

Servant Leadership

**By Dr. Kent M. Keith
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Good morning! Thank you for the opportunity to speak and worship with you this morning. I am delighted to be here!

[Introductory remarks omitted]

My topic is servant leadership. This morning I want to share my understanding of the Scriptural basis for servant leadership, and the challenge of being in the world, not of the world. Next week, Dr. Randy Furushima will be here, and he will discuss good shepherds and bad shepherds. The following week, which will be two weeks from now, I will share my understanding of ways in which we can practice servant leadership in our organizations.

The Sad History of Kings

There is an excellent book by Arthur Boers, who teaches leadership at Tyndale Seminary in Canada. The title of the book is *Servants and Fools: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*. In the first part of his book he argues that the Bible is not interested in leaders in the way that we are fascinated with them today. Today we expect leaders to be dynamic, charismatic, full of vision and drive, characterized by their command presence, and capable of solving all our problems.

Boers argues that this fascination with and near adoration of leaders is a modern phenomenon. The Bible is very suspicious of leaders and what they accomplish. The Bible dwells more on leadership failures than successes. This is very obvious in regard to the kings in the Old Testament.

God did not want the people of Israel to have a king, but they insisted. They wanted a king like the people of other countries. God told Samuel to listen to the people, but warn them against having a king. Samuel explained to the people how badly a king would behave, but still they did not listen. Here is the story as we find it at 1 Samuel 8:4-22:

So all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah. They said to him, ‘You are old, and your sons do not walk in your ways; now appoint a king to lead us, such as all the other nations have.

But when they said, ‘Give us a king to lead us,’ this displeased Samuel; so he prayed to the Lord. And the Lord told him: ‘Listen to all that the people are saying to you; it is not you they have rejected, but they have rejected me as their king. As they have done from the day I brought them up out of Egypt until this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so they are doing to you. Now listen to them; but warn them solemnly and let them know what the king who will reign over them will do.’

Samuel told all the words of the Lord to the people who were asking him for a king. He said, ‘This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and other to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the Lord will not answer you in that day.

But the people refused to listen to Samuel. ‘No!’ they said. ‘We want a king over us. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles.’

When Samuel heard all that the people said, he repeated it before the Lord. The Lord answered, “Listen to them and give them a king.”

And so it was that Israel rejected God as their king. Israel changed from a theocracy, a country run by God, to a monarchy, a country led by human royalty.

Why did the Lord reluctantly agree to a king? I assume that he concluded that the people would have to learn some lessons the hard way. They would not

listen to his warning, so they would have to experience the Lord's truth first-hand. And experience it they did.

Things did not go well for their kings, starting with Saul, the first king. Saul's reign was tragic. He disobeyed God, and instead of anointing David as his successor, he tried to kill David. After Saul and his son Jonathan died in battle, David became king.

David was the slayer of Goliath and singer of psalms. He is much admired. But David committed adultery and murder, and was alienated from his spouses and children. One of his sons raped one of his daughters, and then another son killed the first, and his favorite son rebelled against him and was killed. It was a tragic mess. David was not allowed to build the temple. It was Solomon, his son by Bathsheba, who built the temple.

Solomon was known far and wide for his wisdom, but he was not really very wise. He taxed and burdened his people very heavily in order to build a royal palace as well as the temple. His sins included idolatry and turning away from God. He had 700 wives of royal birth and 300 concubines. The Bible says that his wives led him astray. He built shrines for the gods of his foreign wives, and no longer followed the Lord completely. The Bible says that Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord. God was angry, and said he would take away part of the kingdom from Solomon's successor (1 Kings 11:1-13). Indeed, after Solomon died, the whole northern Kingdom of Israel went its own way and was eventually lost. It was a disaster.

Here is something I find astonishing. Arthur Boers reports in his book that of the 36 kings mentioned in First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles, 28 of the kings are described by the Bible as "evil." The *Bible* calls them evil. Only eight were good—and among the eight, only two were above reproach. That's only two out of 36—only 6%--that were above reproach.

