

The Servant Leader

by J. Oswald Sanders

True leadership is servanthood, and leaders should be dependent on God and humble in their service.

Duration: 40:21

Scripture: Isaiah 42:1-4, Matthew 6:33, Mark 10:35-45

Topics: "Servant Leadership"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the importance of love and optimism in leadership. He uses Jesus as an example of a good leader who faced discouragements but remained optimistic until the end. The preacher also discusses the qualities of a servant leader, including the anointing of the Holy Spirit and the willingness to minister to the frail and erring. He highlights the need for leaders to be prepared to suffer and sacrifice for effective service. Overall, the sermon emphasizes the importance of optimism and hope in fulfilling God's purposes.

Transcript

This morning we come to the subject, The Servant Leader. And I'd like to read two passages bearing on this very important subject. The first is in Mark's Gospel, chapter 10, and we'll read from verse 35.

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. Teacher, they said, we want you to do for us whatever we ask. What do you want me to do for you, he asked.

They replied, let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory. You don't know what you are asking, Jesus said. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with? We can, they answered.

Jesus said to them, you will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared. When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

Jesus called them together and said, you know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. The other passage is found in the prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 42, where we are given a picture of the ideal

servant of Jehovah. Israel was chosen as the servant of Jehovah, but Israel had failed God at every turn and now the prophet sets out some of the characteristics of the one who would be the ideal servant of Jehovah.

Isaiah, chapter 42, verse 1. Here is my servant whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight. I will put my spirit on him and he will bring justice to the nations. He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

A bruised reed he will not break and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness he will bring forth justice. He will not falter or be discouraged till he establish justice on earth.

In his law the islands will put their trust. It's a striking thing that although leadership is such an important factor in all aspects of life, and of course also in the life and service of the Lord, even though it is such an important factor and is so prominent in the work and administration of the Church, yet the word leader is seldom used. The concept of leadership of course is everywhere in the Bible, because the Bible is largely the story of men and women who exercise the leadership function.

But the term that is most usually applied to the leader is servant. Moses my servant. When Paul was speaking about himself and a policy, he said who is Paul? Who is a policy? Only servants by whom you believe.

And the term servant is one of the prominent terms in the Bible. Serve and servant I think occurs about a hundred times in the New Testament. But there it is.

The term leader is not the one that is emphasized. The leader, our Lord says in this passage, will be the one who is the servant. And of course that word has a very lowly connotation in our society.

Who wants to be a servant? We're all willing enough to be masters, to be bosses, but to be a servant is not something that is very popular. The Lord was the leader par excellence of course, and he set the tone for us all when he said I am among you as one who serves. This is the master statement of his function when he came to earth.

He said even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve. In the Incarnation, remember in Philippians 2 it says that in the Incarnation our Lord emptied himself. How did he empty himself? He didn't empty himself of his divine attributes.

He didn't empty himself of his Godhead. But that verse tells us how he emptied himself. He emptied himself.

He became nothing by taking the very nature of a servant. His was a divine nature, and yet as man he took on himself the very nature of a servant. He went further, and in the passage we read together he equated greatness with servanthood.

Whoever wishes to be great among you shall be your servant. I think you will agree that that is one of the most revolutionary statements our Lord made. Can you imagine how it would fall on the ears of the Pharisees of his day, and the Jewish leaders, that they were to be servants? This was indeed revolutionary.

And then he went even further. He said whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. Now the idea of slavery was very very common in the Roman Empire at that stage.

Almost half the members of the Roman Empire were slaves. They knew what slavery meant. You can imagine how this statement would fall on their ears.

If anyone wants to be first he must be slave of all. Now Jesus wasn't decrying leadership. He was redefining it.

They associated leadership with the exercise, the ruthless exercise of power. But he said no it's not that. It is by serving other people that you lead them.

