

# SERVANTHOOD: JESUS' COUNTERCULTURAL CALL TO CHRISTIAN LEADERS

*John C. Hutchison*

Many books have been written on the subject of leadership, by Christian leaders and by secular leaders in corporate business. Few topics have created as much discussion and debate in both contexts as the concept of servant leadership. Since Jesus and essentially every New Testament writer inextricably associated Christian leaders with servanthood, one would expect to find this subject discussed in Christian literature.<sup>1</sup> One of the most widely read books on the subject, however, is a collection of essays published in 1977 by Robert Greenleaf in *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*.<sup>2</sup> Greenleaf, a retired AT&T executive, never claimed that his book is religious in nature. Yet he presented a new paradigm for business managers, one that has gained followers in the past thirty years. As the title implies, Greenleaf wrote that service and an attitude of

---

John C. Hutchison is Professor of Bible Exposition, Talbot School of Theology, La Mirada, California.

<sup>1</sup> Excellent Christian books on this topic include Ken Blanchard, *Servant Leader* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003); Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991); Bill Hybels, *Courageous Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002); J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1994); and John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> The twenty-fifth anniversary edition of this book was published by Paulist Press, Mahwah, New Jersey, in 2002. Earlier versions were copyrighted in 1977 by Robert K. Greenleaf, and in 1991 by the Robert K. Greenleaf Center. Other books by Greenleaf are *The Power of Servant Leadership* (1998), *On Becoming a Servant Leader* (1996), *Seeker and Servant* (1996), and *Teacher as Servant* (1979). The Robert K. Greenleaf Center has also published *Practicing Servant Leadership: Succeeding through Trust, Bravery, and Forgiveness*, ed. Larry Spears and Michele Lawrence (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

servanthood should be a distinguishing characteristic of corporate leaders. He observed that when leaders begin by viewing themselves as servants, they create stronger corporations and produce serving institutions, and they also find greater personal joy in their leadership roles.

Greenleaf's concept of leadership was formally expressed in his writings beginning with "The Leader as Servant," an essay first published in 1970. Though he deserves much credit for his application of this concept among corporate leaders, it did not originate with him. He mentions a number of writers who inspired his development of this model of leadership, but he never mentions Jesus Christ.

This concept presented by Jesus over two thousand years ago has been seen through modern eyes as an unusual approach. In real life it is rarely practiced. History has shown that left to themselves, most leaders do not follow the principles of servant leadership. This article seeks to investigate the original cultural and historical setting of Jesus' teachings on the subject. Through an exposition of Mark 10:35–45 (with additional insights from Matthew 20:20–28 and Luke 22:24–30), one can see how difficult it would have been for Jesus' original followers to accept servanthood as a prerequisite for positions of power and leadership in the Lord's work. The thesis of this article is that Jesus' call of His disciples to this model was one of the most difficult commands for them to understand and obey in their cultural situation. This radical call demanded deep, personal humility, and it violated foundational cultural values related to honor/shame and patronage that were embedded in Jewish and Greco-Roman society. Therefore becoming an effective leader then, much like today, demanded a transformation of one's view of leadership and authority.

## JESUS' WORDS IN CONTEXT

### THEMATIC CONTEXT OF MARK 10:35–45 IN THE GOSPEL

The theme of servanthood permeates the Gospel of Mark, as reflected in Jesus' teachings and actions. The last section of the Gospel (chaps. 11–16) depicts the passion of Christ as the fulfillment of Isaiah's suffering servant (Isa. 52:13–53:12), a theme in the teaching of early church leaders (e.g., Philip in Acts 8:30–35). Jesus' role as a suffering servant was an expiatory act of atonement for sins, but it was more. His use of this motif in His teaching modeled for His followers the need for them to demonstrate servanthood and sacrifice. In Mark 10:42–45 Jesus challenged His disciples to a radical and paradoxical form of leadership and showed that He

Himself would provide the ultimate example through His suffering and death. "You know that those who are regarded as 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, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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."<sup>3</sup>

A number of scholars have discussed the subject of paradox in Mark's Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Santos considers Mark 8:22–10:52 as "the major and central section of this Gospel" because of the concentrated references to the authority/servanthood paradox (8:35; 9:35; 10:31, 45).<sup>5</sup> Jesus' words about leadership are paradoxical and would have sounded absurd when compared with Jewish or Gentile societal norms. Investigating the following contexts helps highlight this tension.

