

Servant Leadership

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The phrase “servant leadership” has become a popular buzzword in contemporary ministry circles. Churches, academic institutions and parachurch organizations take pride in calling themselves “servant leaders.” This trend raises the question, “Is this a biblical concept?” Certainly, the term cannot be found in Scripture. Has it been fabricated simply to tickle the ears? Even if the concept could be determined to have a sound biblical basis, is it properly understood and practiced by today’s church? This paper will attempt to examine the biblical understanding of servanthood in light of Matthew 20:25-28.

EXAMINATION OF MATTHEW 20:25-28

Jesus called them [His disciples] together 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, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wants to be first must be your slave (*doulos*)—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve (*diakonesai*), and to give his life as a ransom for many” (NIV).

Highlights of the Context of the Passage

This account provides the occasion to examine Jesus’ specific teaching concerning the nature of greatness and leadership in the kingdom. To appreciate the appropriateness of this passage to a discussion on servant leadership, one must consider the literary context of this account. In the preceding paragraph, the Sons of Zebedee, James and John, along with their mother, approach Jesus and request the two most exalted positions of honor in Jesus’ kingdom (20:20-23). Upon hearing this, the other ten disciples are indignant (20:24), most likely that James and John would attempt to gain for themselves the highest places. It is further interesting to note that this entire episode immediately follows Jesus’ discussion involving the wages of day laborers (20:1-16). In the Greco-Roman culture, these day laborers were the bottom of the social pyramid.¹ The entire setting, then, seems to be one in which the disciples were keenly aware of one’s status, out of which this discussion arose regarding greatness in the Kingdom. In this context, then, Jesus calls the disciples together to give them further teaching on the subject of true greatness in God’s kingdom.

Jesus’ response reveals that the values of the two brothers and, probably those of

the other ten disciples, reflect those of the world's leaders, not those of the Kingdom. Jesus uses the Gentile leaders as a negative example because Jewish people knew well that neighboring pagan rulers often exhibited an abuse of power. The Gentile model of authority was based on arrogance and overbearing dominance. "Ancient near Eastern kings had long claimed to be gods and ruled tyrannically. Greek rulers had adopted the same posture through much of the eastern Mediterranean. The Roman emperor and his provincial agents would have been viewed in much the same light: brutal and tyrannical."² Leaders quested after power and relished it. In a domineering way, they enjoyed exercising authority over others.³

Telling the disciples that seeking power was a Gentile (i.e., pagan) practice was tantamount to telling them they should not be doing it. The standards of greatness found among society's leaders, striving for power and lording authority over others, should not be that of the disciples of Jesus. Greatness, honor, and prestige are reckoned by a completely different standard. Leaders who would be "great" or "first" in God's community must not strive for positions of honor but become the community's "servant" and "slave." "Great" and "servant," like "first" and "slave," are nearly polar opposites. Thus, the greatness of the Kingdom is of a paradoxical nature and, certainly, Jesus' teaching went against every understanding of a first-century, socio-cultural concept of leadership.

Examination of Key Words in the Passage

Jesus declares that a leader in His kingdom must be a "servant" (*diakonos*) and "slave" (*doulos*). Just what exactly

do these terms mean? To fully grasp the implication of Jesus' instruction and soundly exegete the present text, one must understand the words "servant" and "slave" in their first-century context. The following section will highlight the socio-cultural and scriptural contexts of these terms.

Slave/servant (*doulos*)

Three foundational factors greatly influence how the term "*doulos*" is to be understood in a New Testament sense. These factors will be noted, followed by a more specific description of slavery in a first-century⁴ social context and a survey of the biblical uses of the term.

The first factor that influences our understanding of "slave" is the difference between the contemporary and first-century notions of the term. "The contemporary conception of slavery, as practiced in the New World from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, has hindered achieving an appropriate, historical understanding of social-economic life in the Mediterranean world of the first century."⁵ *Doulos* is best translated "slave" instead of "servant" in order to point to the legal subordination of the "slave" as property of the owner, yet the meaning can be obscured due to present connotations of the term "slave." When studying New Testament texts, one must define "slave" strictly in terms of the profoundly different legal-social contexts of the first century.⁶

The second factor in properly understanding "slave" in the New Testament is understanding the diverse practices of slavery existing in the Greek, Jewish and Roman cultures. The differences are relevant to New

Testament texts and require one to examine each text and determine which of the legal- philosophical frameworks was presupposed.⁷ In the present text, the passage was likely written to Greek-speaking Jews living outside Jerusalem in the mid-first century. While they probably had an awareness of Jewish tradition, living in a Greco-Roman society would certainly have provided a broad frame of reference for the concept. Thus, a brief highlight of the characteristics of all three traditions will be presented.