It cut right across the worldly standard of leadership. Today very few want to be servants, but very many are willing to be leaders. When I became the principal of the Christian Leaders Training College in Papua New Guinea, when a new group of students came in, I said to them if I, if the Lord Jesus was here I don't think he would have called this college the Christian Leaders Training College.

I think he would have called it the Christian Servants Training College. Because that is the key thought behind leadership. Today people are more eager to claim their rights than they are to serve other people.

Now it was this proud request of James and John that they might be number one and number two in Christ's kingdom, that gave rise to our Lord's statements concerning servanthood. There's nothing wrong in desiring a leadership position, provided the motivation is right. And not always is our motivation worthy.

Many people want position, want leadership because of the position and status it brings. But where the motive is for the glory of God and for the blessing of mankind, then it is not wrong to desire a position of leadership. James and John made a threefold mistake.

First of all they wanted to be number one and number two in Christ's kingdom. The second mistake was they wanted to forestall the other ten men, their fellow disciples. They got in first.

Then thirdly they lobbied for this office. And this attitude of theirs brought the Lord's denunciation. They wanted a leadership position on the chief.

And so they tried a shortcut, but the shortcut they tried proved to be a cul-de-sac. And the Lord took advantage of the situation to enunciate three very important leadership principles. He rebuked them for wanting to be first and greatest.

He had already told them in Matthew 19, 28, When the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you will also sit on the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. He had already told them that they were going to have a place of importance in his kingdom, that they wanted to be first, number one and number two. And our Lord wouldn't allow them to preempt the best thrones for themselves.

And so he gave three statements. He enunciated three principles that are of universal relevance in the area of leadership. The first principle is that there is a sovereignty in a leadership position.

You remember our Lord said, John 15, 16, You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you. We don't choose our own ministry. The Lord says, I do the choosing, and I appoint you to the place where you are to serve.

And in this passage, Jesus said something the same thing, something similar. He said, It's not my prerogative to appoint you to number one and number two place. Those are my Father's prerogative.

And then he said, Those places belong to those for whom it has been prepared. One rendering says that those places belong to those to whom they have already been assigned. And this tells me that God has a ministry, a sphere of ministry, a position of leadership for us.

And he has already assigned it to us. God knows beforehand what he's going to do. And he said to James and John, It's not for you to choose the positions that you want.

This is my Father's prerogative. And God sovereignly allots to us the sphere of our service. This means that when we are seeking guidance concerning the sphere of service in which we are to fulfill our ministry, we are not to ask, Will this suit me? Will I find job fulfillment in this situation? Do I feel comfortable about it? Will my gifts find their full employment? Those are not the questions to ask.

The question to ask is, Is this the place that God has prepared for me? Is this the place that Jesus has appointed me to? If I am in the place that God has assigned to me, what assurance it brings. It means that when I get into a difficult situation, I won't be wondering what's going to happen. I'll be able to say, Lord, I am not here by the selection of any committee.

I'm not here by the election of any church. I am here because you prepared the place and you appointed me to it. And this is a tremendous strength when one is in the midst of testing circumstances.

The second principle our Lord enunciated was, there is suffering in a leadership position. He asked the two men, Can you drink the cup that I drink or be baptized with the baptism wherewith I am to be baptized? The Lord wanted to make them face up to the fact that if they were going to be in a leadership position, it would involve them in suffering and in sacrifice, even as it did him. Make no mistake, if we are going to be effective leaders in God's service, there will be a price to be paid.

There will be a cup to drain. There will be a baptism to be experienced. And Jesus was too honest to conceal the cost of following him in leadership.

He knew what the coming days held for James and John. You know, I think only one of the eleven escaped martyrdom. James was executed after a very short ministry.

And John finished his days in a concentration camp working in the mines. Yes, they drank the cup. They experienced the baptism.

And I believe that we've got to be prepared if we are going to be entrusted with positions of responsibility. We've got to be prepared to pay the price of suffering and sacrifice. God often puts us through the mill in order to prepare us for more effective service.