#### THE LITERARY CONTEXT OF MARK 10:35–45

*Mark 8–10.* Jesus' greatest statement about servant leadership in Mark 10 follows a dispute between two disciples, James and John, about their potential future positions of honor and leadership. This immediate context, however, is the culmination of a pattern found in chapters 8–10 that presents Jesus' similar words on leadership. In 8:35, for example, Jesus expressed a paradox: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it." Similarly in 9:35 Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (see also 10:31). The paradoxical nature of these statements alerted Jesus' disciples that a new order was coming in which leadership and greatness would be viewed in a way much different

---

<sup>3</sup> Unless noted otherwise, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version.

<sup>4</sup> Narry F. Santos, "The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (October–December 1997): 452–60; idem, *Slave of All: The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2003); James L. Bailey, "Perspectives on the Gospel of Mark," *Currents in Theology and Mission* 12 (1985): 18–19; Robert Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand: Reader Response Criticism and the Gospel of Mark* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 184–94; Philip Davis, "Mark's Christological Paradox," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 35 (1989): 3–18; and Dorothy A. Lee-Pollard, "Powerlessness as Power: A Key Emphasis in the Gospel of Mark," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 40 (1987): 173–88.

<sup>5</sup> Santos, "The Paradox of Authority and Servanthood in the Gospel of Mark," 458.

from what they would normally have expected. The following chart illustrates a pattern in Jesus' teaching on greatness. Chapters 8–10 include significant statements about greatness and leadership, and all are immediately preceded by a prediction of the suffering Jesus would soon face.

	<i>Jesus' Predictions of Suffering</i>	<i>Jesus' Instructions about Humility and Greatness</i>
<i>Mark 8</i>	“He then began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again. He spoke plainly about this, and Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him” (8:31–32).	“Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it’” (8:34–35).
<i>Mark 9</i>	“He said to them, ‘The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and after three days he will rise.’ But they did not understand what he meant and were afraid to ask him about it” (9:31–32).	“Sitting down, Jesus called the Twelve and said, ‘If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all.’ He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me’” (9:35–37).
<i>Mark 10</i>	“They were on their way up to Jerusalem, with Jesus leading the way, and the disciples were astonished, while those who followed were afraid. Again he took the Twelve aside and told them what was going to happen to him. ‘We are going up to Jerusalem,’ he said, ‘and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief	“Jesus called them together and said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as 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, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even

priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise” (10:32–34).

the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (10:42–45).

This pattern helps readers understand Mark 10:35–45. The paradox of servant leadership is presented in each case with the accompanying paradox of the suffering and dying Messiah. Even Jesus' closest followers found this revelation about their Messiah difficult to accept. In spite of the prophecies of Isaiah 53, the fact that the Messiah would assume the role of a dying Savior as well as that of a victorious King was a contradiction that defied human logic. So it was with Jesus' teaching about future leaders: Truth that can be understood only through the paradox of a different value system.

*The request of James and John.* The request of James and John for positions of honor, assisted by their mother (Matt. 20:20), was the occasion for Jesus' instruction on leadership. Even their fellow disciples criticized them (Mark 10:41; Matt. 20:24). Many commentators depict the assertiveness of these two men as personal ambition, vanity, and self-centeredness, and thus completely out of place in this situation.<sup>6</sup> While one must concede that Jesus ultimately corrected the disciples' understanding of true greatness, a number of factors make their request more reasonable than one would initially think.

First, Jesus had already promised to all His disciples positions of authority in His messianic kingdom. “Jesus said to them, ‘I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel’” (Matt. 19:28).<sup>7</sup> Probably this awareness led the disciples to ask, “Who is

---

<sup>6</sup> John Calvin wrote of this passage, “This narrative contains a bright mirror of human vanity; it shows that proper and holy zeal is often accompanied by ambition” (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979]: 417). William Barclay wrote, “It tells us of their *ambition*. They were still thinking of things in terms of personal prominence and personal reward and personal distinction” (*The Gospel of Matthew* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1958], 253 [italics his]).

