

Servant Leadership

Presented to Waialae Baptist Church

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Good evening! Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you this evening. I am sure that you have had a very significant day, and this has been a very fruitful retreat.

As you hear God's call, as you focus on your mission, as you move forward, it matters how you treat each other. I would like to talk about how to treat each other when you are leading.

There are many ideas about leadership in our culture. But the Bible has a different message, a counter-cultural message. In the Old Testament, God made it very clear that he does not want us to be kings. In the New Testament, Jesus told us to be servants. That is an idea that contradicts our secular, commercial culture, and yet all the evidence is that it is not only Scriptural and spiritual, it is also very practical. We are designed to be servant leaders.

The sad history of kings

One of the most surprising things about that we find in the Old Testament is that God did not want the people of Israel to have a king. The people said 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.”

I think this is amazing. This is one of those “wow” moments. The people of Israel rejected God as their king. Israel changed from a theocracy, a country led 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, he was troubled by an evil spirit, and instead of anointing David as his successor, he tried to kill David. After Saul and his sons die in battle, David became king.

King David! Here is 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 son who was a rapist, 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 all that 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. Indeed, after Solomon died, the whole northern Kingdom of Israel was lost forever. Only the southern kingdom of Judah remained. It was a disaster.

Here is something I find astonishing. Arthur Boers reports in his book *Servants and Fools* 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—not quite 6%—that were above reproach.

God was not happy about all this. He wanted to dismiss the kings—the shepherds of Israel—and once again be the king, caring for his sheep. Here is what he told Ezekiel in chapter 34:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: 'This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock? You eat the curds, clothe yourselves with the wool and slaughter the choice animals, but you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weak or healed the sick or bound up the injured. You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd, and when they were scattered they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep wandered over all the

mountains and on every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth, and no one searched or looked for them.

“Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because my flock lacks a shepherd and so has been plundered and has become food for all the wild animals, and because my shepherds did not search for my flock but cared for themselves rather than for my flock, therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I am against the shepherds and will hold them accountable for my flock. I will remove them from tending the flock so that the shepherds can no longer feed themselves. I will rescue my flock from their mouths, and it will no longer be food for them.

“For this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself will search for my sheep and look after them. As a shepherd looks after his scattered flock when he is with them, so will I look after my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places where they were scattered on a day of clouds and darkness. I will bring them out from the nations and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them into their own land. I will pasture them on the mountains of Israel, in the ravines and in all the settlements in the land. I will tend them in a good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel will be their grazing land. There they will lie down in good grazing land, and there they will feed in a rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, declares the Sovereign LORD. I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak, but the sleek and the strong I will destroy. I will shepherd the flock with justice.

God gave us free will, and we often exercise it badly. He warned the Israelites, but they did not listen. They wanted kings anyway. The kings turned out very badly—most of them were evil. God agonized over that. He longed to take care of his people instead of leaving them in the hands of these bad shepherds. It was a painful history.

Of course, God was active during the time of the kings. He sent the prophets. They emerged as a major force during the rise of the monarchy. Their role was to counterbalance the kings, because the kings were so bad. 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.

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. But then, if we don't have kings, how are we supposed to lead others. 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.

The teaching of Jesus on this point is found in all three of the synoptic gospels— Matthew 20:25-28, Mark 10:42-45, and Luke 22:25-26. 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. And he is against hierarchies. Hierarchies allow people to lord it over others, and Jesus says we are not to do that.

As followers of Jesus, we know that Jesus called us to serve, and he demonstrated that service. We know from John 13:1-15 that Jesus knelt down and washed the feet of his disciples as an example of how we are to serve. At Luke 22:27, Christ said, "I am among you as one who serves."

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.

This brings us to the importance of humility. Humility is essential to servant leadership. And it's not easy to be humble in today's culture. We live in a culture that says we should be assertive, put ourselves first, explain to others how great we are, strive to be better than others, try to be famous, try to get a prestigious job, and try to get ahead, if necessary by stepping on others or putting others down.