The ancient Greek tended to regard an enslaved person as inferior by nature. Personal freedom was his prized possession. “Because *douleuo* involved the abrogation of one’s own autonomy and the subordination of one’s will to that of another, the Greek felt only revulsion and contempt for the position of the slave. While the *doulos* may be well treated and had an equal status with free men, the life of the slave was one of unrelieved compulsory labor and service for others. Hence, *douleuein*, in the sense of dependence and subordination in service is debasing and contemptible.”⁸

In some aspects, the Jewish tradition gave higher regard to slaves. Despite the practice of debt-slavery and the use of slaves even in the Jerusalem Temple, the Jewish tradition tended to regard any enslavement of Jews by Jews as improper because every Jew had already become exclusively a “slave of God” by means of the liberation of his or her ancestors from Egyptian bondage (Lev. 25:55). It was envisaged that the slave would work alongside his master and participate in all his religious observances, including the Sabbath rest.⁹ The prophecy of Joel 2:29 extends to the

slaves, implying their full participation in the outpouring of the Spirit.¹⁰ While Jewish slaves may have been treated fairly well, slaves — especially Gentile slaves—were still viewed as inferior to freemen.

In the Roman tradition, slaves were regarded in legislation as “things” and “property” on the one hand and, on the other hand, often were treated well as fully human beings and usually granted Roman citizenship when set free.¹¹ Generally, in the Greco-Roman world, the slave did not count as a person, but as chattel the master could deal with as he chose. Roman law imposed certain restrictions that forbade the grossest kind of mistreatment. Nevertheless, the legal rights of slaves were minimal.¹² By the middle of the first century, Stoic philosophy was improving the condition of slaves because of its view that all persons are subject to fate and not responsible for their social status. “Seneca (Ep. 47) professed to see no difference between the slave and the free person except an accident of birth or political misfortune. Anyone could become a slave if his country was conquered by another. There is thus no inborn inferiority in a slave.”¹³ Thus, under the influence of Stoicism—and later of Christianity—the Romans gradually came to acknowledge that even slaves were “persons” and deserved to be treated humanely.¹⁴

A person could become a slave in various ways. Before the first century, the majority of slaves were prisoners of war and people kidnapped by pirates. When slaves came in from other cultures, they were denationalized and made a part of Greco-Roman civilization.¹⁵ By the first century, however, the children of women in

slavery had become the primary source of slaves. Their numbers were supplemented by the sale of freeborn children to pay debts, the raising of foundlings (exposure of a child) or conviction in the law courts.¹⁶

Throughout this time, an additional consistent source of slaves was the practice of “self sale,” in which persons sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off their debts or seek a better means of providing for their needs.

Having examined the use of *doulos* in the socio-cultural context of the New Testament, consideration is given to the use of the term in the rest of Scripture. The *doulos* group of words was usually used in the OT to translate the root ‘*bd*’ and its derivatives. The memory of Israel’s experiences in their Egyptian captivity lingered on and was the main source of this root’s essential meaning. “It is distinguished from its synonym *diakoneo* by its emphasis on the service being that of a slave, i.e., on an obligatory, repressive or at least a dependent form of service under the complete control of a superior.”¹⁷ The one who calls himself a *doulos* acknowledges that another has absolute power over him.

Even the highest official, the vizier, is a “servant” in his relationship to the king. Hence the title “servant” came to be used in Scripture as one of honor, borne by important figures such as Moses, David or the prophets, who were called “servants of God.”¹⁸ This courtly, ceremonial language was adopted in worship to describe the relation between God and man. In calling himself the *doulos* of the *kyrious* (Ps. 122:2), the Israelite was conscious of his complete dependence upon God—declaring unconditional subjection to him. The

concept of the *doulos*, thus expanded, in turn affected one’s relation to one’s countrymen. He who honored *Yahweh*, the God who had chosen a people for himself, knew that he had been joined to his community to serve them.¹⁹

The New Testament reveals even greater significance of the term “slave.” Christ’s actions brought a new dignity and responsibility to the title of *doulos*.

