

A Practical Theology of Servant Leadership

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This article presents a practical theology of servant leadership by examining primary and supplemental biblical texts. The primary texts are Matthew 20:20-28¹ and Mark 10:35-45, both of which include comments by Jesus regarding leadership and servanthood. These passages establish the unique Messianic, servant-leader role of Jesus. Among the important supplementary scriptures reviewed in this paper are the Servant Songs of Isaiah, Luke 22:25-30 (additional comments by Jesus about leadership), and John 13:1-17 (the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet). These passages also demonstrate that Jesus embodied servant leadership. The theological foundation delineated in this study provides a meaningful scriptural base from which to substantiate and advance the servant leadership concept.

“The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve” (Matthew 20:28)

The primary purpose of this article is to examine the biblical texts that relate to the concept of servant leadership and thereby build a theological foundation for the leadership theory. The primary biblical texts explored in this paper are Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45, both of which include comments by Jesus regarding leadership and servanthood. The paper also reviews various other scriptures that illustrate the quintessential servant leadership of Jesus. Among the important supplementary scriptures reviewed in this paper are the Servant Songs of Isaiah, Luke 22:25-30 (additional comments by Jesus about leadership), and John 13:1-17 (the story of Jesus washing His disciples' feet). The theological foundation of servant leadership delineated in this study provides a meaningful scriptural base from which to substantiate and advance the servant leadership concept.

Scriptural Foundations of Servant Leadership

Among the important scriptures that establish the servant leadership concept are the parallel passages found in Matthew 20:20-28 and Mark 10:35-45. The texts of the two scriptures read as follows:

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Matthew 20:20-28. ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of Him. ²¹ "What is it you want?" He asked. She said, "Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom." ²² "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. ²³ Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father." ²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, "**You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.**" ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, **whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave** – ²⁸ 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.**"

Mark 10:35-45. ³⁵ Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." ³⁶ "What do you want me to do for you?" He asked. ³⁷ They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." ³⁸ "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" ³⁹ "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, ⁴⁰ but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared." ⁴¹ When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. ⁴² **Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.**" ⁴³ Not so with you. Instead, **whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.** ⁴⁵ 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.**"

There are some variations between the scriptures. In Matthew, the mother of the sons of Zebedee accompanies them, and she functions as the primary spokesperson. The Markan scripture does not mention the mother; James and John speak for themselves. The Matthean scripture refers to Jesus' kingdom, whereas Mark speaks of His glory. However, both refer to His anticipated exaltation. In both Matthew and Mark, Jesus speaks of His cup, but the Markan scripture is more elaborate; it also refers to Jesus' baptism. Finally, the Matthean scripture is more specific about the future special places at Jesus' side; it specifically states the Father has prepared these places for His designees.

Despite the variations, the elements of the scriptures that relate to servant leadership are essentially synonymous. Jesus addresses the same issues and makes the same replies in both cases. Most importantly, the last four verses of each passage are almost identical.

Biblical Context of the Primary Scriptures

It is important to understand the biblical context surrounding the Matthean and Markan scriptures. First, the events in these passages take place near the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. The disciples had trained under Jesus for nearly three years. They had witnessed numerous miraculous events, including: 1) healings (Matthew 4:23-24; Mark 2:1-12, etc.), 2) raising people from the dead (Mark 5:37-43), 3) power over the elements (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 6:45-50, etc.), 4) deliverance from evil spirits (Matthew 8:28-32; Mark 5:1-13, etc.), 5) feeding of the multitudes (Matthew 14:13-21; Mark 6:30-44, etc.), and 6) the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9; Mark 9:2-13). Furthermore, they were aware that Jesus was more than a mere man. The Father had revealed through Peter in the presence of the other disciples that Jesus was "the Christ" (Matthew 16:13-17; Mark 8:27-29). However, it is clear in Matthew 16:22-23 that Peter (and probably the rest of the disciples) had little comprehension of the ramifications of this revelation.

A second important point regarding the context of the request of James and John is that the event took place as Jesus and the disciples were on their way to Jerusalem, not long before His *Passion* (Matthew 20:17). Jesus was at or near the zenith of His popularity. Large crowds followed Him, and He responded to them with mercy (Matthew 15:30-39; Mark 8:1-9). Very soon, He would enter Jerusalem in a triumphal fashion (Matthew 21:8-11). In light of the aura that surrounded Jesus, it is easy to see why the disciples may have soon expected Him to establish an earthly kingdom.