<sup>7</sup> Though the timing of the events in Matthew's Gospel cannot be determined with certainty, the text supports this teaching as chronologically prior to the story of Matthew 20:20–28.

the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (18:1).<sup>8</sup>

Second, James and John, sons of Zebedee, along with Simon Peter, were the “inner circle” of leaders among the disciples. This position of trust was most evident on the Mount of Transfiguration just before this event (Matt. 17:1; Mark 9:2; Luke 9:28), and in Gethsemane shortly thereafter (Matt. 26:37; Mark 14:33). Third, James and John were probably cousins of Jesus, their mother being Jesus’ aunt, the sister of Mary.

As just noted, several women apparently are accompanying Jesus and the Twelve on the journey to Jerusalem. As Jesus gives the prediction of his impending crisis in Jerusalem, one of those women, the mother of Zebedee’s sons (see 4:19–20), comes up to Jesus with her sons and, “kneeling down, asked a favor of him.” This woman has been a faithful follower of Jesus. Later identified as Salome, she is among the women who attends Jesus at the cross and witnesses the empty tomb (cf. 27:56; Mark 15:40; 16:1). The best clarification of the listings of the women identify Salome as the sister of Mary, Jesus’ mother (cf. John 19:25). So she is Jesus’ aunt, and her sons, James and John, are his cousins on his mother’s side. As Jesus undertakes his last fateful trip to Jerusalem, his mother and aunt may have traveled with the band of disciples.<sup>9</sup>

Matthew 27:56; Mark 15:40; and John 19:25 list names of women who gathered near the cross. Wilkins’s identification of the mother of the sons of Zebedee as Jesus’ aunt and a faithful follower becomes evident through a comparison of these lists.<sup>10</sup> This familial relationship explains Salome’s request on behalf of her sons (recorded only in Matthew’s Gospel), and it also suggests that the request itself may not have been as inappropriate as one might think. Jesus, Mary, Salome, James, and John were family, and culturally one might expect this kinship relationship to make a difference when Jesus will rule in His kingdom. In first-century Palestine “the primary role of a woman in a PKG [patrilineal kinship group] society is to provide male offspring for her husband’s family.”<sup>11</sup> Hellerman cites examples from both Jewish history (Rebekah) and Roman society contemporary with Jesus (Livia, wife of

<sup>8</sup> On a later occasion this question was asked in the upper room (Luke 22:24).

<sup>9</sup> Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 667.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 27:56 refers to this woman as “the mother of Zebedee’s sons,” Mark 15:40 mentions her as “Salome,” and John 19:25 refers to her as Jesus’ mother’s sister. One can conclude that these refer to the same woman, and therefore that a familial relationship existed between Jesus and the Zebedee family.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Hellerman, *The Ancient Church as Family* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 33.

Augustus and mother of Tiberius) that demonstrate a mother's personal involvement in the promotion of her son for a position of honor and blessing.<sup>12</sup> Bathsheba's promotion of her son Solomon to the aging King David is a similar case in the Old Testament (1 Kings 1:15–17).

Some New Testament critics have claimed that Matthew was altering Mark's narrative in order to avoid embarrassing the apostles and to place the "blame" on their mother. Other commentators have characterized Salome as an overenthusiastic Jewish mother inappropriately promoting her sons. The facts of the story and an understanding of kinship relationships in the culture, however, do not support these views. In both Matthew's and Mark's accounts the source of the inquiry seems to be the two sons (with support given later by their mother). Jesus addressed His response, and the other disciples their indignation, toward James and John. The involvement of all three in the request to Jesus can be appropriately seen as a discussion within a family who knew one another well, had spent much time together, and cared for each other. Salome's request for James and John, "is not pushing her sons into something that they do not want, but together they are demonstrating their commitment to support Jesus in what lies ahead."<sup>13</sup>

*The reaction of the other disciples.* Jesus' instruction about greatness and leadership in this passage is directed to all twelve disciples, not just James and John. After He responded privately to the sons of Zebedee, the other disciples heard about the inquiry and became indignant with them (v. 41). Their disdain did not stem from their innocence, however. The Gospels list other occasions when the disciples discussed authority and greatness, and even argued which of them might be the greatest! One of those occasions was in the upper room, a setting in which Jesus displayed one of His greatest examples of servant leadership by washing His disciples' feet.<sup>14</sup>

James and John's question seems to be mirroring the thoughts of all the disciples, which is why Jesus responded to all of them. Why then were the ten indignant toward the sons of Zebedee? Perhaps it was because the others were not included in the inquiry. Or more likely, the other disciples were irritated because James and John were using their familial ties with Jesus to "get the edge" on

---

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 34–35.

