

CHOOSING TO SERVE RATHER THAN TO BE SERVED

By Ken Korkow

Years ago, the term “servant leadership” moved into prominence in business and professional circles. For some it seemed a contradiction in terms, what grammarians call an “oxymoron” Leaders are the ones who are supposed to be served, right? However, writers like Robert K. Greenleaf and others pressed the point that the best leaders achieve the most by serving those they lead. He even started the Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership to advance that philosophy.

Servant leadership is a concept we encounter in the Bible as well, modeled best by Jesus Christ. Addressing His followers, Jesus stated, *“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). He preceded that by saying, *“whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all”* (Mark 10:44).

There is just one problem with that: I know God wants me to be a servant – but I don't like being treated like one. The “flesh side” of me wants people to see my acts of service and think or say, “My, oh my, isn't Ken such a wonderful man of God.” Unfortunately, a true servant is not noticed; often he or she is even ignored. A true servant only desires to serve and see the master exalted, without thinking about self, recognition or receiving credit. You will know what it is like to be a servant – when you are treated like one.

Pondering this, I was impressed by what author Henry Blackaby wrote about it. He says it much better than I could, so here is the excerpt:

“For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:27).

“The measure of greatness in the kingdom of God differs vastly from that of the world. Our society idolizes the rich, the powerful, the beautiful, and the athletic. We even make celebrities out of those who brazenly flaunt their immorality. The world claims it is demeaning to serve others. However, God's kingdom completely rejects the world's measure for esteem, giving the greatest honor to the one who serves most. The person who serves selflessly, lovingly, without complaint, and without seeking recognition is highly regarded in the kingdom of God.

When Jesus and His disciples entered the upper room, the disciples looked for a prominent place to sit; Jesus looked for a place to serve. As they awkwardly waited to be served, Jesus took a towel and basin and washed their feet (John 13:1-15). We Christians like to refer to ourselves as servants, but we are seldom content to be treated as servants! We are tempted to adopt the world's evaluation of importance. But when we look to Jesus as our model, we see that it takes a far more noble character to serve than to be served.

The world will estimate your importance by the number of people serving you. God is more concerned with the number of people you are serving. If you struggle to be a servant, your heart may have shifted away from the heart of God. Ask Jesus to teach you selflessness and to give you the strength to follow His example. Watch for Jesus' invitation to join Him in serving others. It will come.”

Who are the people you lead? Or people in your sphere of influence, even coworkers? How might you exhibit true leadership – servant leadership – by serving them, demonstrating how important they are and putting them and their needs first, even ahead of your own?

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the term, "servant leadership"?

2. Have you ever seen someone demonstrate what it means to be a servant leader? If so, who was that person, and what did it look like for them to lead by serving others?

3. One difficulty with striving to be a servant leader, Mr. Korkow observes, is the "danger" of actually being treated like a servant? Why would that be problematic?

4. If you were to resolve to become a servant leader – or a better one – what do you think that would require? Would you be willing to do whatever is necessary to effectively lead others by serving them? Explain your answer.

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

Matthew 8:20, 20:20-28; Luke 22:27; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Philippians 2:3-4,7