The hymn of John Newton, Amazing Grace, is one that has become tremendously popular, even among non-Christians. But John Newton also wrote another poem that reveals to us the ways in which God deals with us and prepares us in his service. It runs like this, I asked the Lord that I might grow in faith and love and every grace, might more of his salvation know, and seek more earnestly his face.

T'was he who taught me thus to pray, and he, I trust, has answered prayer, yet it has been in such a way as almost drove me to despair. I thought that in some favoured hour at once he'd answer my request, and

by his love's constraining power subdue my sins and give me rest. Instead of that, he made me feel the hidden evils of my heart, and bade the angry powers of hell assault my soul in every part.

Nay more, with his own hand he seemed intent to aggravate my woe, crossed all the fair designs I schemed, blasted my gourds, and laid me low. Lord, why is this, I trembling cried, wilt thou pursue thy worm to death? This is the way, the Lord replied, I answer prayer for grace and faith. These inward trials I employ from self and sin to set thee free, and cross thy schemes of earthly joy, that thou mightst find thy all in me.

You see, God doesn't always work in the way we desire, and sometimes it is through the difficult, the painful experiences that we are prepared for his service. Then the third, and perhaps the most important principle that our Lord enunciated was that there is servanthood in a leadership position. Jesus repudiated every worldly standard of leadership.

Listen again to what he said. You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you.

Words couldn't be plainer. Spiritual leadership is not born of a passion to rule, it's born of a passion to serve. Contrast the world's lifestyle with our Lord's chosen lifestyle.

When he came to earth in his incarnation, he didn't come as a king, he didn't come as a tycoon, he didn't come as a professor, he came as a carpenter. What to do to serve the people of little Nazareth? The Lord of glory, with a carpenter's apron, with hammer and chisel, serving in the carpenter's shop at Nazareth. Our Lord gave the most startling demonstration of the fact that he had a servant spirit when he washed the disciples' feet.

I don't think any illustration in history could equal the wonder of that incident. And if you read the passage in John 13, you'll notice that before the incident is recounted, this statement is made. Jesus, knowing that the Father had committed all things into his hand, and that he came from God and went to God, laid aside his garments, took a towel, girded himself, poured water into a basin, and washed the disciples' feet.

They had come in from the dirty streets of Jerusalem, their feet were defiled, and it was the custom in the East that when a guest entered the home, the slave would bring water and wash the guest's feet. But apparently this day, no slave was on duty, and there was no one to wash the guest's feet. Wouldn't you have thought that when the disciples saw this situation, they'd have rushed to the Lord and said, Lord, could I have the privilege of washing your feet? But not one of the men suggested any such thing.

Why, it would be beneath their dignity. And Peter wasn't going to wash Judas' feet anyway, and so it remained for the Lord of Glory to wash the disciples' feet. Can you picture it? Here is Christ in full knowledge of his divine nature.

The Father had committed all things into his hand. With one hand, he's upholding the universe, while with the other hand, he's washing Judas' feet. Could you imagine any greater demonstration of what it means to be a servant than that? And this was the only occasion when our Lord said, I have left you an example that you should do as I have done to you.

It's rather striking that Christ as an example is only specifically mentioned in two connections. Here, it's in connection with servanthood. In Peter's epistle, he speaks about Christ as having left an example of suffering.

These are two of the principles we've been thinking about today. Our Lord set the example in suffering, and he set the example in servanthood. And he said, you should do as I have done to you.

How wonderfully our Lord demonstrated the fact that he had the heart of a servant. He washed the disciples' feet. Why? Because this was the courteous thing to do.

Because their feet were dirty and needed to be washed. But most of all, he did it because he had the servant spirit and he loved doing it. Let this mind be in you, Paul says, which was also in Christ Jesus.

Jesus displayed the ideal characteristics of a servant leader. You'll notice that he subordinated his own interests to those of his followers. He surrendered his legitimate rights and privileges in order that he might serve others.