<sup>13</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 667.

<sup>14</sup> Discussions about this topic are recorded in Matthew 18:1; Mark 9:33–34; and Luke 9:46; 22:24.

acquiring positions in the kingdom, including the influence of their mother. Jesus then spoke to all twelve disciples, because they were all missing the point. Jesus addressed their misdirected understanding about leadership and authority and then gave the disciples a new paradigm for measuring greatness as a leader.

CULTURAL CONTEXT OF MARK 10:35–45

To appreciate the revolutionary nature of Jesus' teaching about servant leadership one must note the disciples' Jewish and Greco-Roman world. This can help Christian leaders today understand the challenges they face. Though today's culture differs from that of first-century Palestine, the difficulties in embracing the servant-leader paradigm have not changed.

ASPECTS OF FIRST-CENTURY CULTURE

Three aspects of the culture in Jesus' day have a bearing on this passage.

KINSHIP AND PATRONAGE

As De Silva observes, "The culture of the first-century world was built on the foundational social values of honor and dishonor."<sup>15</sup> Two primary expressions of this value system were in the family structure (kinship) and the public and private favors that patrons/benefactors bestowed on recipients in society (patronage). De Silva further explains the importance of honor as a cultural value.

Honor is a dynamic and relational concept. On the one hand, an individual can think of himself or herself as honorable based on his or her conviction that he or she has embodied those actions and qualities that the group values as "honorable," as the marks of a valuable person. This aspect of honor is really "self-respect." On the other hand, honor is also the esteem in which a person is held by the group he or she regards as significant others—it is the recognition by the person's group that he or she is a valuable member of that group. In this regard, it is having the respect of others.<sup>16</sup>

The concepts of kinship, patronage, and honor are useful in understanding several points in the story, including the challenges faced by Jesus' disciples.

---

<sup>15</sup> David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 23.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 25. See also J. G. Peristiany, ed., *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 21–22.



As already noted, the audacity of the Zebedee brothers' request of Jesus may likely be explained by the familial relationship of James and John's mother to Mary. James, John, and Salome were faithful followers and traveling companions of Jesus, but they were also family. Kinship identity carried much influence in both Greco-Roman and Jewish society. A person's "merits begin with the merits (or debits) of their lineage, the reputation of their ancestral house. Greeks and Romans receive a basic identity from their larger family. . . . This is even more pronounced in Jewish culture."<sup>17</sup> Though the request of James and John makes perfect sense in kinship circles, it was not well received by the others and was superseded by Jesus.

Mark 10:35–45 provides a helpful study in this regard. James and John come to Jesus seeking advancement together: "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mk 10:37). They are acting as natural kin ought to do, cooperating with each other in the quest for honor. It is probably of no importance to them which is granted the seat at the right hand over the left. Nevertheless, their request is not in keeping with the ethos Jesus seeks to create among all his disciples. The two natural brothers have made a distinction between themselves and the response of the ten here, who are "angry with James and John" (Mk 10:41), as well as their previous argument with one another concerning "who was the greatest" (Mk 9:33–34), shows that all twelve were still thinking in terms of competition for precedence within the group. Jesus declares that such an attitude must yield to the kinship values of cooperation and seeking how to be most of service to the brothers and sisters, rather than seeking how to achieve the greatest precedence and distinction among them. That is what will make for honor within the Father's household—acting honorably as family rather than competitively.<sup>18</sup>

The assertion, "It is not what you know, but whom you know that counts," would be an apt description of the value system of patronage in the first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman world. People of power or wealth often served as patrons or benefactors to others, giving them access to goods, protection, debt relief, or opportunities for employment or advancement to an office or position in government. As Clarke notes, the Roman emperor himself took on the role of a public patron or benefactor, granting political offices to members of society's elite in exchange for allegiance and absolute loyalty to him as *pontifex maximus*.<sup>19</sup> In many ways the emperor was

---

<sup>17</sup> DeSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 158.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 220–21.

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 29.

seen as the chief patron of the empire with hundreds of interlocking patron-broker-client relationships beneath him.

Jesus' instruction about leadership in Mark 10:35–45 warned the disciples that they were not to function like Gentile rulers. Perhaps James and John, who believed Jesus would rule as the messianic King, were using their kinship relationship to approach Him as benefactor and request the highest positions next to Him. The other disciples were angry about this because the two brothers had gone behind their backs. But Jesus' instruction was directed to the group (vv. 42–45), all of them evidently needing to know and follow His new model of leadership.