Third, by the time James and John made their request to sit in the places of honor next to Jesus, it appears they had taken on special roles among the disciples. James and his brother John were two of the first disciples called by Jesus. They were fishermen who immediately left their boat to follow the call (Matthew 4:21-22; Mark 1:19-20). Only Simon and his brother Andrew had preceded the sons of Zebedee into discipleship. Later, Jesus formally appointed James and John as apostles (Mark 3:14). He gave them authority and sent them out to preach, heal, and even to drive out demons (Matthew 10:1-2; Mark 3:14-17; Mark 6:6-13). Like Simon, who Jesus renamed Peter, James and John also received a special name from Jesus. He called them “Boanerges, which means Sons of Thunder” (Mark 3:17).

On at least two occasions that preceded the request to sit at the places of honor, Jesus took James, John, and Peter along on special excursions: 1) the raising from the dead of Jarius’ daughter (Mark 5:21-43) and 2) the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-2; Mark 9:2). [James, John, and Peter also exclusively accompanying Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26:36-37; Mark 14:32-33) but this event took place at a subsequent time.] These situations imply that James, John, and Peter had special places of trust or responsibility in Jesus’ plans. In the first situation a synagogue ruler, Jarius, requested that Jesus come and heal his dying daughter. However, before Jesus could proceed to the house where she lay, a messenger informed Jarius that his daughter had died. Jesus still continued to the home of the synagogue ruler and “did not let anyone follow Him except Peter, James, and John the brother of James” (Mark 5:37). There Jesus raised the little girl from the dead, and “He gave strict orders not to let anyone know about this” (Mark 5:43). Later, James and John, along with Peter, accompanied Jesus to a mountain for the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-2; Mark 9:2). On the mountaintop they witnessed Jesus’ transformation from a human, physical form into a dazzling, supernatural image. Consequently, their knowledge that Jesus was the Messiah, a miracle worker, and a supernatural person served as the foundation for their subsequent request to sit at the places of honor.

A fourth important contextual factor is that the inquiry from James and John took place in front of the other disciples immediately after Jesus predicted His betrayal, crucifixion, and resurrection (Matthew 20:17-19; Mark 10:32-34). It is quite probable that while the disciples had heard Jesus’ prediction of His death, they had no comprehension of the events that would unfold in His resurrection and ascension. Perhaps James and John were still dwelling upon an earlier statement of Jesus. In Matthew 19:28 Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.” James and John probably assumed Jesus would come into an earthly kingdom after His resurrection, and they felt a sense of urgency about requesting positions of honor in Jesus’ forthcoming reign. However, Jesus made it clear that James and John did not understand the full implications of what they were asking (Matthew 20:22; Mark 10:38). In fact, Jesus had already specified that the greatest in the kingdom of heaven would not be the prideful, exalted ones but rather those who humble themselves like little children (Matthew 18:2-4). Yet, even after His crucifixion and resurrection, the disciples again asked Jesus if He was at that time “going to restore the kingdom to Israel” (Acts 1:6).

Theological Issues

There are several very important theological issues embedded in the Matthean and Markan scriptures, some of which could constitute book-size theses. However, the purpose of this review is to focus on the concepts that directly relate to servant leadership. The primary issue relevant to servant leadership involves the desire of the two disciples to sit in exalted positions and Jesus’ response to their inquiry. Jesus acknowledged there would be exalted places of leadership, but the Father has determined their designees (Matthew 20:23; Mark 10:40). While not explicitly stated in this scripture, the exalted places are identified elsewhere as part of a kingdom in another world (John 18:36).

The most important aspects of the scriptures as they relate to servant leadership occur in Matthew 20:25-28 and Mark 10:42-45. These passages include three critical components that support the concept of servant

leadership. First, Jesus identifies the nature of worldly, human leadership. He states that the “rulers of the Gentiles lord it over” and “their high officials exercise authority over” the populace (Matthew 20:25; Mark 10:42). The Greek word for rulers is *archon*, meaning “ruler, lord, prince” (Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich & Danker, 1979, p. 113; see also Alsop, 1972). The *archon* “has a prominent position in which he exercises authority; he is thus in the first instance a ‘high official’” (Delling, 1964, p. 488). The Greek word for lord is *katakryieuo*, which means, “be master, lord it [over], rule” (Bauer et al., p. 412). According to Foerster (1964), *katakryieuo* means, “the exercise of dominion against someone, i.e., to one’s own advantage” (p. 1098). Similarly, the phrase “exercise authority over” comes from the Greek word *katexousiazo* (Bauer et al., p. 421). It means “to exercise power over them,” and the word “implies the tendency towards compulsion or oppression which is immanent in all earthly power” (Foerster, 1964, p. 575). Given these definitions, Jesus’ statement implies that worldly leaders ordinarily hold their followers in subjection and master them by wielding power, often through fear, coercion, or manipulation. This is the standard perception of authoritarian leadership witnessed throughout history in various settings.