Philippians 2:7 declares that becoming a man, Christ divested himself and took on the form of a servant (*morphēn doulou labon*).²⁰ Clearly, during his time on earth, Jesus exemplified a life of servanthood and selfless sacrifice for others. The ultimate expression of this service was to give his life for humankind. Fortunately, the death of Jesus Christ has the ability to free humankind from the relentless grip of a completely different sort of slavery—*doulos tes hamartias*—“slave of sin” (Rom. 6:17).

The paradox is that, in this redemption, one is set free to a new form of slavery—a change in masters. Believers “having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6:18, 22). Again, the distinctive feature of *doulos* is that it refers to the subordinate and responsible nature of one’s service in exclusive relation to one’s Lord. It emphasizes the obligatory character of the service for God and to one’s neighbor that is the duty of the community of those who have been set free by Jesus Christ.²¹ Thus, the nature of Christ’s loving work prevents one from separating service to God from service to one’s neighbor. All who are called to freedom from sin are set free to serve one another in love (Gal. 5:13).

Servant/Serve (*diakonos/diakoneo*)

In the preceding section, the word “*doulos*” (slave/servant) was examined. Closely related to this term is the concept of “*diakonos*” (servant). Due to the similar background of these words, *diakonos* will be mentioned briefly in order to highlight its uniqueness from the term “*doulos*,” as it is used in Scripture.

“While *doulos* stresses...the Christian’s complete subjection to the Lord, *diakonos* is concerned with one’s service to the church and fellow-believers.”²²

The Greek word-group *diakoneo*, and its derivatives, make up the single most important word group having to do with ministry. As the etymology suggests, they are used mainly to express the varieties of personal helps to others (i.e., serve, support, serve as deacon, service, helper, assistant, servant).²³

The term *diakoneo* is not found in the Old Testament, although it can be found in the literature of later Judaism, in the writings of Philo and Josephus.²⁴ However, various forms of the word are found numerous times in the New Testament. Its primary meaning is that of one who serves at tables, or simply, a servant (Matt. 22:13; 20:26; John 2:5, 9). It is rooted in voluntary, humble service for others. Such lowly service, or the waiting on of tables, was considered by many free men to be beneath their dignity (Luke 7:44 ff.). Despite one’s enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for performing such service to others, the numerous New Testament references provide a rich picture of the diversity in which service (ministry) may be carried out.

Such faithful service presupposes humility in the one who serves. *Diakoneo* is used of Jesus himself as an

expression of his humiliation and giving up of himself for others through suffering and death (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45; Luke 18:26). So used, the concept extends beyond the limits of its former sphere of meaning. Jesus’ humility, characterized by selfless sacrifice for others, becomes the norm for the life of the disciples. Derived from divine love, *diakoneo* becomes a term that denotes loving action for one’s neighbor and describes the outworking of true *koinonia*.²⁵

In summary, it has been shown that the first-century understanding of “servant” (*diakonos*) refers to voluntary, humble service for others that may be demonstrated in numerous ways. In an even stronger sense, the term “slave” refers to obligatory subjection to the will of the master and absolute obedience to his commands. The slave’s work could cover a wide range of activities, and the status of the slave was completely dependent upon that of the master. There were some benefits afforded to the slave, namely, the master’s provision for his or her needs and the potential to accumulate rewards.

Conclusion

In the present text, Jesus instructs the disciples that true greatness in God’s kingdom requires one to be both a servant and a slave. Clearly, it was radical for Jesus to define greatness in terms of servanthood. Jewish free persons, like their Gentile counterparts, would have considered slaves socially inferior.²⁶ Fortunately, both the Jewish sense of being God’s slaves and the common Greco-Roman practice of self-sale into slavery provided conceptual models for them to regard themselves as having become “slaves” of Christ.²⁷

Thus, they would have some concept of a willing subjection to the will and command of another.