The kings were so flawed that God sent the prophets. Prophets were significant leaders in the Old Testament. They emerged as a major force during the rise of the monarchy. Their role was to counterbalance the kings, because the kings were mostly evil people. The prophets were messengers from God. The prophets called people back to a right relationship with God. The prophets let people know what disasters would befall them if they did *not* restore their relationship with God.

Prophets could also take direct action when needed. Bible scholar Walter Brueggeman describes how prophets did things that the kings could not do. The prophet Elisha is an example. Elisha “caused the overflow of olive oil for the desperate widow, restored the son to life, fed the hungry assemblage and left a surplus of food, served a feast to the Syrians, healed the foreign leper, and overcame the famine. Elisha broke the vicious cycles of deathliness before which all parties had become helpless.” It was not through the power and authority of the king, but through the power and authority of Elisha that “poverty is turned to abundance, death is turned to life, hunger is turned to food, war is turned to peace, famine is turned to cheap food for the crowd.” Elisha was not a king, but Elisha carried the truth about God’s power. The king was irrelevant in crisis situations. It was the prophet who responded to the crisis with a transformative intervention.

Then there are heroes in the Old Testament who were heroes because they were steadfast in their faith. Noah was obedient in building the ark. Abraham obeyed God and left home; he was willing to sacrifice his son. Esther had the courage to face the king and save her people. Ruth had the courage to stay with Naomi and start a new life. Daniel would not disavow his faith, and survived the lion’s den. Prophets and people of faith, not kings, stand out as heroes.

The simple message of the Old Testament is that God did not want his people to have kings. When they insisted, God reluctantly agreed. As God had warned, the kings were flawed. They were not only bad, they were *evil*. Based on this sad history of kings, what are we to do?

Jesus and Servant Leadership

Well, Jesus told us what to do. He told us how to lead in a different way, not the way of kings, but the way of servants.

As followers of Jesus, we know that Jesus called us to serve, and he demonstrated that service. Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples as an example of how we are to serve (John 13:1-15).

Jesus told the parable of the sheep and the goats, in which those who spend eternity with Jesus are those who have served others—those who give drink to the thirsty, give food to the hungry, provide clothing to the naked, provide hospitality to the stranger, care for the sick, and visit those in prison.

Bible scholar Aubrey Malphurs said that “we could sum Jesus’ life up with the one word *service*. One purpose for his incarnation and life on Earth was to serve and thus model what service is all about.” Christ said, “I am among you as one who serves.” (Luke 22:27)

This idea of serving, of a servant’s heart, turns out to be the core message of Jesus. I would guess that that is not what most people think. If you asked a group of Christians today, what is the central message of Jesus?—they might answer: “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except by me.” Or they might answer: “I came to die for you, that you might have eternal life.”

Those are indeed important messages, but scholars would answer differently. They agree that the central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God. Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than anything else. And the kingdom of God is not like the world in which we live today. Jesus said many things to help us see how different the kingdom of God is from the world we live in. For example, he said the last will be first, and the first will be last. He said that we must be like children to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Even more important, the kingdom of God that Jesus described is a transformed world, a world in which domination systems no longer exist. Power is no longer used to oppress or enslave. That’s because the kingdom of God is not for power, the kingdom is for love and servanthood. Bible scholar N.T. Wright said that this teaching about the servant’s heart is at the center of Christ’s vision of the kingdom of God. It’s the core message.

One more thing: Scholars agree that the kingdom is for earth, not just heaven. Jesus taught us to pray, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” So the kingdom of God is not for later, it is for now. We should be helping the kingdom of God to break into our world. We can do that with love and a servant’s heart.

We need to remember that servanthood is not servitude. Servitude occurs when people are forced to serve. We are not forced to serve. Instead we choose of our own free will to be servants. We choose of our own free will to love and help others. We choose of our own free will to follow the example of Christ.