The second major statement of Jesus is His specification of the prerequisite for greatness in the kingdom of God – “**whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be your slave**” (Matthew 20:26-27; Mark 10:43). The Greek word for servant is *diakonos*. It refers to the “servant of someone” (Bauer et al., 1979, p. 184) or “the servant of a master” (Beyer, 1964, p. 88). *Diakonos* is the root word for deacon, a position of servanthood in the body of Christ (I Timothy 3:8-13). The Greek word for slave is *doulos*. It refers to a “slave – to the master” (Bauer et al., p. 205). “Hence we have a service which is not a matter of choice for the one who renders it, which he has to perform whether he likes or not, because he is subject as a slave to an alien will, to the will of his owner . . . in *doulos* the stress is . . . on the slave’s dependence on his lord” (Rengstorf, 1964, p. 261). Given the underlying meaning of the critical words, the text indicates that greatness in the kingdom of God does not come through power or authority but rather through service. According to Ladd (1974), these passages speak of love, which “means utterly selfless service – the willingness to fill the most humble and menial tasks of service to one’s fellows” (p. 280).

The third critical part of the passage is Jesus’ identification of His own servant nature. He stated, “**the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve**” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45). From the perspective of Christ, the phrase “Son of Man” replaced the designation Messiah; it is a comprehensive term that “embraces the total work of Jesus” (Cullman, 1959, p. 137). In this verse, the Greek verb “served” and the infinitive “to serve” belong to the same word family as the noun *diakonos* used earlier in the passage (Bauer et al., 1979, p. 184). Consequently, Jesus indicated that although He was the totality of the Messiah, He did not come to be the king served by others but rather to be the servant of humanity. Jesus’ crucifixion was “the highest manifestation of His entire life of service to God and man” (Ladd, 1974, p. 187).

Summary. The aforementioned passages directly address the issue of leadership. They clearly indicate that **Jesus saw Himself as a servant leader**, one whose very incarnation had the purpose of serving humankind. Despite His inherent authority as the Messiah, Jesus did not seek an earthly kingship. Instead, Jesus advocated that those who want greatness in the kingdom of God should seek the role of servant. The passages indicate that Jesus willingly humbled Himself to serve humanity. They constitute a “climactic prophecy that the Son of Man’s title to lordship is to be gained along a road of self-denying service to man and the full and final offering of His life to God as a ransom-price for His people, as the obedient and humiliated Servant of Yahweh” (Martin, 1975, p. 192).

Messianic Expectations at the Time of Jesus’ Incarnation

In light of Jesus’ claim to Messiahship, His statements about His servant nature were particularly surprising to the Jewish mindset of the day. There were expectations within Judaism of both a Suffering Servant and a Messiah, but the two expectations did not coalesce in one person (Story, 1999). “The Servant’s essential role of vicarious suffering was not a vital part of the Jewish messianic expectation” (Story, p. 6).

At the time of Jesus’ birth, the Jews were languishing under the rule of a very strong Roman Empire (Rowdon, 1986). Herod the Great, the provincial ruler had occasionally acted favorably toward the Jews. For example, he initiated reconstruction of the temple in Jerusalem, beginning around 19-20 BCE (Josephus, 94; see also Douglas & Tenney, 1987). In addition, the Romans provided Palestine with relative security, improved travel,

economic opportunities, and a common language (Greek), which would eventually facilitate the spread of the gospel (Houston, 1986). Nonetheless, Herod was a “cruel and implacable tyrant” (Douglas & Tenney, p. 435). The Jews resented Roman oppression, political manipulation, and expropriation through taxation. The Pharisees’ derision of the position of tax collector evidenced the hatred of the Roman levy (Matthew 9:11; Luke 18:11). Consequently, the Jews wanted a Messiah who would deliver them from Roman oppression.

