



“Better Together – Lead + Serve”

Deuteronomy 18:15–19; Matthew 5:1-5; Matthew 17:1–13

What kind of leader are you? What kind of leader was Jesus? Are you ready to serve those you lead?

Let’s cut to the quick. We are all called to lead, for leadership in the churches that make up Christ’s body cannot be left to some ordained clergy, full-time staff, and those willing to volunteer for committees. All believers are called to take the initiative in our common vocation. When someone needs help, it is the task of us all to step up and see

that the help is given, even if it doesn’t come directly from us. Every growing church on the globe knows the truth of this. I’ve learned it over the years on occasions too numerous to count.

Christians step up to lead in even the smallest of tasks, gathering two or three to help. We can never sit and wait for someone else to take the lead. It is in our genuine caring for others that our leadership is seen. Jesus expects this of us; he expects that we will lead in facing every need, in embracing every soul, in leading even strangers to Christ by our actions. How could we be like Jesus, truly embracing our apprenticeship, and yet always wait on others to set the pace. May we all be wise shepherds when needed.

Leading with a servant’s heart

We are all asked to lead. Sometimes in a large organization. Sometimes in a small group. Among a group of friends. Or in our family. All of us are called upon to influence the behavior and thinking of other people with whom we are seeking a shared goal. Leadership is inescapable. We all lead and we all are led.

Jesus led.¹ In leadership-speak, Jesus formed a team, showed them a vision of where they were headed, and taught them how to get there in everything he said and did. But even for Jesus, leading wasn’t easy. His disciples were often confused, blind to the larger picture, unable to understand or live out what Jesus was trying to teach them – at least until after Jesus was gone. For then, over the next decades, Jesus’ disciples, now apostles, spread across the Mediterranean world, building for the kingdom of God.

Ken Blanchard of *One-Minute Manager* fame, set out to learn more about Jesus’ leadership from the four gospel accounts. Blanchard writes, “I realized that Christians have more in Jesus than just a spiritual leader; we have a practical and effective leadership for all organizations, for all people, and all situations.” Perhaps so. It is certainly a provocative claim, but may neglect the distinctiveness of the Church and the work of the Holy Spirit in a world filled with people who are at best apathetic and, at worst, hostile to God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Still, we can learn a great deal about leadership from Jesus. We just have to be ready to be surprised . . . as surprised as the disciples.

Wishing to serve

Jesus’ leadership began with the heart, not the head, not even the hands. A humble heart. A giving heart. A serving heart. Today’s passage from Matthew is taken from the last days before Jesus’ crucifixion. Two disciples, the brothers James and John, the sons of Zebedee, get their mom to go to Jesus and ask that her sons get elevated among the group so that they can sit at Jesus’ right and left hands in the kingdom. When the other disciples hear what had happened, they are understandably upset and go to Jesus, who seizes the teaching moment. The Gentiles may lord it over one another, Jesus says, each seeking to rise higher than the next, but that is not to be the way of Jesus’ disciples. They are to emulate Jesus, remembering that they are to serve, not be served.

This isn’t about being nice or even helpful. It is about putting the interests of others ahead of our own even when that means substantial sacrifices from us. Blanchard writes, “A heart motivated by self-interest looks at the world as a ‘give a little, take a lot’ proposition. People with hearts motivated by self-interest put their agenda, safety, status, and gratification ahead of those affected by their thoughts and actions.” The question Blanchard asks is pretty much the same question Jesus asked the brothers James and John: “Are you a self-serving leader or a servant leader?”

¹ Jesus was led as well, as he sought to follow The Father’s will in living out the vocation given him. Jesus prays at nearly every turn in the gospels. Great leaders know how to follow well also.

Likewise, the writer of Hebrews, sometimes referred to as the Preacher, points us toward the example of Christ. Even when we tire or lose heart, we are to, as John West put it, “keep on keepin’ on” for Christ, our model and our hope. Jesus endured, setting aside humiliation and shame, always keeping his eye and his heart on the goal.

Ego

Ken Blanchard has a clever way of creating helpful acronyms and charts. For example, he asks whether our ego gets in the way of our faithful obedience. Does our ego “Edge God Out?” Do we allow ourselves to be driven by pride and fear? Pride pushes us toward the promotion of ourselves, at the expense of others. Fear pushes us toward the protection of ourselves, again at the expense of others. In their self-promotion before Jesus, the brothers James and John revealed their prideful desire for status and recognition.

Or . . . will we seek an ego that “Exalts God Only.” Will we embrace a life built on humility rather than pride and confidence rather than fear?

Blanchard suggests that trading one EGO in for the other is a matter of (1) embracing an eternal perspective, (2) seeking to lead for a higher purpose, (3) carefully assessing our own faith and trust in God, and (4) seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. All this is sound advice that has been taught and modeled by Christians for two thousand years. Blanchard and Hodges even suggest a twelve step program to move from Edge-God-Out to Exalt-God-Only patterned on Alcoholics Anonymous or Celebrate Recovery! That may seem a tad cute, but Blanchard and Hodges are right to see that many of us have nurtured egos that get in the way of our discipleship and joy. Perhaps, a twelve-step EGO Anonymous program or CR Group actually would help.