Jesus concluded by declaring his example for them to follow: “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” (20:28). Jesus probably is alluding here to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, who offered His life on behalf of the many. It is also a standard Jewish “how much more” (*qal vahomer*) argument: If their master served, how much more ought they to do so.²⁸ Christ’s disciples are called to follow His example of humility, service and self-sacrifice.²⁹

In light of Matthew 20:25-28, what can be said of servant leadership today? Four application principles will be highlighted from the preceding discussion. First, truly “great” ministry must be marked by selflessness. One should not seek after position or power, for the greatness of the kingdom is reached only through service and self-sacrifice. This is contrary to the prevailing leadership philosophies, which encourage “working one’s way to the top” and “striving after positions of power.” When God places servants in positions of responsibility and command, they must be careful not to abuse that power. Rather, they must maintain an attitude of humble submission. No matter what tasks the master asks them to perform, there is no place for pride, for they are only doing what is requested of them as God’s servant. They must carry out their tasks in humble, self-sacrificing service to others.

Second, those truly in a servant’s position recognize that their status is not based upon who they are or what they

do, but to whom they belong. They have no status of their own but simply assume the status of their master. They will not seek to gain status based upon any work performed, or accomplishment. Rather, all credit and glory goes to the master—Jesus Christ. Not needing to strive for human recognition truly is the mark of a humble leader.

Third, servants owe their masters exclusive and absolute obedience. Whatever the master calls upon them to do they must be willing to obey his command. A servant is conscious of the fact that he has forfeited all rights to independence and is in complete subjection to the will of the master. In a society that promotes “personal rights,” willingness to set aside one’s rights is a difficult but necessary requirement.

Fourth, servants do not strive by their own efforts to provide for their needs and amass great earthly possessions. Rather, the servant relies on the provision of the master. The master will always see that the servant has what is needed to carry out his will. Servants recognize that everything they have belongs to the master. In a day of materialism, masked as striving after “financial security,” a servant willingly foregoes the quest for worldly treasures.

In summary, it is clear that the request of James and John reflects the distorted perspective of their society’s leadership values, wherein the greatest good appears to be that which serves the self by seeking honor, position, glory and prestige. However, the kingdom brought by Jesus defines greatness in leadership in an entirely opposite way—in terms of servanthood. This way is foreign to the world and to human nature, yet it is the way of Jesus and it is thus to be the way

of his disciples. Christ's disciples are to be marked by the humility and servanthood that characterized Jesus.³⁰

Addendum

While the New Testament may never have linked the words "servant" and "leader" together, Jesus certainly did teach and model the concept. His message was clear: The essence of true leadership is servanthood—selfless commitment to serving God, no matter what the cost, evidenced by a life of sacrificially serving others.

He was the epitome of servant-leadership. Disregarding all social conventions of his day, his life attested that true greatness in God's kingdom could not be measured by natural human standards or by the standards of any one society. He declared that greatness in ministry would not be attained through striving after position and power from society's perspective. In contrast, leadership that is considered great in God's eyes, will be achieved only in humble service to others.

Unfortunately, this does not describe much of what passes under the contemporary title of "servant" leadership today. May believers hear the words of Jesus and be challenged: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15). Indeed, may the words of Philippians 2:7 become the prayer of Christ's disciples everywhere:

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to

your own interests, but also to the interests of others. The message of Jesus can be summed up well. "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...who made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...he humbled himself and became obedient to death" (Phil. 2:7).

Servant Leadership Model: Nehemiah

The example of Nehemiah is clear: He was actively involved in projects from start to finish (Neh. 1-7). On behalf of his people exiled in Babylon, he took it upon himself to appeal to King Cyrus (Neh. 2:5). Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls and temple. Beginning with prayer, he surveyed the state of affairs, developed a plan and went straight to work. One of the distinctive features of Nehemiah's leadership was the way he involved others. Nehemiah motivated people and then mobilized them to carry out his plan. Everyone, from the high priest to the goldsmiths and merchants, to the common citizens got involved (Neh. 3:1-31).

