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The Greatest Commandment: The Foundation for Biblical Servant Leadership

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“The servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first.” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13).

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45, NASB).

Introduction

In 1977, Robert Greenleaf published his reflections on his journey into the nature of power and greatness. Greenleaf’s reflections presented a rather optimistic model of leadership that he believed could be achieved—that leaders, through their service, could legitimize their power and help build a serving society. Yet to do so, leaders had to model principles that, at least at the outset, seemed counterintuitive to many peoples’ concept of leadership. These principles emanated from a desire to serve which, according to Greenleaf, was inherent in the leader. For Greenleaf, “the servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve” (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 13).

For Christians, the concept of serving others—even from a leadership position—is not new. Jesus called us to serve (Matt. 20:26, John 12:26), demonstrated service (Matt. 20:28, Phil. 2:7, John 13:3-17) and reminds us of God’s command to serve (Luke 4:8). The Bible is replete with examples of leaders who sought to serve others (e.g. Joseph, Moses, Peter, and Paul). Thus it is not difficult to see why the concept of servant leadership continues to resonate with Christian leaders today. What may be more difficult is for believers to remember the importance of *who* is to be the primary recipient of our service. For Greenleaf, the call to “serve first” assumes service to others, the people the leader leads, and proceeds from his naturalistic worldview. Christians rooted in the Biblical worldview, however, must understand that the Greatest Commandment outlines

the order of our service—that order being God first, then others. This paper will examine how the Greatest Commandment serves as the foundation for demonstrating Biblical servant leadership.

The Christian and Servant Leadership

Even as Greenleaf defined the servant leader as one who has a desire to serve, to “serve first,” he knew that the words *serve* and *lead* were overused and even carried negative connotations (1977). With the recent proliferation of the concept of servant leadership in academia, the marketplace, and the church, perhaps the phrase itself is overused and, if not a negative term, is one whose meaning is suspect. Yet as Greenleaf noted, though the words *serve* and *lead* were overused, they are nonetheless good words. Thus, although the phrase *servant leadership* may be overused—or wrongly used—the phrase is nonetheless a good phrase since it identifies a concept that is good and Biblical.

Biblical servant leadership is good since it espouses a crucial concept for Christians who would lead—that leadership and service are not separate and contradictory terms, but are two sides of the same coin. Blanchard & Hodges (2005) posit, “Servant leadership is a concrete expression of a daily commitment to live out the Word of God and the will of God and thereby advance the kingdom of God” (p. 194). For Blanchard and Hodges, servant leadership is not an option; it is a mandate for the believer.

The earliest call for believers to both lead and serve can be traced back to the first chapter of Genesis. In Genesis 1:27 we read, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (NASB). As image-bearers of God, Adam and Eve were then given a command: “Be fruitful and multiply,

and fill the earth, and subdue it; and rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (Genesis 1:28).

These two verses relate profound truth for Christians called to lead. Finch (2007) believes that Genesis 1:27 carries the implicit message to serve others, since serving others “is the only response commensurate with God’s work in creation, in which God imprinted the divine image on Eve and Adam and, through them, on every human being” (p. 204). This understanding—that we are all image-bearers of God—is critical to rightly implementing the command of Genesis 1:28, in which Adam and Eve were told to rule over the earth that God created.

Stevens (2006) observes that by this command to rule, Adam and Eve were given the role of stewards who had “the wonderful role of representing the absent monarch’s interests” (p. 6). As stewards, followers of God act as trustees that are to develop and to serve the “unfolding kingdom” of creation (Roels, 1990, p. 27). Further, Roels contends that if one believes that his or her business plays an important role in God’s kingdom, then an important concern is to best determine *how* to be God’s steward in such business endeavors. This concern leads many to search for the best ways to both serve and lead in their business, and thus the continued allure of servant leadership as the biblical answer to fulfilling the role of a steward.

Stevens (2006) calls the Genesis mandate to both serve and lead the cultural commission of God that, like the Great Commission of Christ, is incumbent upon all believers to undertake (p. 82). But does this call necessarily equal a call to servant leadership? Though Finch (2007) observed that servant leadership resonates with people who are not necessarily connected to any religious tradition (p. 203), Reinke (2004)

posits that servant leadership is “highly consistent with Judeo-Christian philosophical traditions and teachings” (p. 34). Yet Chewing (2000) cautions against assuming a biblical call for such a paradigm, suggesting instead that the Christian should focus on the aspect of service rather than leadership. “Christ did not come to mentor leadership...He came to serve, not to be served” (p. 15). Niewold (2007) also warns Christians against uncritically adopting Greenleaf’s version of servant leadership. “Here is a Christianized humanism suited to the modern autonomous self unfamiliar with, and even hostile to, such essential soteriological categories as transcendent holiness, sin, personal moral corruption, repentance, conversion, and even mission dei” (p. 126).