#### HONOR AND SHAME

The request of James and John must have been disappointing for Jesus. Their words reflected a belief in Him as their Lord, who they believed would soon establish His messianic kingdom. But their request for personal positions of eminence also revealed a limited perspective of self-centeredness and a failure to grasp something crucial about the road ahead. Glory and positions of authority would come only through the road of suffering, sacrifice, and servanthood. Jesus revealed three noteworthy principles about leadership privately to James and John (vv. 38–40) and to all the disciples (vv. 42–45).

*Principle 1: Spiritual authority and leadership come only through the path of suffering and sacrifice (10:38–39).* In Jesus' response, "You don't know what you are asking" (v. 38), He laid a foundation for the instruction to follow—authority is entirely different from other views of leadership. His later words to the Twelve, "Not so with you" (v. 43), affirm the same, that His pattern of spiritual leadership is different. Jesus had already prefaced this instruction with three prophetic references to His own suffering in Jerusalem (8:31–32; 9:31–32; 10:32–34), a connection that had evidently not "registered" with the disciples. Their messianic expectations were undoubtedly like those of any other Palestinian Jew at that time, focusing on the hope of God's kingdom to supplant the domination of the Roman Empire. The image of a suffering Messiah, though predicted in Isaiah 52:13–53:12, was not understood by them.

When Jesus revealed the imminence of His suffering, He used the present tense: "You cannot drink the cup *I am drinking*, can you, or be baptized with the baptism into which *I am being baptized?*" (Mark 10:38, author's translation). "The cup" was a common Jewish metaphor generally for one's appointed destiny (Ps. 16:5) and specifically for joy and blessing (23:5; 116:13) or divine judg-

ment against sin (75:7–8; Isa. 51:17–23; Jer. 25:15–28; 49:12; 51:7; Ezek. 23:31–34; Hab. 2:16; Zech. 12:2). Since Jesus applied “the cup” uniquely to Himself, it is best taken here as His submission to the Father’s will in facing the cross (Mark 14:36; John 18:11).<sup>20</sup> The metaphor of baptism is a parallel thought. In the Old Testament, flood waters picture the condition of someone who is overwhelmed by calamity (Job 22:11; Ps. 69:2, 15; Isa. 43:2). The word βαπτίζω conveys the idea “to identify with,” showing Jesus’ acceptance of the suffering ahead (cf. Luke 12:50).

Jesus responded to the brave but naïve claim of James and John (“We can!”) with a prophecy about their future. James would be the first of the Twelve to be martyred (Acts 12:2), and John would experience a long exile under Domitian for his Christian leadership (Rev. 1:9). While Jesus’ “cup” and “baptism” as an atoning sacrifice are unattainable by others, His words in Mark 10:39 teach that those who suffer and are persecuted for His sake are identified with His sufferings.<sup>21</sup>

In a culture that valued honor and sought to avoid shame at all costs, Jesus’ description of the road to leadership was uninviting. Leadership positions, He said, would be gained through the path of sacrifice and suffering. Being crucified like a common criminal, considered in first-century Palestine as the most shameful kind of death sentence, became the standard for such sacrifice. This was a new paradigm indeed.

*Principle 2: Spiritual authority and leadership can be sovereignly granted only by God the Father (v. 40).* This statement may have surprised the disciples. Jesus, whom they believed would reign as Messiah, did not have authority to grant positions of leadership in His kingdom! Put in patron/client terminology from the Greco-Roman culture, Jesus said He could not grant the wish of the two brothers because God the Father was the real “patron” in this situation, and Jesus was the “broker” representing the Father. Both God the Father and God the Son participate in this plan, with each one having specific roles. By inference, believers today who receive positions of spiritual leadership receive them only because

---

<sup>20</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *Wiersbe’s Expository Outlines on the New Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1992), 128; John D. Grassmick, “Mark,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton IL: Victor, 1984; reprint, Colorado Springs: Cook, 1996), 152; Alan Cole, *The Gospel according to St. Mark*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 170; and Wilkins, *Matthew*, 668.

<sup>21</sup> Later Peter wrote that he considered it a privilege “to participate in the sufferings of Christ” (1 Pet. 5:12–16).

the Father has granted them.