There are many ways to serve. When we see the opportunity to serve by leading, we lead with a servant’s heart. The teaching of Jesus on this point is found

in all three of the synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark, and Luke. For example, in Matthew 20:25-28, Jesus gathered his disciples and said:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whomever would become great among you must be a servant, and whomever would be first must be a slave—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.

This is the passage in which Jesus calls us to be servants when we lead. He calls us to be servant-leaders.

In pointing us toward servanthood, Jesus rejected what I call the power model of leadership. The world in which Jesus walked and taught and healed was a world built on power—the power of the Roman Empire and the power of the Jewish temple hierarchy. Both of those power systems caused great suffering. Jesus told us that we should not be like those power leaders.

We know that Jesus refused earthly power—he declined to become a secular king. Satan could not tempt him when he offered Jesus all the kingdoms of the world. And the crowd following him could not tempt him, either. We read at John 6:14-15, that after the feeding of the five thousand, the crowd wanted to make Jesus king by force. But Jesus escaped from the crowd. He withdrew to a mountain by himself. He didn't come to be an earthly king. He rejected the power model of leadership.

And so should we. Why? Well, here's my own explanation. According to the power model, leadership is about acquiring and wielding power—mostly for oneself. It is about making people do things. It is about how to attack and win. It is about coercion and manipulation.

The power model assumes a pyramid, a hierarchy in which power is in the hands of the leader at the top. The focus is on the leader, who issues orders to his or her subordinates.

This is the dominant model of leadership in our culture, and it was the dominant model of leadership in the time of Jesus. Unfortunately, it is a really bad model. During the past 40 years I have worked in the public sector, the private sector, the non-profit sector, and the academic sector. Everywhere I have worked, I have seen serious problems with the power model.

First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely. Second, the power model glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. Third, the power model defines success in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes the most for their group or organization or community. These are severe problems.

Other problems with power relate to the leader herself or himself. People who seek power often become irrelevant as leaders. They focus on what they want, instead of what other people need, and they lose touch with the people they are supposed to be serving. Even worse, people who seek power can never get enough of it. It becomes a kind of addiction or disease. They always want more, and more, and more. This easily results in spiritual corruption and an unhappy life of self-torture. I have met many power-oriented leaders, and they are not happy people.

So there are a lot of problems with the power model—problems for society and problems for power-oriented leaders. However, the biggest problem with the power model of leadership is that *it does not advance the kingdom of God*. The kingdom of God does not break into our world by fighting power with more power. That just leads to more battles, more pain, and more suffering. No—the kingdom of God breaks into our world through love and service, not power.

I know that people say you have to fight fire with fire. Sometimes that makes sense. But there is an alternative, and in the long run it is a much better alternative, and that is to fight fire with *water*. We need to extinguish the addiction to power. We need to replace the addiction to power with a commitment to service.

If we wish to follow Jesus and truly be Christian leaders, then, we must do what he did—we must reject the power model of leadership. Power cannot be our goal, nor can it be our most important tool when we lead. On the rare occasions in which we must exercise power, we must exercise it *with* others, not *over* others, and we must exercise it to *serve and protect* others, not to benefit ourselves.

Jesus calls us to be servants when we lead. That's why the service model of leadership is not about acquiring and wielding power, it is about making a difference in the lives of others. So servant-leaders don't ask: how can I get power? How can I make people do things? Instead, servant-leaders ask: what do people need? How can I help them to get it? What does my organization need to do? How can I help my organization to do it? Rather than embarking on a quest for power, the servant-leader embarks on a quest to identify and meet the needs of others.

That's the key concept: identify and meet the needs of others. The focus is on service.

In the world, not of the world

Servant leadership works, but that does not mean that it is easy. One reason it is not easy is that it is counter-cultural.