Interestingly, when Greenleaf first published his thoughts on servant leadership, he understood that its central tenets were at best counterintuitive and must weather inevitable criticism. He wrote, “Criticism has its place, but as a total preoccupation it is sterile...if too many potential builders are taken in by a complete absorption with dissecting the wrong and by a zeal for instant perfection, then the movement so many of us want to see will be set back” (1996, p. 11). Yet he also understood the need for his ideas to be analyzed and expounded upon as new information became available and new analysis conducted. Far more than just adopting contemporary theory on a particular leadership practice, the Christian in business must take all such theories captive to the obedience of Christ and see if such ideas are good, virtuous ideas (II Cor. 10:5; Phil. 4:8).

With this in mind, let’s begin with the very foundation of Greenleaf’s servant leadership—that the “servant-leader is servant first” (1977, p. 13). Few Christians would argue that Christians are not called to serve—this was the very essence of Christ, and again relates to the powerful attractions to Greenleaf’s central tenet that the servant-

leader is to serve. For Christians, the issue is not service, but *who* is to be the foremost recipient of our service as stewards of God. Despite Greenleaf's definition, the call to serve others is not the foundational call of the Christian servant leader. The foundational call for Christians is to serve God first.

Seeking the Kingdom: The Greatest Commandment

Jesus said, "But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt. 6:33). Jesus spent the entirety of his public ministry teaching and showing the way of the kingdom while living the righteousness of God. Thus the exhortation to seek the Father's kingdom first is exemplified in the life of Christ in word and deed. For Jesus, seeking the kingdom was not merely living a moral life of perceived holiness before God—think of his stinging rebukes of the Pharisees. Seeking the kingdom was first and foremost submission to his Father's will, a will that included obedience unto death, "even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

It is worth noting that there were times when Jesus seemingly refused service to others in order to be obedient to the Father. Jesus delayed his healing of Lazarus so that God would be glorified (John 11). Jesus withdrew himself from the crowds to be alone with the Father (Luke 5:16). Jesus refused those who would proclaim him political messiah so that he could become their spiritual Messiah—just as the Father had required (John 6:15). In short, Jesus was a servant to his Father first in order to better serve those he came to save. Scripture reinforces this idea for believers who seek to be servant leaders—our service to others is complete when it is first and foremost rooted in loving service to God.

A lawyer, well versed in matters of covenant and Mosaic law, once asked Jesus a question: “Which is the greatest commandment?” (Matt. 22:36). His question hearkened back to the teachings of Deuteronomy—a book Jesus knew quite well. Jesus readily answered, “To love the Lord with all of your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment” (Matt. 22:37-38). Then Jesus added, “And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. In these rest all of the law” (Matt. 22:39). This was life in the kingdom of God. This is what it meant to seek the kingdom *first*. Love God, then love each other. Scripture gives us numerous examples of how we demonstrate our love for God. Deuteronomy 10:12 states we are to “love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul.” Here, love is couched in service. Deuteronomy 11:1 adds that when we love God, we will keep His charge, His statutes, His ordinances, and His commandments. And His command is that we love and serve others. This is how we show the Father we love Him—by keeping these commands (John 14:21, 23). Love and serve God first to better love and serve each other. It is by being rooted in this truth—and understanding the critical order in which Jesus encapsulated the commandments of God—that our service to others can be blessed and sustained.

Again, Jesus lived and modeled the truth he taught. He is the perfect role model of servant leadership (Blanchard & Hodges, 2005). Stevens (2006), for example, noted that although one of Jesus’ messianic titles is “the servant,” his service was rooted in his obedience to the will of the Father (p. 52). Similarly, Stark (2005) posits that everything Jesus did related to what the Father was doing, that Jesus’ activity flowed as the Father directed. This is Biblical servant leadership. As Borek, Lovett, & Towns (2005) remind

us, “Jesus both taught and modeled the principles of servant leadership throughout His public ministry and private mentoring” (p. 210).

Thus Jesus serves as the consummate example of the Greatest Commandment displayed in its purest form. He understood the importance of the Greatest Commandment when, faced with the agony of the cross, he prayed, “Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done” (Luke 22:42). Jesus served the Father first, and through this selfless act of placing himself fully in the Father’s will came the most unimaginably powerful act of service to others—redemption. So the ministry of Jesus was fulfilled by living the Greatest Commandment and was far more than just service to others—it was first and foremost service to God and his purposes (Stevens, 2006).