*Principle 3: Spiritual authority and leadership are demonstrated through servanthood, selflessness, and sacrifice for others (vv. 41–45).* These verses are the heart of Jesus' teaching on servant leadership. After a private discussion with James and John, Jesus addressed the third principle to all the disciples, who evidently had become aware of the request of the sons of Zebedee. Jesus stated that Gentile leaders are not to be viewed as leadership role models.

Rulers like Caesar, Herod the Great, Herod Agrippa, and other Roman magistrates were the most powerful human figures of their day. Gentile rulers, Jesus said, "lord it over" others (v. 42). This could be rendered "exercise lordship over them," in keeping with the next phrase translated "their high officials exercise authority over them."<sup>22</sup> Jesus' point focuses more on the *motive* for power, and in these simple statements He contrasted His teaching on greatness with Roman cultural standards of success. Judge gives insight regarding the model of leadership among "the Gentiles."

By New Testament times the predominant Stoic school of philosophy had raised the estimate [of the value of glory] to a very high level, apparently in response to the cult of glory among the Roman nobility. It was held that the winning of glory was the only adequate reward for merit in public life, and that, given the doubt as to the state of man after death, it was the effective assurance of immortality. It therefore became a prime and admired objective of public figures to enshrine themselves, by actually defining their own glory, in the undying memory of posterity. What was more, a man was thought the meaner for not pursuing this quest for glory. . . . Self-magnification thus became a feature of Hellenic higher education.<sup>23</sup>

Jewett makes the point that this quest for glory represented the greatest goal of all public life, and it was often memorialized in monuments and inscriptions on statues. "Only politicians of totalitarian bent in the modern world would dream of listing their accomplishments and honors in such detail, but in the honor-shame culture of the Greco-Roman world it was perfectly natural."<sup>24</sup> The practice of emperors like Augustus "served to stimulate emulation in others in the quest for honor, which was thought to be su-

---

<sup>22</sup> D. A. Carson, "Mark," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 8 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 432.

<sup>23</sup> E. A. Judge, "The Conflict of Educational Aims in New Testament Thought," *Journal of Christian Education* 9 (1966): 38–39.

<sup>24</sup> Robert Jewett, "Paul, Shame, and Honor," in *Paul and the Greco-Roman World*, ed. J. Paul Sampley (New York: Trinity, 2003), 554.

preremely virtuous.”<sup>25</sup> Hellerman offers this evaluation of the role of honor in Roman society. “It would be overly simplistic, of course, to suggest that honor served as the sole force energizing social relations in the ancient world. Human societies are much too complex to support such reductionism, for other dynamics often come into play. It is fair to assert, however, that in the solar system of ancient goods and values, honor occupied the place of the sun around which other priorities orbited. To remove honor and honor-seeking from the heart of an analysis of the ancient world would therefore be to render impossible a nuanced understanding of Roman social life.”<sup>26</sup>

Many government leaders aspire to positions of privilege, power, and authority because these are accepted measurements of importance. Jesus, however, introduced a completely different standard. His point is, “Don’t seek after positions of authority for the recognition or human glory that comes from the position; rather, consider sacrificial service for others as the true ‘badge’ of greatness.” This contrast addresses the well-intentioned but misplaced motives of James, John, and the other disciples, who were seeking positions for their own recognition.

Jesus’ instruction about leadership in these passages is supported by other teachings in His ministry and by the example of His ministry and death on the cross. Similar statements of His describe this kind of greatness. “Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it’ ” (Mark 8:34–35; cf. Matt. 16:24–25; Luke 9:23–25). “He took a little child and had him stand among them. Taking him in his arms, he said to them, ‘Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me’ ” (Mark 9:35–37; cf. Matt. 18:3–5; Luke 9:46–48).

Paradoxically greatness in Christ’s kingdom contradicts natural human aspirations and cultural standards. James, John, and the other disciples were pursuing models of leadership, greatness, and even service that reflected the value system of their culture. Anyone would be expected to pursue such positions in both the

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 555.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Hellerman, *Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi: Carmen Christi as Curus Pudorum*, Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 37.

Jewish and Greco-Roman world because those cultures valued honor and sought above all to avoid dishonor. Jesus was asking His disciples to abandon their way of thinking and to adopt a new value system that would govern His kingdom.

