

The Misunderstood Ideal of Servant Leadership

My children like to remind me that I've been around for almost half a century. At such times, I smile my bemused smile in the tenderest way that I can, and move on. After all, I should be able to handle this well – I am the parent, they are the children, and this is playing...

Is this servant leadership? I have asked myself this many times. Why does the question stay there? Servant leadership is often taught in the contemporary Christian church and beyond. It is a concept that sits well with contemporary theologians who want to promote a form of leadership that is not repressive, harsh, insensitive or ugly. This is a good motive, because many churchgoers have suffered under the hand of righteousness that has become hypocritical in its tyranny.

This urge to promote a leadership of servant orientation also seems to strike a chord with those outside the church. I have seen the term used in non-religious educational, business and organisational psychology literature. My best guess is that servant leadership has become a bedfellow with modern conceptions of tolerance, peace and egalitarianism.

Now comes the rub. How can we figure what bits of this association of ideas are good, neutral or damaging? Well, let's look at some of the Biblical principles first. In my experience, the most oft-quoted passages basis for servant leadership are the Isaiah servant ones and Philippians chapter 2. Jesus' washing of the disciples' feet is the other often-used text.

These passages are used to create lists of what Christians should be like as leaders. Some of the aspects about these lists that you may recognise are:

1. "He will not cry out, or raise his voice in the streets. A bruised reed he will not break" (Isaiah 42:2,3). The common suggested implications are that Christian leaders will not answer back, argue, lose control, and will not hurt anyone. Jesus' conduct at various stages of His trial is also used to support these suggestions.
2. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Jesus Christ, who... made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant... He humbled Himself and became obedient to death" (Philippians 2:5,7,8). The common suggested implications are that Christian leaders will not ask for anything and will always work hard for others, even to the point of ill-health or social dysfunction (e.g. neglecting others who are relationally important to them).
3. "Now that I 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" (John 13:14,15). The common suggested implication is that Christian leaders should always put the other person and his or her needs first.

We can explore how these suggested implications fit in with the common ideals from contemporary culture as listed above – those of tolerance, peace and egalitarianism. The contemporary mind sees these ideals as the basis of society, such that each person should aim to be peaceable, whilst accepting everyone, because all ideas are equal.

That is, tolerance has become the basis of peace. This mindset suggests that if we hold to a version of a one-world unity, then we will tolerate all versions of culture and religion to the extent of not judging any aspect of one being better than any aspect of another. Certainly, people of this mindset would therefore never conclude that one culture or religion could be generally better than any other – although ironically, such persons are happy for individuals to think this, as long as they do not reflect it in any form of social action. It is suggested that such peace is a testament to the dignity of all, as evidenced by being committed to the same global treaties that ensure common standards of treatment for all. And of course, servant leaders are the ones best suited to implement this social plan, because they will be servants to this common good (note that the same tolerance-peace-egalitarianism logic can be applied to any contemporary community, not just the global one – e.g. business, schools and even churches).

However, do passages such as the ones above, and their commonly understood implications as described above, easily support these urges of the contemporary mind? I would posit that the suggested common implications of these passages are incomplete, because they give a critically incomplete picture of who Jesus was and is as a leader. A fuller understanding of the Biblical contexts demonstrates that if servant leadership is a bedfellow with the current socio-political trends of tolerance, peace and egalitarianism, it is a strange bedfellow indeed.

For example, the Isaiah 42 passage is better understood in terms of the function of the servant-leader to come, rather than a single dominant style of relating. The servant of the Lord was to usher in a new order of things. This new order was a new way of fulfilling the Creator's relational order (the justice and righteousness of verse 1). This will be the basis whereby appropriate compassion can be exercised – compassion for an aching people before God becomes the motive for ushering a new way of fulfilling God's justice (also mentioned in verses 3 and 4).

Without this understanding we sentimentalise the role and style of the servant of God. We can even carry a Hollywood version of Jesus in our minds. However, Jesus was incredibly strong and determined in His actions. And at times, this led to straight rebuke or critical questioning and challenging. This also extends to the understanding of the Philippians and John passages. Certainly, the thrust of these passages is to remind God's servants to be other-person-centred. But the basis of being able to do this is faithfulness to God's Word. Jesus was very clear on this – we must hear His Words, and put them into practise (Matthew 7:24). James reiterated it: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says" (James 1:22).

A similar flawed logic is found when some people look to Jesus as being a friend. This is given as being another example of servant leadership of the egalitarian mode. There is indeed a kernel of truth in this, in that

Jesus goes to the extent of highlighting that ultimate other-person-centeredness is laying down one's life for another (John 15:13). But He notes that this must be done as an act of obedience to Himself.

That is, we are Jesus' friends if we obey Him (John 14:15 and 15:14). We are friends because we now understand who He is, and how He will send His Spirit to be our guide to truth (John 16). And this truth entails standing for justice (God's order for our relationships) and mercy (God's helping us as His children). Grace is the invitation to keep the discourse open to help learn these things – it is the Word coming to us even when we do not deserve it. This grace bearing is the role of THE Servant, and of the Servant's children. This is called service, administering God's grace as He has determined (1 Peter 4:10,11). Anyone in leadership has the additional responsibility for being an initiator of this grace bearing for all of those for whom they have responsibility. Those within their leadership are to respond with submission to those with this responsibility.

So yes, we will 'wash each other's feet' – and sometimes this will mean rebuking one another in love. Likewise, we need to be humble, as Jesus was – and sometimes submission to God's ways will mean being strong enough to be radical, even to the point of making others uncomfortable for a while.

This fuller understanding of what servant leadership is places it at odds with tolerance as defined above. It means respect for the other may have to be held in a growing tension of disagreeing strongly with him/her (which is genuine tolerance). It means that 'peace at all costs' will become 'peace as far as it depends on you' (Romans 12:18), because being humble to God's Word may even divide a family, let alone peoples. And all people being treated the same will not extend to communities of faith that may have to 'expel the immoral brother' (1 Corinthians 5).

What then can give us a clearer understanding of servant hood (which all Christians are called to) within leadership? I think that the answer is clear, based on God's grace enacted through human history. In Eden, after Adam and Eve defined right and wrong for themselves, God still came to walk with them (even though they were ashamed). He came and asked Cain a question to offer for him to tell his story and shame (even though he was in denial). God sent the Word Himself to help us even though we did not deserve Him, so that the discourse and relationship could keep going. He desires us to speak with Him, and He has done everything we need to be able to do this. Thus, a leader who serves will be a *listening leader*, who *invites the relationship through discourse to keep going, within God's order (justice and righteousness) and compassion (mercy)*. Are we ready to be God's servants in this way to all for whom we have responsibility?

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September 2003

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