Other Biblical figures relate this important truth. Moses, for example, can be rightly viewed as one of history’s godliest servant leaders. But his life was not always marked by such humble service to God. Consider Moses’ role in delivering the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage. The events that led to his leadership role were sparked by Moses’ slaying of an Egyptian taskmaster (Exodus 2:11). Acts chapter 7 provides a rich context to better understand the actions of Moses when he killed this Egyptian. We often view Moses’ action as the reactive, violent response of a Hebrew defending his enslaved countryman. But the author of Acts states that Moses “supposed his brethren would have understood how that God by his hand would deliver them: but they understood not” (Acts 7:25). Moses was beginning to assume the mantle of leadership and, at least in his eyes, to serve his brethren by initiating deliverance. The only problem was that Moses’ initial plan for serving the Hebrews was not rooted in the Greatest

Commandment. Once it was, Israel received her deliverance—not by the natural hand of Moses but by the supernatural hand of Moses' God.

Sometimes loving and serving God first might seem counterproductive to the command to love and serve others. For instance, when faced with a royal command to pray only to Cyrus, the prophet Daniel chose to continue his prayer time with God. The consequence of his decision was terrible—Daniel was sentenced to death. For the Jews living in Babylon, Daniel's fate not only meant the death of a fellow Hebrew, it also meant that their small displaced community would lose a high-ranking member's position of influence. Servant leadership absent the Greatest Commandment might surmise that the best way to serve others would be to retain one's position of power by adapting to the king's edict. Such an action, however, would forego God's miraculous deliverance of Daniel—an act which moved the great Persian king to proclaim Daniel's God the "living God" and ensured that the Jews were free to worship Him (Daniel 6:25-27).

Thus, once a person demonstrates the love demanded by the Greatest Commandment, service to others can then be truly understood. As Rahner (1983) stated, "The human being attains his or her fulfillment in one single, total act of his or her existence: in the love of God for his own sake" (p. 70). Rahner also noted that love of God and neighbor were in a type of mutual relationship, that love of one's neighbor was an achievement of obeying the Greatest Commandment. Serving others demonstrates our love for others, yet our love for others must first emanate from our total and preeminent love for God.

Loving God Sustains our Service for Others

Greenleaf (1996) believes that the average person faces a dilemma when facing a decision that has ethical implications. The dilemma is not that the person lacks an ethical code or desire to make the moral choice, but rather that the person lacks the strength required for such a choice. Greenleaf defines strength as “the ability to see enough choices of aims, to choose the right aim, and to pursue that aim responsibly over a long period of time” (p. 27). Thus strength is the ability to not only choose the right thing; it is also the ability to see that choice through.

Servant leadership that is rooted in a deep and genuine love for God provides the wisdom and strength needed to give our lives in service to others. Leadership can be an emotionally draining and physically exhausting work. Working with fallen people in a fallen world can create difficulties that weary the heart. The psalmist noted, “My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Psalm 73: 26). Strength of heart is not provided in service to others—it comes only from the Lord and provides the strength needed to endure while practicing true servant leadership.

Drawing upon the leadership of Nehemiah, Boice (1996) noted that while some Christian leaders put their relationships with others first, the first priority of Nehemiah was to serve the Lord and seek Him in prayer. Boice believed Nehemiah sought God first since only God “could accomplish what needed to be accomplished” (p. 202). In our roles as servant leaders, our objectives can sometimes seem no less daunting. As we seek to advance the kingdom in the midst of a subjective and relative culture, we too need the strength of God to accomplish His work. God is not only the strength of our hearts; he is also the strength of our hands. Nehemiah prayed, “For they all made us afraid, saying,

Their hands shall be weakened from the work, that it be not done. Now therefore, O God, strengthen my hands” (Nehemiah 9:6). Thus seeking the Father first provides the strength needed to effectively serve, strength that not only encourages the heart, but also sustains our service to others.

Conclusion

This discussion began with Greenleaf’s notion that a servant leader “is servant first” (1977, p. 13). Though Greenleaf based his theory on naturalistic assumptions, the basic tenet of leading by serving is rightfully significant to Christians who are commanded to be stewards and serve the image-bearers of God. However, Christians must understand who is to be the primary recipient of their devotion and service. For Christians, service is first and foremost given to God, and is rooted in loving fulfillment of the Greatest Commandment. Jesus modeled this critical truth, and other Biblical figures reinforce this important order. Through obedience to the order of the Greatest Commandment, Christians can look to the Lord to provide the strength needed to lovingly serve others and demonstrate true Biblical servant leadership.

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