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what does servant mentality in leadership look like?

'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.' (Mark 10:45)

The word 'servant' and its derivatives appear approximately 100 times in the New Testament. On a number of these occasions leaders are called to pursue and embody a servant 'shape' in the way that they minister and live out their calling. The danger of this familiarity is that leaders are sometimes quicker to note it than to embrace it in their thinking and therefore their ministry and leadership. Here are some of the ways in which I have been challenged over the years to embrace more fully and richly the mentality of being a servant leader.

Emptying

Paul pointed out to the Philippians that part of the essential character of Jesus' servanthood was the 'emptying' of self. For Jesus this involved putting aside his divine status and power, embracing struggle and opposition and, ultimately, letting go of life itself.

This 'emptying' is not just a call to humility as some suppose. It has more 'bite' and more substance. It is a call to eschew self-ambition, prominence and even reputation. In a culture that is 'rights' aware and focused, it means that we have to be careful not to embrace expectations which are – at the end of the day – born of this world rather than the kingdom.



For Jesus, it meant emptying himself of any expectation that he would be 'liked'. It meant that his plans and ambitions could only be those of the Father (remember the Gethsemane prayer?). It meant that he would be misunderstood – even by his own family.

For some of us, it might mean emptying ourselves of career expectations. For some, that might mean not being invited into senior leadership positions. For others, it challenges us to let go of the ambition to be a 'platform speaker', to lead a large church or to be an author/broadcaster.

Of course, the call to 'empty' ourselves of all that is self-centred is not so that we might be impotent in ministry – rather that we might then be filled daily with the Spirit.

Service from love

In Galatians 5:13 Paul implores us: 'through love serve one another' (ESV). What is interesting is how love is identified in this statement as the root or source of service. Richard Foster put it this way:

'How do spiritual leaders serve their people? They serve them by compassionate leadership. People do not need someone who will stand over them and pontificate in authoritative tones about the meaning of life. They need someone who will stand with them and share their excitement, their



confusion, their hurt. People need leaders who love them.' (*Money, Sex and Power*, 1985, p.238)

In his book *On Leadership*, Allan Leighton (ASDA, BskyB and Royal Mail) argues that good customer service comes 'from the heart not a text book'. And whilst the profit motive can never be the purpose of Christian ministry, it is fascinating to note Leighton's recognition of the place of the heart!

The problem for leaders is that people are not always easy to love. For those of you who are part of a church leadership team – why not systematically pray for all those on your address list or electoral roll? My own experience is that it is impossible to pray for somebody and not know the love of God released towards them in your own heart.

The towel

If the cross is a sign of submission, the towel is a sign of service. In John 13 Jesus picks up a towel and washes the feet of his disciples. The washing of feet was a regular, ordinary, even mundane part of daily life in the dusty first century Middle East.

In the discussion between Jesus and his disciples that follows, Jesus makes the connection between servanthood and the example he has given them. Leaders, ministers, and preachers quite rightly find themselves 'centre stage' or 'at the front' serving others. However, if we are to follow Jesus' example, it's also worth asking ourselves: when do we do the ordinary, the mundane, and the routine? When did we last offer to wash up coffee cups after a meeting? When did we last initiate the setting up of chairs? When did we last think to offer someone a lift to church or home?



Under-rowers

In 1 Corinthians 4 Paul gives us an insight into his self-perception: 'This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed.' The word that we translate as 'servant' would be better translated as 'under rower'. The task of the under rower in a first century galley ship was only possible if he kept his eyes fixed on the one shouting 'pull'. If you failed in that gaze you would be out of time with the other rowers – and probably severely punished for it.

The servant takes his/her orders from the master. And whilst I'm sure you'd agree with me that we are all aware of the daily challenge to be nudged and steered by the Holy Spirit, it is also all too easy to pray: 'Lord, bless what we're doing' instead of, 'Lord, instruct us in our doing'. That's the prayer of the under-rower. It's a prayer that indicates willingness for the Lord to 'call the shots'. Philip must have prayed the same: he ended up in the desert leading the Ethiopian to faith at the 'steer' of the Spirit.

And the mind of the servant leader is the mind that prays the same.

The pothole of self-righteous service

A fifth challenge is to walk the narrow pathway of true service and avoid the potholes of what might be called 'self-righteous service'. Self-righteous service is that which requires external rewards. It is the kind of serving that 'feels good' because other people see and appreciate the effort. It warms to human applause – with appropriate religious modesty of course! It is not the kind of service that is content in being hidden. True service is content with divine approval only.

There have been times over the years when I have thought: 'I wish someone could see what I am doing – for the Lord of course – right now'. That's self-righteous service. And it is in stark contrast to the mentality that knows that his eyes are the only eyes that matter. One of my favourite Bible verses is Matthew 25:23. I hope that – one day – I might hear Jesus speak those same words to me: 'Well done, good and faithful servant!' In that instant it will be apparent that all the other commendations, applause and affirming words are of little consequence.

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