefully patterned for them. He is the ultimate example of this kind of leadership, and no one can possibly out-serve Jesus. He is the first leader, and the first servant. He is the one with absolute power and authority, and he is also the most devoted servant of the weak, the powerless, the least, and the ones that no one else wanted to serve. He never used his power to serve himself, instead he gave his very life as a ransom for many so that he could serve us to the end. He laid down his life to instill that life within us, and when we lead like he does, we honor that sacrifice.

Leading by serving expresses a fundamental value in God's Kingdom: the greatest leaders recognize that they are stewards of the influence and responsibility they have been given by God, and their ultimate desire is to bring glory and honor to him and his cause. Our responsibility and accountability as leaders in whatever capacity is ultimately to God for what we have done with the calling he gave us. We are not the owners of our family, our business, our church, our ministry, our classroom – we are stewards of influence in those places. Stewards see their leadership as temporary and know they are accountable not just for the results they produce, but for how they accomplish their task – whether they use their position to serve themselves or to serve others and God's purpose. We are replaceable. Our roles will change at some point. We may lead with a title today, but tomorrow we may not. Our platform may be small today but larger tomorrow. But in all of it God is looking for people he can trust as stewards of the influence he gives them.

The quality of our leadership hinges on that servanthood and stewardship of influence. When we serve others and Christ's Kingdom, we add value to what matters to him, and there is nothing more significant to invest in than that. One day we will give an account for how we have led people, we want to do so with joy and not with regrets. We want to accomplish God's purpose for us to the fullest extent possible and avoid the errors that cause men like Moses, Gideon, and David to eventually stumble and fall into trading what was good for God's people for what was good for them personally.

You can move towards this kind of leadership by measuring whether it moves you towards serving others or serving yourself. You have a responsibility to Christ for how you lead, not just what you get done with your leadership. This week, ask yourself these questions about your areas of leadership: Do you make decisions based on your interests or the interests of God's kingdom? Do you seek to serve first, or to be served? Do you find that you are willing to set aside what is good for you to pursue what God is calling you to do? Are you resisting stepping into a leadership role simply because you don't want the responsibility or accountability that comes with it?

In the words of one of my favorite leadership quotes of all time: "Leadership is a stewardship. It is temporary and you're accountable." Serve well and lead well so that Christ will be honored through your leadership.