He was willing to pay any price, any cost, that was demanded in their service and in the service of his Father. I can imagine somebody saying, well, but I'm in a leadership position. I have a position of responsibility in my church, in my organization.

How would it be possible for me to exercise the authority and discharge the responsibilities that are upon me, on the one hand, and at the same time to be a servant? How can I do both? Well, that sounds a legitimate question. But somehow or other, Jesus managed to do both, did he not? He exercised his authority, and yet he was among his people as a servant. I think the answer to the problem is this.

It was not the acts that Jesus did that were the important thing. It was the spirit in which he did it. Whatever he did, he did it in the spirit of a servant.

It doesn't mean that the pastor will become the janitor. Not that. But it does mean that the pastor, in all the exercise of his authority, will do it not in the spirit of a master, not in the spirit of a boss, but in the spirit of a servant.

And I believe it's that that is one of the qualities that is so very often lacking, and yet one of the things that is very important in the area of leadership. Now, let us turn in thought to that passage in Isaiah chapter 42, where we have brought before us the ideal servant of Jehovah. The pattern of our Lord's life is to be the pattern of ours.

And as we see these qualities, these five special qualities, specially mentioned, that were so fully exemplified in his life on earth, we should make it our desire to emulate them. And we should be asking the spirit of God to so work in our lives that we will become servant leaders, even as he was. The first principle that we see here is the principle of dependence.

Here is my servant whom I uphold. Dependence. One of the most amazing things in the incarnation of our Lord is that he who had all power and controlled everything became dependent.

My servant whom I uphold. This was one of the aspects of our Lord's self-emptying. He was so closely identified with us in our humanity.

He so really clothed himself with our humanity and with our human weaknesses that as a man he needed to be upheld. He was dependent upon his father. On the one hand, he upholds all things by the word of his power.

On the other hand, he said, I can do nothing of myself. Can you take that in? Nothing. He said, I came not to do my own will.

He said, the works that I do are not mine. Here, Jesus is saying that as man, he was totally dependent on his father. The words he spoke were not self-originated.

They came from the father. The works that he did were the works that the father told him and enabled him to do. How dependent he became.

And yet, how independent we are. Sin is independence of God. And yet, the Lord, who is our example, became dependent.

My servant whom I uphold. Christ didn't empty himself, as I said, of his divine powers, but he did empty himself of self-will and self-sufficiency. I can do nothing of myself.

And that's a measure, as we give up our independence, as we become dependent on the Lord and allow him to uphold us, in measure, as we do that, he can bless our leadership and make it spiritually reproductive. And then, the second quality. He will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

Now, we live in a day of self-advertisement. That's very prominent in the Christian world, too. You read the advertising material and how easy it is for self to be prominent.

But our Lord, in his ministry, was characterized by modesty, by humility. It doesn't mean here that he wouldn't engage in street preaching. It says he will not shout or cry out or raise his voice in the streets.

There will not be loud self-advertisement. His work will be quiet. His work will be hidden.

Why, even the seraphim who had six wings, with two they covered their face, with two they covered their feet. Their ministry was a hidden ministry, a hidden service. Our Lord was the same.

He didn't advertise himself. Remember how, on many occasions, after he had performed a miracle, he said, see, you tell no man. He wasn't looking for a divertisement.

The devil, in one of his temptations, said to the Lord, advertise yourself. Throw yourself down from the temple. Do a startling miracle and you'll get people's attention.

But that was not the characteristic of our Lord. He must increase. I must decrease, he said.

So, the second quality was modesty and humility. And this is the mark of a true servant leader. The servant leader will not be trying to bolster his own interests and secure his own advancement.

He will retire behind the scenes. John the Baptist pushed Christ forward and he himself receded. And that is the true picture of the servant leader of Isaiah chapter 42.

The third quality is compassion. A bruised reed will he not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. Compassion.