The Jews had long expected a Messiah. Old Testament scriptures foretold the day of His coming (Isaiah 11:1-16, 42:1-4, 49:1-26; Jeremiah 23:5-6, 33:15-18; Zechariah 3:8, 9:9, etc.). “The Messianic hope was a burning conviction held with fanatical zeal, shaped under pressure of tyranny and persecution, and inspired by deep religious faith” (Manson, 1956, p. 3). Akuchie (1993) said, “the birth and ministry of Jesus took place at the peak of the Jewish nation’s expectation of the coming of the eschatological Messiah” (p. 39).

The average Jew apparently expected a political Messiah (Stein, 1978). “The Jews expected a completely earthly, political king, not some heavenly being who would appear on earth in a miraculous way” (Cullman, 1959, p. 115). Perhaps they envisioned a ruler like King David, who would be a mighty warrior (Manson, 1956). Another possibility was an expectation of a leader similar to Moses who would liberate them from the oppression of Rome (Akuchie, 1993).

The Jews were not just interested in gaining freedom from oppression. They also sought to maintain the cultural and religious dogma of Judaism and reestablish the political and geographic claims of Israel (Manson, 1956). The Jews expected a triumphant Messiah who through God-given power would procure for Israel the preeminent position in world affairs. Jesus is a “stumbling block to Jews” (I Corinthians 1:23), perhaps because the crucified Messiah is such a sharp contrast with the triumphant hero of Jewish expectations (Manson, 1956).

The Jews were not the only ones who thought the Messiah might be an earthly king. When the Roman King Herod heard of Jesus’ birth, he was apparently afraid the announcement of the birth of the Messiah might erode his power. Herod was known for his savagery; he had ordered the murder of his own wife, Mariamne, and three of his own sons (Josephus, 94). Consequently, he inquired of the chief priests and teachers of the law about the prophesied birthplace of the Messiah (Matthew 2:3-4). They quoted Micah 5:2 and told him the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Therefore, Herod sought to kill the Messiah by ordering the murder of every baby boy in Bethlehem who was two years of age or younger (Matthew 2:16).

Summary. Clearly, the suffering servant was not the expected Messiah of either the Jews or the Gentiles. The Jews desired a new and powerful king, while the Romans feared just such a person. Jesus was the antithesis of what both groups anticipated. When Jesus did not appear as a powerful conqueror, even John the Baptist began to question whether Jesus was the true Messiah. He sent his disciples to Jesus and told them to ask: “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” (Matthew 11:3). Jesus told them to return to John and tell him of the evidence of His ministry: “The blind receive sight, the lame walk... the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor” (Matthew 11:4-5).

Jesus is a king but not of this world. He acknowledged His kingship before Pilate just prior to His crucifixion: “Are you the king of the Jews?” asked Pilate. “Yes, it is as you say,” Jesus replied (Mark 15:2). Given Jesus’ knowledge of the events that were about to unfold, He clearly was not referring to an earthly kingdom. Rather, Jesus recognized that His purpose was to eternally triumph over evil rather than merely establishing an earthly empire. His leadership would take the form of a servant and represent the incarnate demonstration of the pure love of God.

Additional Scriptures that Support the Servant Leadership Concept

In addition to the direct discourse about servanthood in the previously discussed passages from Matthew and Mark, the Bible provides further support for the servant leadership concept. For example, at the Last Supper, Jesus consolidated and clarified several of the concepts regarding servanthood, leadership, and greatness in the kingdom of God. A dispute arose among the disciples as to which of them was greatest. Jesus responded:

²⁵ The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. ²⁶ 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.** ²⁷ 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.** ²⁸ You are those who have stood by me in my trials. ²⁹ And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, ³⁰ so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. (Luke 22:25-30)

Jesus “modeled for all time what servant leadership looks like” (Wilkes, 1996, p. 17). He focused on training the disciples and teaching the masses. According to Manson (1956), the first phase of Jesus’ plan for the disciples was to gather them around Him so they could learn by observing His example. He visibly modeled the ideal of love in servant leadership. At the Last Supper He “showed them the full extent of His love” by washing their feet (John 13:1). Furthermore, He explicitly instructed them to follow His example:

¹⁴ Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. ¹⁵ **I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.** ¹⁶ I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than His master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent Him. ¹⁷ Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them. (John 13:14-17)

The account of the footwashing is important because it illustrates the connection between Jesus’ self-admission of His Lordship and His call to the disciples to follow His example (Martin, 1975). “He is Lord who chooses to play the role of a slave and by this humiliation and lowly service He both makes cleansing possible to His followers and sets them a pattern for their life of fellowship and service within the church” (Martin, p. 306).

