

Chapter 2

Servant Leadership Jesus Style

The business community believes they coined the phrase “servant leadership,” but we have evidence of the practice 2000 years ago! The purpose of this chapter is to look at how Jesus did ministry and figure out how to replicate His methods.

Luke 22:25-27 (NIV) Jesus said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 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. 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.’”

Matthew 20:28 (NIV) “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.”

John 13:3-5 (NIV) “Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under His power, and that He had come from God and was returning to God; so He got up from the meal, took off His outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around His waist. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash His disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around Him.”

Philippians 2:5-8 (NIV) “In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage; rather, He made Himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!”

Jesus was very committed to His prayer life (Luke 5:16). As our example, He strongly maintained His daily relationship with the Father. He was heard saying that He could do nothing on His own initiative (John 5:30), and on several occasions insisted that the disciples understood that they, too, could do nothing on their own (John 15:5). Understanding the role of a servant also means understanding from where you get your authority and empowerment. To commit ourselves to servant leadership, we need to know very specifically what our Master wants us doing and saying, and be willing to follow regardless of our personal desires.

Jesus frequently practiced patience, having to say the same things over and over (Matthew 15:15-16). He overcame the humanness of impatiently expecting others to get it the first time. Numerous times, it is recorded, “Again I say unto you...” There were times when He became firm with His hearers when they repeatedly did not retain information, but even in those times, He patiently sought to bring them along. However, Jesus graciously confronted when appropriate (Matthew 20:20-28).

Jesus was great at communication. He often said, “I have told you everything” (Mark 13:23). A servant does not hold back information that belongs to another. Nor did He give out information that was not His to give. A great example for us!

A servant leader Jesus-style would not be time driven. You will not find passages where Jesus said to get back to Him tomorrow. There were times when He refused to meet requests but the reason was not a time issue.

Perhaps one of the most challenging practices we see in Jesus-style leadership is His practice of accepting people where they were, but caring enough not to leave them there. He could applaud a person and at the same time raise them to a higher standard (Luke 10:17-21). Notice, in this specific case, He applauded and rejoiced with them over their success before challenging them for their growth.

Jesus was first a leader. The word “servant” in the phrase “servant leadership” is an adjective, showing how to do leadership. A servant methodology is one where the person knows to whom they report, whom they serve, and how to be respectful to both.

Repeatedly, Jesus made it very clear that His priority was to serve God. Because of that priority, He came to serve man. We would save ourselves a lot of detour if we could maintain the same focus. We serve God when we serve His people. I need not experience the fatigue of serving without recognition or appreciation if I understand that the One I am serving sees all and knows all.

Jesus did not find it necessary to do the popular thing (John 6:26). He knew who He was; He did not have to prove His identity or His purpose. As we follow Him, we do not need to promote ourselves. Our motivation is to be total love for others, not self-promotion.

Jesus understood the need for modeling. He was the living example of what He wanted His followers to be and do. “As the Father has sent me, I also send you” (John 20:21).

Leaders have power. Jesus had ultimate power. How did He use His? Did He use His right to be bossy? We are given authority and influence in order to empower others, not to eliminate their God-given role as a choice-maker. Jesus gave His disciples room to fail for the sake of learning. In Rescue Mission work, we have the opportunity to lead rather than push or pull. Leading means giving the person the opportunity to follow. The key word here is “opportunity.” Jesus did not always see His followers taking the opportunities He was giving them. When Peter stepped outside the boat to walk to Him even when Jesus knew he would not be successful on his own, Jesus took the opportunity to make an eternal point with Peter by first letting him fail.

We sometimes in Rescue get to a point where we think we know the best for the person we are serving, so we want to cut to the chase and speed up the process by just straightening the person out with our wisdom. Servant leadership Jesus-style allows the person to arrive at the point of healthiness in his or her own timing. We sit around and marvel that the disciples did not figure out the truth about the Messiah earlier. Jesus, who knew He had a short time with them, still patiently let them come to the point of change on their own.

Jesus sought feedback. “Who do men say that I am?” Asking the right questions helps those being served to sharpen their perspective. Feedback, of course, also should be coming from the One in authority over us.

Please note that Jesus was not afraid of getting dirty (foot washing), working hard as needed (preparing and serving breakfast to hungry men who had been up all night), spending hours praying for His disciples, lots of times losing sleep to do so. He taught by example. He delegated, even when He knew He could do it better and would probably have to redo the efforts of the disciples. He was comfortable with asking questions to make His disciples think, even when He knew the answers and could have just preached at them. He explained Himself when necessary, and showed compassion on those who needed time to get His points.

Do not suppose that you can excuse yourself by blaming your dominant, controlling personality! Look at Paul, a man definitely trained in the power and control thinking of his day before the Lord got hold of him. That would be the same Paul who said, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (Corinthians 11:1).

Following Jesus' commands is essential.

Following His example is effective.

Servant leadership Jesus-style means, as a servant, I am submissive to the purpose for which I have been called, and as a leader, I am entrusted with the care of those I am called to lead. My Leader meets my needs, giving me the freedom to focus on the needs of those I lead.

To look at Jesus as my Mentor in ministry is a tremendous privilege. One could not hope for better direction. He, the all-wise One, knows best. Following in the footsteps of Jesus is humbling and satisfying.

Remember, the commendation we all want to receive from Jesus in the hereafter: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21,23).

If I am to be a servant leader:

I will not expect honor and praise to myself but will encourage praise to my Master.

I will be patient with those who do not seem to get it on the first instruction.

I will risk being disliked for the sake of truth or another's safety.

I will set a good example even when it takes time and effort on my part.

I will not expect others to minister to me but will be grateful when that happens.

I will commend others for important characteristics like evidence of faith.

I will model gratitude.

I will accept the potential cost of servanthood without self-pity.

I will be quick to meet needs as a way of pointing people to my loving Master.