De Silva, Moxnes, and other writers agree that the concept of honor in the New Testament world is linked with power. Hellerman observes, “The Romans were remarkably creative in devising ways to publicly proclaim and reinforce the social hierarchy. Clothing, occupations, seating at spectacles and banquets, and the legal system all served to remind the empire’s residents of their respective positions in the pecking order of society. . . . All such practices served the ultimate design of reinforcing the values of elite society.”<sup>27</sup> As Lendon comments, “The honour of a man was inextricably bound up with the office he was holding and the offices he had held. To gain an office in the Roman world was to enjoy an accretion to one’s honour.”<sup>28</sup>

Regarding Greco-Roman society Clarke writes, “Graeco-Roman society was highly stratified, and at all levels of community life people recognized and elevated the *status quo* whereby those of comparatively greater rank and social standing received due deference and honour. Since such principles of leadership permeated structures at so many different levels of community life, it is reasonable to assume that these dynamics will have impinged significantly on the lives of all in Graeco-Roman society of the first century, whether rich or poor, pagan or Christian.”<sup>29</sup>

These Gentile values also affected the Jews. “When the dominant, Greco-Roman culture held a group like the Jews in contempt the effect was a constant pressure on individual Jews to give up their Jewishness and join in those behaviors that would be greeted as honorable by the members of the dominant culture.”<sup>30</sup> Clarke comments on the effects of the Gentile culture on the Jewish synagogue.

There was also a significant similarity between the *Jewish synagogues* of the first century and other institutions in contemporary Graeco-Roman society, particularly in terms of the ways in which

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>28</sup> J. E. Lendon, *Empire of Honour: The Art of Government in the Roman World* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), 181.

<sup>29</sup> Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers*, 146–47.

<sup>30</sup> David DeSilva, *The Hope of Glory: Honor Discourse and New Testament Interpretation* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), 6.

they honoured their leading and respected figures. Such people were recognized and honoured for their generosity towards and patronage of their local Jewish community. Time and again the key figures within the community were paraded in inscriptions as having made significant contributions from their own purse to the benefit of the synagogue. At this significant level, the degree of assimilation, in outward form at least, between the Jewish and the Graeco-Roman contexts is remarkable.<sup>31</sup>

Jesus directed His disciples to pursue the lowly position of a servant (δίακονος) and a slave (δοῦλος). The latter was the most servile term for a slave<sup>32</sup> to both Jews and Gentiles. The Greek term δοῦλος and the Latin *servus* were associated with the lowest class of society, even degradation or abuse.

Therefore it was almost impossible for James and John to appreciate the radical nature of Jesus' words. As the sons of Zebedee, they were part of a family that had achieved status in Galilee with a lucrative fishing business. They were evidently well known to the high priest in Jerusalem (John 18:15–16), which also points up their social standing in Judea. Taking on the role of a slave would mean moving from positions of honor to dishonor. Later the apostle Paul, a prestigious Roman citizen, identified himself as a δοῦλος of Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1), as did James, Peter, and Jude (James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:1; Jude 1). Jesus confirmed this surprising paradigm by using Himself as a role model. “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). Yet as the “Son of Man” He was viewed as the powerful messianic ruler. “He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (Dan. 7:14).

Jesus then revealed that even His position of leadership and authority was established through His servanthood. His life would become a λύτρον (a “ransom”) for others. This word, used in the New Testament only here in Matthew 20:28, means the price paid to release a slave or captive from bondage. Combined with the preposition ἀντι, this expression communicates the idea of substitution—“instead of” or “in place of.” The terminology of a price paid

---

<sup>31</sup> Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians as Leaders and Ministers*, 146 (italics his). See also W. A. Meeks, *The Moral World of the First Christians* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 6:32–38.

<sup>32</sup> Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:212.

for a slave again emphasizes the “shame of the cross” (Heb. 12:2) in a culture that prized honor and despised dishonor.

The most detailed New Testament description of Jesus’ servanthood is in Paul’s Christological reflection in Philippians 2:6–11. Hellerman’s analysis of this passage in the social context of Roman Philippi describes the powerful and surprising characterization of Jesus as *δοῦλος*, humiliated through crucifixion.<sup>33</sup> Though many expositors have appealed to the Suffering Servant motif of Isaiah 53 as background to Philippians 2:6–11, the Roman cultural values defining honor and shame shed even more light on this Christological statement. The “elite” and powerful in Roman society were known for grasping honor through self-assertion, some claiming to be a god, but Jesus did not even consider equality with God something to be grasped (v. 6).