Unfortunately, people who lack humility simply don't do what servant-leaders do. People who lack humility are focused on themselves, and show little respect for others. They are not willing to listen, and are reluctant to build teams, share leadership, or grow people. They want people to serve them, they don't want to serve others.

But Jesus calls us to humility, and Jesus is the ultimate example of humility. You know the famous quote from Philippians 2:5-9:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but 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! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.

When we lead with humility, we are not worried about our prestige or status, we just focus on whatever needs to be done, no matter what it is.

Humility is easily misunderstood. I was raised by Nebraska Methodists. For many of them, humility meant thinking that you are a miserable, awful, unworthy person. That confused me, because we are created in the image of God, and God does not make junk.

Later in life, I came across some other ways of explaining humility that I like much better. For example, humility is not about putting yourself down, it's about lifting others up. It's not thinking less of yourself, but thinking of yourself less. It's an honest appraisal of who you are, and what gifts you have been given, so that you can use those gifts while recognizing the gifts of others. Again, humility is essential, because without it, we are unlikely to do the things that servant leaders do.

The inbreaking of the kingdom

This idea of serving, of a servant's heart, turns out to be the core message of Jesus. That is not what most people think. If you ask a group of Christians today, what was 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 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.

It works

The teaching of Jesus about leading with a servant's heart turns our secular world upside down, just as other kingdom teachings do. It is radical, it is challenging, and— here is a surprise for many people— it turns out to be very, very effective in the daily reality of the workplace. It is not only Scriptural and spiritual, it is also very practical.

Servant leadership has been my passion for the past twenty-five years. During that time I have enjoyed participating in the international servant leadership movement. The movement includes people of many faiths and philosophies who

agree that leaders should focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others, rather than trying to acquire power, wealth, and fame for themselves.

My role in the servant leadership movement has been as a speaker, writer, and classroom teacher. For five years, I was the CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership in the United States, based in Indiana, and for three years I was CEO of the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership (Asia), based in Singapore. Currently, in addition to serving as President, I teach servant leadership courses at Pacific Rim Christian University.

Practitioners in the international servant leadership movement agree that servant leaders help their colleagues to grow, so they can fulfill their potential and contribute their gifts at their highest possible level. Servant leaders listen to their customers, clients, patients, members, students, or citizens, so they can figure out what people really need, and then provide it to them. The idea is that if you love people, and pay attention to their needs, you and your colleagues and your organization are very likely to succeed.

During the past few years, scholars have begun doing serious research about servant leadership in the workplace. The research results so far indicate that servant leadership encourages positive organizational citizenship behaviors, creates a service climate at work, and promotes fairness in the workplace. Employees of servant-leaders are more helping and creative than those working with leaders who score lower on servant leadership. Servant leadership has been shown to be positively related to employee job satisfaction. Servant leadership also has a positive impact on employee commitment to the organization, job performance, and community citizenship behavior. Servant-leaders are good at building and facilitating effective teams. They promote open and problem-driven communication, team confidence, personal integrity, and cooperation among team members.

There are many characteristics and skills of servant-leaders. I usually write and speak about seven key practices: self-awareness, listening, changing the pyramid, developing your colleagues, coaching not controlling, unleashing the energy and intelligence of others, and foresight.

Laura Reave is a leadership scholar who reviewed 150 studies of spiritual values and practices related to leadership effectiveness. She concluded that quiet, humble leaders who stay in the background are often the most effective. By contrast, Reave said that “a major cause for executive failure identified by

executives themselves is personal vanity and pride.” Humility turns out to be effective.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the kings of the Old Testament were flawed, and most of them were evil. Jesus taught us to be servants, not kings. The central message of Jesus was about the kingdom of God, and central to that message is a servant’s heart. That is how we must lead— with a servant’s heart. Humbly, we can serve each other, and then we can serve the larger community, listening and loving and helping others, here and around the world. *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.

Thank you— and God bless you!