Throughout the entire process, Nehemiah was a participatory leader. He led his followers from a position alongside them, rather than being out in front or trying to push them from behind. Nehemiah 2:17 illustrates his participation: "Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." What were the results of Nehemiah's leadership? The record is clear: "So the wall was completed in just 52 days" (Neh. 6:15). It was an

enormous task, and they had little resources. Nevertheless, under the leadership of Nehemiah, they accomplished the “impossible.”

Servant Leadership Model: Barnabas

The third ministry model is the complementary leadership style of Barnabas. His original name was Joseph, but the disciples it to Barnabas, which means “son of encouragement” (Acts 4:36). Barnabas spent much of his ministry supporting others. Because he worked with the Apostle Paul, who is a very dominant figure, Barnabas often is overlooked in leadership studies. However, from the example of Barnabas, we can learn an important lesson in servant leadership: the ability of a leader to serve alongside and support other leaders.

Consider his relationship with Paul. Barnabas recognized the sincerity of Paul’s conversion and was instrumental in launching him into ministry. When the Jerusalem Christians were skeptical, Barnabas believed in Paul, and appealed to them to accept him (Acts 9:27). Barnabas disciplined Paul in leadership (Acts 11-12), and his support paid off—Paul became a great leader. Soon

the roles were reversed, and one of Barnabas’s primary ministry tasks was to support Paul’s leadership. He spent much of his ministry supporting Paul. They worked together well, traveling on missionary journeys. In Antioch, they led the church for a year. They had great results, teaching “great numbers of people” (Acts 11:26).

In the same way, Barnabas recognized the leadership potential in Mark and disciplined him. He encouraged Paul to take Mark with them on their first missionary journey. (Acts 13:13f). Even though things did not work out, Barnabas still believed in and encouraged Mark in ministry. He gave Mark a second chance (Acts 15:38f). Again, Barnabas’s encouragement paid off, and Mark too became a great leader (Col 4:10; Philem. 24; 2 Tim. 4:11).

Today, many leaders are called to fill supporting roles alongside leaders in more prominent ministry positions. We can see from the example of Barnabas, how important this can be. Every Paul needs a Barnabas. Undoubtedly, Barnabas is a supreme example of servant leadership.

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Endnotes

¹Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 93-94.

²Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downer's Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 163.

³Donald A. Hagner, *Word Biblical Commentary*, eds. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, vol. 33B (Dallas: Word Books, 1995), 581.

⁴Note: Throughout the remainder of this paper, when the term "first century" is used, it can be assumed that the reference is to first century A.D.

⁵S.S. Bartchy, "Slavery," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David N. Freeman, vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 66.

⁶Ibid. Bartchy highlights the central features that distinguish first-century slavery from that later practiced in the New World as follows: racial factors played no role; education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners) and education enhanced a slave's value; many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions; slaves could own property (including other slaves); their

religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn; no laws prohibited public assembly of slaves; and, perhaps above all, the majority of urban and domestic slaves could legitimately anticipate being emancipated by the age 30.

⁷S.S. Bartchy, "Servant; Slave," *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 4., 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 420.

⁸R. Tuente, "Doulos/Slave," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 592-93.

⁹See Gen. 17:1-13, 27; Exod. 12:44; 20:10; 23:12; Lev. 22:11; Deut. 5:14; 12:12, 18; 16:11, 14.

¹⁰Tuente, 593.

¹¹Bartchy, "Servant; Slave," 420.

¹²Eduard Lohse, *The New Testament Environments*, trans. John E. Steely (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1976), 212.

¹³Albert A. Bell, *A Guide to the New Testament World* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1994), 195.

¹⁴Lohse, 213.

¹⁵Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 56.

¹⁶Bartchy, "Slavery," 67.

¹⁷Klaus Hess, "Diakoneo/Serve," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1986), 593.

¹⁸See Jos. 14:7, 24:29; Judg. 2:18; 2 Kings 17:23; Ps. 89:3, 105:42; Isa. 48:20; Dan. 3:5.

¹⁹Hess, 595.

²⁰Hess, 597.

²¹Hess, 598.

²²Hess, 548.

²³Hess, 544.

²⁴Hess, 547.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Keener, 163.

²⁷Bartchy, "Servant; Slave," 420.

²⁸Keener, 100.

²⁹Hagner, 581.

³⁰Hagner, 583.