

Leadership or Servanthood: Part 1

“But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Matthew 20:25-28

“And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.”

Luke 22:25-27

“They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant.”

Matthew 23:5-11

Is the word ‘leadership’ a biblical concept? Some will automatically think that is a stupid thing to ask. Of course it is a biblical concept. However, it would be interesting to see how these Hebrew and Greek terms have been translated to our English term ‘leader’ and how we interpret that concept in God’s kingdom work. The basic concept of the term translated as ‘leader’ (Luke 22) is: *to so influence others as to cause them to follow a recommended course of action—‘to guide, to direct, to lead.’*¹ We would almost automatically jump to, yes, that is being a leader. We also instinctively relegate ‘exercising authority’ and ‘lording over them’ as bad leadership models not good leaders.

The puzzle we might have stepped into in the church is that we have ‘Americanized’ the concept of leadership in the church to follow the pattern of the Gentiles. Jesus warned the disciples in all these passages about the Gentile’s way of ‘leadership’. He did not simply say to be a better model of a leader – He warned them about being like them at all. In fact, He told them, in His kingdom if they were to be great (in God’s eyes) they were to be something entirely different.

Jesus contrasted “the way of the Gentiles” with His own model of *influence as being a servant*. In Matthew 23:1-12 Jesus flat out told the disciples to be very wary of ‘titles’. Do not be called “rabbi” for you have one teacher and you are all brothers. He warns them about being “called fathers” and “instructors or teachers” (9-10). Obviously the context is the arrogant, hypocritical posture of the Pharisees and Scribes. Jesus reminded them to NOT follow the way of the Gentiles by saying, *“It shall not be so among you.”* Would we not conclude then the simple problem is not what we are called, but simply how we perform in those roles? The only way around a different model is to assume that Jesus was offering false alternatives – you can be leaders like the Gentiles who influence by exercising authority over others or you can be like me, a servant. Do we think there is another model that is acceptable? He advocated this paradigm as the necessary mindset for His disciples.

I grew up hearing that good leaders “get other people to do things they do not want to do,” which, to be quite honest, always raised the question in my mind, what is a leader? Is ‘leadership’ about leading or manipulation? (Maybe they were the same). We call people with positions in the church, ‘leaders’ and yet it is very hard to find this term used by

¹ Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 464.

Jesus and never in the New Testament when talking about Elders or Deacons. Certainly there are ‘teachers’ (διδάσκαλος) like John (John 3:10), but is that really the same as leadership. We connect the idea of *leadership* with these positions but the Bible does not. I get the fact that we inductively reverse engineer this process by looking at the competencies, character and chemistry in biblical characters and they are to have a godly influence on others and then label it as being spiritual leadership – I get it, but I am still concerned we are using a label that Jesus never used or advocated to describe the standard operating procedure for His disciples/apostles.

The way we fix this problem (particularly in the church) is we talk about ‘servant-leadership’. The fact that we have even come up with this dual-termed phrase to describe, ‘People in positions of authority.’ The idea of ‘leadership’ by itself was beginning to bother the Christian community because there was an implicit discomfort with the concept of leadership; certainly a discomfort when Christian leadership starts looking like the models in the world. I think it would have been much easier on us if Jesus had just come out and said, “I want you to be servant-leaders” – end of discussion... but He did not combine the two. He simply said if you want to be great, learn to be a servant and slave.

The other problem is that we have entitled spiritual gifts to define Leadership. You do know that when you look through the most obvious descriptions of ‘church leadership’ in the Scriptures, that of Elders and deacons, there is nothing about spiritual gifts listed to qualify them for those responsibilities (with the possible exception of “being able to teach” (being *able* is not necessarily the same as having the gift of teaching) which is elaborated in 1 Timothy and Titus.

I can hear some of you already groaning in the background. “Hey, Brad” you are the *Senior* or *Lead* Pastor of a church – if that *leadership* position did not exist you would not have a job”. . . maybe, but it is not so much the role or the responsibilities that I am concerned about but how we think about our ‘positions’ and how we operate in them. I don’t have a plaque on my door saying ‘Senior Pastor’ which I think bothers some. I have had a name plaque that said, “Brad’s Space”. As you can tell I am not super big on titles for exactly these reasons. I am not as afraid of the responsibility as much as the pretense of authority. Obviously, I have seen people with great gifts who are terrible leaders (whatever that means). I have also seen people *without* what we would might typically call ‘leadership gifts’ be amazing servants – the question we are tempted to ask is: *which is a better leader?* (If we use such language – I know this is getting complicated). *The better question (in my mind) is which one better exemplifies what Christ called His disciples to be and do – those who have authority and get things done or those who simply know how to model being a servant?* (Oops, I will apologize now for begging the question and the appearance of false alternatives).

I know that I am starting to sound pejorative when it comes to the term ‘leader’. That is not really what I am trying to do here. I know we need clarity about who is responsible for people and ministry; we need to know who is ‘in charge’ or who makes decisions when it comes to changes in what we do or how we do things. Without that clarity things disintegrate quickly. Maybe what I am inviting you to contemplate is that our language needs to change and the pictures in our mind about ‘leadership’ may need to shift from culture to Christ.

I personally find the concept of ‘leader’ to be more confusing than ever. Is it simply the person in a position that has a certain level of authority or control? Is it about getting things done? Is it influence regardless of stereotypical labels? Is leadership about competence or character? People have so many ideas in their head when they use the term ‘leadership’ that I think it has become very convoluted. My encouragement is simply this: sometimes it is spiritually healthy to make sure that the ‘pictures in our mind’ when we talk about a *leader* may not always fit with the picture in the mind of Jesus. Next month we will probe a little more on this concept of leadership.

In His Grace,

Brad