The Servant Title of Jesus

The Bible also specifically identifies Jesus as a servant in several places: Matthew 12:18, Acts 3:13, 4:27, 4:30, Romans 15:8, and Philipians 2:7. In the Matthean and Acts passages the underlying Greek word for servant is *pais*, which can be translated as either “servant” or “son” and specifically refers to “Christ in His relation to God” (Bauer et al., 1979, p. 604; see also Alsop, 1972). In Jesus’ case, *pais* refers to both – the Son of God and the Servant of the Father. In Romans 15:8 the Greek word translated as servant is *diakonos* and in Philipians 2:7 it is *doulos* (Bauer et al., 1979). These are the same words referring to servanthood that appear in the primary passages Matthew 20:26 and Mark 10:43, which were reviewed heretofore.

The Matthew 12 passage is especially interesting because it speaks of Jesus’ servant leadership as a fulfillment of prophecy:

¹⁴ . . . the Pharisees went out and plotted how they might kill Jesus. ¹⁵ Aware of this, Jesus withdrew from that place. Many followed Him, and He healed all their sick, ¹⁶ warning them not to tell who He was. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet Isaiah: ¹⁸ “Here is my **servant** whom I have chosen, the one I love, in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on Him, and **He will proclaim justice to the nations.** ¹⁹ He will not quarrel or cry out; no one will hear His voice in the streets. ²⁰ A bruised reed He will not break, and a smoldering wick He will not snuff out, till **He leads justice to victory.** ²¹ **In His name the nations will put their hope.**” (Matthew 12:14-21)

The counterpart passage in Isaiah includes the Hebrew word *ebed* to refer to the Messiah. *Ebed* also means “servant” or “slave” (Brown, Driver, & Briggs, 1974, p. 713). According to Cullman (1959), “the concept ‘Jesus the *ebed Yahweh*’ has its origin with Jesus Himself, just as does the concept ‘Jesus the Son of Man’” (pp. 68-69); both imply His role as “the suffering servant of God” (p. 51). The Isaiah scripture not only speaks of Jesus’ servant nature but identifies His leadership role in restoring both Jews and Gentiles to relationship with God through salvation:

⁵ And now the LORD says – He who formed me [Jesus] in the womb to be His **servant** to bring Jacob back to Him and gather Israel to Himself, for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD and my God has been my strength – ⁶ He says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” ⁷ This is what the LORD says – the Redeemer and Holy One of Israel – to Him who was despised and abhorred by the nation, to **the servant of rulers: “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”** (Isaiah 49:5-7)

The Servant Songs of Isaiah

The aforementioned passage is a part of the *Servant Songs* that appear in Isaiah 42:1-9; 49:1-13; 50:4-11, and 52:13-53:12. All four of the songs speak of the *ebed* (Brown, et al., 1974). Some scholars dispute the implications of these scriptures (Kirkpatrick, 1988), but many believe they are Messianic in nature and provide a portrayal of the servant character of Jesus. Given the Hebrew concept of corporate solidarity, the *Servant Songs* also have a corporate aspect (Story, 1999). They speak of the mission of the Servant and of the restoration of Israel. Cullman (1959) indicates that Isaiah 42:6, 49:8, and 53 reveal a primary responsibility of the *ebed Yahweh*, which is to restore the covenant between God and His people.

In the first song (42:1-9), Jesus is the Servant (*ebed*) who will establish justice (42:4), be a covenant for the people (42:6), and set the captives free (42:7). The second song (49:1-13) indicates that Jesus was formed in the womb for the purpose of being an *ebed* to Israel (49:5) and also to the Gentiles (49:6). The third song (50:4-11) speaks of the suffering, reconciling nature of the *ebed*, as well as about His judgment upon the unrepentant. The fourth song (52:13-53:12) returns to the role of the *ebed* in salvation. This passage emphasizes His suffering and His role in bearing our sins:

³ 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. ⁴ Surely He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered Him stricken by God, smitten by Him, and afflicted. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; He was led like a lamb to the slaughter. . . . ¹⁰ 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, and the will of the LORD will prosper in His hand. ¹¹ After the suffering of His soul, He will see the light and be satisfied; by His knowledge my righteous **servant** will justify many, and He will bear their iniquities. Isaiah (53:3-7, 10-11)

Jesus took upon Himself the title “Son of Man” (Matthew 8:20, 9:6, etc.). It indicated His role as “Servant of the Lord” (Manson, 1956, p. 73). According to Cullman (1959), Jesus’ statement that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28; Mark 10:45) addresses “the central theme of the *ebed Yahweh* hymns” and is “a clear allusion to Isaiah 53:5” (p. 65). “It is as if Jesus said, ‘The Son of Man came to fulfill the task of the *ebed Yahweh*’” (p. 65). The role worked out in the deeds of Jesus’ ministry, especially those tasks that emphasized service and sacrifice (Manson, 1956).