Community

Paul’s aphorism from 1 Cor. 10:13 can be puzzling. Really? . . . God won’t allow me to be tested in more than I can handle? I can certainly imagine events in my life that I’m not at all confident I could handle. Trading in one EGO for another won’t insulate me from suffering and problems.

But it is important to know Paul isn’t really speaking to “me.” The “yous” here are plural. Paul is speaking to the community not to any one individual. It is in community that we learn to Exalt God Only. It is in fellowship that we learn the way of forgiveness and grace. Together, we learn how to lead with servants’ hearts. And in all this, God is forever faithful. Paul Sampley writes, “With every test, the faithful, dependable God will make sure it is something you can collectively handle, or God will provide an exodus as in olden times.” Amen.

Leading with a servant’s hands

People are surprised when they find out that I recommend against using a red-letter Bible, in which Jesus’ words, and nothing else, are in red. It’s not that I’m against Jesus’ teachings; the problem is that a red-letter Bible makes it seem that what Jesus did was less important than what he said. Yet, we know from our own experiences that what we do often reveals more about who we are than what we say. Even our children know that the ole’ “Do as I say, not as I do” doesn’t really cut it. Jesus had the wisdom to both say it and do it.

And what did Jesus do? He traveled and he taught and he proclaimed the arrival of the kingdom of God and he invited and he welcomed . . . and he healed. All of this was focused on Jesus’ astonishing claim that in him, the long-awaited dawning of God’s kingdom had arrived. As Jesus puts it in the opening of Mark’s gospel, “The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the good news” (1:15).

It is pretty easy for us to grasp that Jesus taught about the kingdom of God. Many of Jesus’ parables begin with the phrase, “The kingdom of God is like this . . .” The Sermon of the Mount is an extended teaching of what the kingdom of God is like. But what about Jesus’ actions? His dining with tax collectors and prostitutes. His healing of the lame and the blind and the sick. Yes, these were acts of compassion, but they were far more: they were enactments of the kingdom of God. Not just mini-dramas to make a point, but the genuine bursting forth of God’s kingdom.

Consider Jesus’ announcement of his ministry in Luke 4. Jesus rises to speak in the Nazareth synagogue and reads from the scroll of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

When Jesus fed the poor, healed the sick, made the blind see and the rest, he was showing people that God’s kingdom had arrived, for in God’s kingdom there is no hunger and no sickness and no blindness. Again, these were not merely

live-action parables. It was more like Jesus was opening a portal² into the kingdom of God when he cured each sick person.

The reality of God's kingdom and its arrival 2,000 years ago is what makes Christian mission work different than it appears to some. Whether it is feeding the hungry, providing malaria nets, or proclaiming the Good News, all these are also enactments of God's kingdom, portals into a world without hunger, malaria, or ignorance.

A full belly may look like no more than a full belly to some – but there is far more going on. It is a bit like seeing a Bible sitting on a table. For many, the Bible is no more than a marginally interesting collection of ancient writings. But, in truth, the Bible is much more than that. It is the “God-breathed” revelation of God's self. It is the Godgiven testimony to Jesus Christ, the living Word of God. As the cliché goes, there is more to the Bible than meets the eye. And there is more to each person's act of compassion.

A leader's hands

In the kingdom of God leaders serve. Each time we put the interests of others ahead of our own, each time we help those who need, each time we set aside our prideful ambition, we are participating in the kingdom of God. This is not only what servant leaders say, it is what they do. It is what Jesus did. But how do we learn to be a serving leader? How do we set aside the world's conceptions of what it means to be a leader?

Blanchard and Hodges remind us that Jesus took his disciples from complete novices when he first called to them at the seaside to teachers and leaders in their own right, able with the help of God's Holy Spirit to build a church that endures to this day.

Likewise, we have to learn to be servant leaders. Each of us begins as a novice, or as Peter puts it, a newborn infant feeding on the pure, spiritual milk, so that we might grow into salvation (1 Peter 2:2). We learn to be trustworthy apprentices, eager for, as Paul puts it this time, “solid food,” (1 Corinthians 3:2). We strive to be maturing and ever-growing disciples of Jesus Christ.

But of course, God doesn't stop with us there. We are to be disciples with a purpose, modeling Christ with our heart, hands, head, and habits. In this sense, we are all missionaries. It is this outward focus that is so easy for us to forget. It is not just about helping out or doing good for others. It is about proclaiming the Good News in all that we say and do. Freeing the oppressed, healing the sick, feeding the poor . . . this is not just Jesus' work, it is our work too. And every moment spent doing such work is a moment lived in the Kingdom of God.

² The kingdom of God is not merely a conception of our heads or hearts. It is real; every bit as real as the pavement you and I walk on each day. The best way to think about God's kingdom is as a parallel reality that will one day fully wash over our own. The coming of the kingdom is not about our going somewhere, it is about that somewhere being fully here. One of the things I like about the Harry Potter series is that it opens its readers to the possibility of two parallel realities, the world of wizards and the world of muggles, which somehow coexist in the same “space;” one world fully aware of the other, while one lives in near ignorance.