The word compassion doesn't mean to feel sorry for, to pity. It means to suffer together with. And a true Christian leader, servant leader, will suffer with his people.

He will identify himself with their sorrows and enter into them so that he can comfort them in it. The hymn says, he took our sins and our sorrows and made them his very own. And there will be a measure in which we will do that same thing.

God's servant will be merciful to the weak and to the early. A broken reed, a bruised reed is useless. It's failed of its purpose.

And all you can do is tread on it. Men have got no use for failures. Why, if you're a failure, you're tossed aside.

The unfeeling crowd go by and leave the failure to his fate. But Jesus specialized in mending broken reeds. Take one outstanding example.

You think of Peter denying the Lord with oaths and curses. That must have cut deeply into our Lord's feelings. And yet, what did he do? Peter might well have said, why, it's all over.

It was a lovely dream while it lasted, but I've blown it. But to whom was it Jesus appeared and granted a private interview? Was it not Peter? And isn't it an amazing thing that 50 days later, that same denying, blaspheming Peter is preaching that mighty Pentecostal sermon that launched the New Testament church. A bruised reed he'll not break.

A smoking wick, a dimly burning wick he won't snuff out. Why, Peter surely was a dimly burning wick. He was only a nasty smell.

There was no light, no illumination. And yet in 50 days time, his flaming ministry set the world ablaze. This is a mark of the servant leader.

He won't despise the frail, the failing, the erring, but will minister to them. The fourth quality is optimism. He will not fail nor be discouraged till he establishes justice on the earth.

Our Lord was never pessimistic. He was realistic. He saw things as they were and he stated them as they were, but he was never pessimistic.

He was perennially optimistic because he knew that his Father's purposes in the end would not fail. And this will be characteristic of the servant leader, the ideal servant leader. He will be optimistic concerning the fulfillment of the divine purpose.

I believe hope is essential in Christian service. One of the qualities of love is love hopes all things. Love never gives up.

Love is constantly optimistic concerning the future. You never find a pessimist who's a good leader. The good leader is always one who sees the possibilities in the situation even more than he sees the difficulties.

Jesus faced terrible discouragements, the fickleness of his own followers, the hostility of the foe, the malice of the devil. And yet in the face of it all, he was optimistic until he uttered those last words. Finished! It is done.

It is accomplished. My Father's purpose is achieved and the task he gave me to do has been perfectly done. He shall not fail till he has established justice in the earth.

Then the last quality to which I would draw attention is found in verse one. Here is my servant. I will put my spirit upon him.

The anointing of the spirit. We can have the other four qualities and many other qualities too, but unless there is this last one, unless there is the anointing of the spirit, our ministry will not be very mighty in the spiritual sense. In Acts 10.38, it says, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power.

Now, for what was he anointed? Was he anointed to preach mighty sermons? Well, he certainly did that. Was he anointed to do spectacular miracles? He certainly did that. But this passage says, God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing those who were oppressed of the devil.

We generally think of the anointing of the spirit, especially in the realm of the proclamation of the message. But here the scope is widened. It is in the ministry of mercy, the ministry of compassion to those who are around us.

The ministry of our Lord, when the Holy Spirit came upon him at his baptism, immediately took on a new character. He had been for 30 years in Nazareth. There had been no great stir, but after he had been anointed with the spirit, why, things began to happen.

And when he went to Nazareth and spoke the words of grace and yet the words of truth, you know what happened? They wanted to take him and throw him over the brow of the hill. Something happened. His ministry took on a new effectiveness.

And I believe that this is something that we need if we are going to be fulfilled, our role as servant leaders. It is only the spirit of God who can impart to us that servant spirit. We haven't got it in ourselves.

We are essentially selfish and self-centered creatures. But if we are willing, the Holy Spirit can work in us that same spirit of the servant as our Lord assumed when he became man. May we then be willing to lay aside the role of the master and gladly and willingly assume the role of the servant in our leadership.

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