

The Servant Leader

Jesus overturned every worldly idea about power when He introduced the concept of servant leadership

The spirit of Christ is the spirit of ministry. It is in serving, healing, blessing and binding up that the children of the King most resemble their Father.

The spirit of Babylon and of Rome is the lust for power, the power to lift up or sweep away, to own, to kill and to make the lowly fear. Whether in a day laborer or a corporate king, the spirit of Christ is servanthood, ego-crucifying, self-denying, others-centered servanthood.

The power of servant leadership lies not in position but in motive. The CEO of a massive corporation, holding great responsibility, may “wash his employees’ feet” by seeking their benefit in business.

There is no conflict between a well-managed business making a profit for its stockholders and one making a good life for its employees. There is no room for exploitation in Jesus’ model of servant leadership.

The servant leader is still in authority even as Jesus was when He washed the disciples’ feet. No one in the room doubted who the leader was. Because He authentically ministered to their needs, no one resigned, no respect was squandered and no face was lost.

Servant fathers will still discipline their children. The servant CEO will still make decisions, sometimes decide for layoffs, and will dismiss employees who fail to meet company standards. He will never browbeat, threaten or manipulate. He will not withhold money or praise or encouragement.

The servant leader stoops to anoint his followers with the oil of gladness and never stands taller than when he kneels to wash their feet. His power rests in servanthood, not in dominion. Far from losing power in serving, he is enriched by it. He goes from strength to strength not by bending others to his will, but by sacrificing that they might be blessed.

What does servant leadership really mean in practical terms for a CEO or a college president? Does it mean that the CEO is out in the parking lot washing his employees' cars every day? Does it mean that the college president makes the beds and cleans the bathrooms in the dorms?

No, it doesn't mean that. Jesus washed the disciples' feet once, and the fact that it is recorded is the surest proof that He did not do it every day.

Being a servant leader is about being genuinely interested in the well-being of those entrusted to you. It means treating subordinates with respect and securing the dignity of all. To reduce Jesus' model of servant leadership to random acts of servitude is to trivialize a great truth.

To make foot-washing merely ceremonial is to risk ritualizing the call to practical servanthood, thereby separating it from real life. Authentic servant leadership is indeed sacramental, and does, in fact, mean practical acts of kindness, but it is so much more.

Servanthood is a mysterious spirit with power sufficient to break proud hearts and humble the high and mighty. Infinitely more important for leaders than for servants—an attitude more than an action—the power of servanthood is very near who Jesus is and who He was on the last night before He was crucified. Loving Him, we grow like Him.

Like He did, we serve. Serving, we know His power. Empowered, we change and heal whom we serve.

Jesus cared more for His influence upon the few closest at hand than for His image among the masses. The life of a leader, his character and his servant spirit will do much to influence his closest associates.

Here is the rule: The closer to the area of immediate impact, the greater the influence. A preacher may, even from a great distance, have some small influence upon the guy in the back row. But his longtime associate, his secretary, and his kids know the real man, and upon their lives and souls he writes the story of his own character.

After the cross, after all their betrayals and denials and disappointments, the apostles became what they became in great part because of the influence of Jesus. As they walked in wisdom and grew in grace, surely upon occasion they saw Christ in one another.

In the way one or the other would turn a phrase while preaching or pray aloud or even work a miracle, the others would surely smile at one another knowingly: "That looked just like Jesus." "Your voice just then reminded me so of Him." "That is exactly the way He used to do it."

What they were, the giants they became, how they lived and how they died were reflections of Jesus' power. His influence upon them as well as His spirit within them was the power by which they turned the world upside down.

Not one of the apostles was ever a king, prince or president. None ever held any office, ruled a country or ran a company. Yet they lived their lives in His power, serving and submitting themselves to God and humanity as they had seen Him do. Theirs was never the power of the current age but the mysterious, eternal power of the suffering servant.

When they died—some by the sword, some in the fire and one on a cross—they were not powerless victims. They were more than conquerors.