We live in a secular, commercial culture that considers power and wealth to be symbols of success. That is what our culture tells us to strive for, and people measure us by how much we get. But power and wealth are false idols, and they do not make people deeply happy. They can be used as tools to serve others, but they are only tools, not goals.

As mentioned earlier, we know that Jesus refused earthly power. He also warned us about money. He made it clear at Luke 12:15 that "life does not consist in an abundance of possessions." At Matthew 6:19-21, he said:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

After his interaction with the rich young man, Jesus told the disciples: "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 19:23). So Jesus rejected earthly power, and he taught us not to seek treasures on earth. The goal is to be spiritually rich, not rich in material possessions.

In short, the teachings of Jesus are counter-cultural. That's why Christian leaders don't start with the way the world is; they start with the way *Christ* is. Christ has taught us how to live and lead. If we follow him, we will lead a meaningful life. We will bring hope and joy to others. We will help those who need help the most. And we will do it without worrying about what the secular, commercial world thinks. We will be successful in more important ways than the secular, commercial world can imagine.

Yes, it is hard to avoid the assumptions and values of the secular, commercial culture. Those assumptions and values surround us every day. So the

pressing question is this: How do we follow Christ, and not get sucked into cultural norms and symbols of success like power and wealth?

I think Jesus gave us the answer. To lead the way Jesus calls us to lead, to lead in a way that is both counter-cultural and effective, we must be *in* the world, not *of* the world.

Jesus shared this idea during the Last Supper, first when speaking to the disciples, and then when he prayed for them. At John 15:18-19 he said:

If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.

Later, when Jesus prayed to his Father for the disciples (John 17:13-17), he said:

I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them. I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth.

This idea of being *in* the world, not *of* the world, has meant a lot to me for the past forty years. I think the message is clear. Jesus was in the world, teaching and healing and saving. We need to be like him. We need to be in the world, fully engaged, loving and serving others the way Jesus did. However, we do not have to measure ourselves by the secular world's values or its measures of "success." We do not have to be *of* the world.

This gives us great freedom. We don't have to be rich and famous. We don't have to have prestige. We don't have to be members of the social elite. We don't have to be politically powerful.

Isn't that a relief? I think that's great. If we *do* acquire power and wealth, we can use them as tools to serve others. If we *don't* acquire power and wealth, that's okay. We are not here to be a success as the world defines it. We are here to be who God wants us to be, not who the world wants us to be. We are here to follow

Jesus. If we do, we will be blessed, whether or not the world thinks we are “successful.”

Of course, being a servant-leader will often mean that your behavior will contradict the popular norms of the secular, commercial world. When you lead with the heart of a servant, some people will not understand. Some people will see you as a weak leader, or not a leader at all, because you are not pacing the floor, barking orders at your subordinates. Instead, you are listening, identifying needs, and working together with others to meet those needs.

When you lead with the heart of a servant, some people will feel threatened. After all, those who live the power model of leadership may not want to admit that there is another way—a *better* way. They may mock you, attack you, try to silence you, or simply make it hard for you to lead. So being in the world, not of the world, can be challenging. But that is how we must live, and that is how we must lead. We cannot waiver. Jesus Christ is our model, and he has called us to be servant-leaders.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the kings of the Old Testament were flawed, and most of them were evil. Jesus taught us to be servants instead of kings. The central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God, and central to that message is a servant’s heart. We must reject the power model and embrace the service model of leadership. We must be servant leaders, *in* the world, but not *of* the world. Humbly, we can serve each other, and then we can serve the larger community, listening and loving and helping where help is needed most. *That* is how the kingdom of God will break into our world. That is how the kingdom *will* come, on earth as it is in heaven.

Let us pray...

Lord, we are your people. We ask that you give us the heart to serve you by serving others. Give us the humility to be servants instead of kings. Give us the courage to be in the world, not of the world. And in all things, help us to be your instruments, advancing your Kingdom, for your glory. In Christ we pray, Amen.