Other Servant Leaders Identified in the Bible

In addition to Jesus, the Bible identifies several other individuals as servant leaders. For example, several scriptures describe great leaders of Israel as servants. Abraham, the patriarchal leader of Israel, was identified as God’s servant (Genesis 26:24; Psalms 105:6, 105:42). The effects of his servant leadership linger in modern society, since both Jews and Christians trace their heritage to his son Isaac. Moses was the appointed leader of Israel when they left Egypt and while they wandered in the Wilderness (Exodus; Leviticus; Numbers;

Deuteronomy). The New Testament identifies Moses as the servant of God (Hebrews 3:5; Revelation 15:3). Likewise, David was the exalted King of Israel when the nation was at or near its zenith (I & II Samuel; I Kings; I Chronicles). David was also identified in the New Testament as a servant of God (Luke 1:69; Acts 4:25).

In addition to the vanguard of the Old Testament, several scriptures identify servant leaders in the early Christian church. According to Rinehart (1998), the leadership style of the apostles arose from “a desire to serve rather than dominate” – consequently, they gave themselves to building up people, rather than building up institutions (p. 76). Among the leaders of early Christianity were Peter, James, and Paul. Peter was an impetuous fisherman (Matthew 4:18, 16:21-23, 26:69-75; Mark 8:31-33, 14:66-72; Luke 5:1-7, 22:55-62; John 21:3). However, he became the leader of the church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40). Later, Peter identified himself as a servant (II Peter 1:1). Like Peter, James identified himself as a servant (James 1:1). Rinehart (1998) recognized James as a clear example of a leader. Paul, formerly Saul, was a law-abiding Pharisee (Acts 23:6, 26:5; Philippians 3:5) and a former persecutor of Christians (Acts 7:58-8:3, 9:1, 22:4). Yet, in many respects, Paul became the theological leader of the Christian church. Despite his prestigious heritage and his call to leadership, Paul identified himself as a servant of Jesus (Romans 1:1; Galatians 1:10; Colossians 1:23, 25; Titus 1:1). Furthermore, Jesus specifically appointed Paul as a servant in Acts 26:16.

Clearly, the scriptures do not confine the servant leadership concept to Jesus. Despite the frailties of human nature, God still worked in biblical times through men and women to lead everything from small groups to entire nations. Both Old and New Testament passages indicate that God called other leaders into servanthood. The legacy of these leaders indicates that service is the route to greatness in the kingdom of God.

Conclusion

Jesus' leadership was paradoxical (Cedar, 1987; Rinehart, 1998). He was the “greatest leader in the history of the world” (Ford, 1991, p. 11). He possessed all authority in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18), yet He was the world's utmost servant. Nouwen (1989) said Jesus' leadership is that “in which power is constantly abandoned in favor of love. It is true spiritual leadership” (p. 63). Jesus willingly surrendered His position of power to humbly and sacrificially serve mankind through death on the cross. The message of the cross is confusing foolishness to the unregenerate mind, but paradoxically, it is the great wisdom of God for bringing mankind to repentance and salvation (I Corinthians 1:23-25).

God has predestined that all who call on His name should be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Romans 8:29). Part of that process should incorporate servant leadership. However, “servant leadership is not easy; nor is it natural” (Cedar, 1987, p. 157). It is contrary to the self-centered tendencies of every human being. Many of the leaders (other than Jesus) identified herein in association with servant leadership had problems with sin. Abraham practiced deception out of fear (Genesis 20:1-15), Moses was guilty manslaughter (Exodus 2:11-14), David committed adultery (II Samuel 11:1-5), Peter cowardly lied about his relationship with Jesus (Mark 14:66-72; John 18:25-27), and Paul was a conspirator to murder (Acts 7:54-8:1). Consequently, Christians should seek to emulate Jesus above all others. Emulation must involve service. Jesus said, “whoever serves me must follow me; and where I am, my servant also will be. My Father will honor the one who serves me” (John 12:26). Furthermore, “the greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted” (Matthew 23:11-12). The person who aspires to genuine servant leadership seeks to follow the footsteps of Christ. Humility and sacrifice mark Jesus' path, but ultimately, it is the paradoxical route to greatness in the kingdom of God.

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