In addition, “to ascribe to Jesus the status of *doulos* (2:7) was to assign to him a position of greatest opprobrium in the social world of Paul’s readers.”<sup>34</sup> Also Paul’s statement that Jesus “humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross” (v. 8) represents Jesus’ greatest cultural humiliation.

Most countercultural vis-à-vis ancient social values is the fact that Christ humbled *Himself*. Being humbled was common fare in the ancient world, where males sought to augment their own honor and social status at the expense of the honor and status of their peers. Humbling *oneself*, on the other hand, was not within the purview of the values of the dominant culture. The content of Christ’s self-humiliation, moreover, resulted in his utter degradation, as he underwent the most shameful public humiliation imaginable in the ancient world—death on a Roman cross.<sup>35</sup>

Though Paul’s description of Christ’s servanthood is one of the most Christological passages in Scripture, the thrust of his argument rests in the exhortation of verse 5 and the subsequent glorification account in verses 9–11. Believers are to relate to others in the same way Jesus related to them. Just as God the Father exalted Christ, so He will honor and ultimately exalt believers as well.

---

<sup>33</sup> Hellerman demonstrates the form and content of Philippians 2:6–8 as a *cursus pudorum*, a listing of shameful disgraces that were diametrically opposed to the Roman concept of greatness. The subsequent exaltation of Christ in verses 9–11 affirms the reaffirmation of Christ’s honor in the Father’s plan (*Reconstructing Honor in Roman Philippi*, 129–56).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.



## SERVANT LEADERSHIP IN A MODERN CONTEXT

Embracing the servanthood paradigm of leadership may be just as challenging to followers of Jesus today as it was for His earliest followers. Present-day terms such as “minister,” “deacon,” and “servant of the Lord” are appropriate for believers in positions of leadership. Titles, however, are not the point. Practicing this paradigm and carrying out Christian ministry with a servant’s heart goes against the grain of everything people have been taught by Western culture. At the heart of sin is self-centeredness and a desire to be seen by others. In addition most models of leadership in secular settings reward those who are self-promoting and “climbers” on the ladder of success. Many leaders instinctively seek out positions of control over others and try to avoid showing weakness or vulnerability. Not surprisingly, this pattern has also influenced many church leaders.

Many willfully seek power, honor, and positions of control. Like the disciples, they measure success with titles, one’s position in an organization, or the size of one’s salary. By contrast Jesus is the greater example of servanthood *and* of powerful leadership. Servanthood does not avoid leadership. Instead it is a different kind of leadership, one committed to meeting the needs of others.<sup>36</sup> And much like first-century slaves, true servant leaders give up their rights for the sake of others (Phil. 2:3–4). As Sanders writes, “True greatness, true leadership, is achieved not by reducing men to one’s service but in giving oneself in selfless service to them. And this is never done without cost. . . . The true spiritual leader is concerned infinitely more with the service he can render God and his fellowmen than with the benefits and pleasures he can extract from life. He aims to put more into life than he takes out of it.”<sup>37</sup>

This radical model, which goes against the grain of present-day cultural norms, can be practiced only by the power of the Holy Spirit. A true servant leader is a Spirit-led leader.

---

<sup>36</sup> This point is skillfully presented in Peter Nelson, “The Flow of Thought in Luke 22:24–27,” *Journal for Study of the New Testament* (spring 1991): 113–23.

<sup>37</sup> J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1967), 13.

Christian Leadership is about Servanthood not Position and Status. So often in the world, leadership is seen as being about position, status, and power, and when that happens it is abused. It becomes used for the benefit of the so called leader. Nothing could be further from the model that Jesus lived and taught. In Matthew 23, Jesus took the Pharisees to task for exactly this kind of behaviour. You can explore this call to a different style of leadership in Growing the Servant Heart which is a free, on-line leadership development programme for Christian Leaders by Claybury International and One Another Ministries. You can find it at the <http://academy.christian-leadership.org>. Image: epSos.de Flickr.com Creative Commons Licence. A Christian leader should instead be a humble servant-leader. As you open the lesson, emphasize the value of both servant leadership and humility. Opening Discussion: Mahatma Gandhi fought for India's independence from Britain in the opening years of the twentieth century. A call to gospel order was therefore necessary to protect the unity of the church. Care must be taken, however, to understand the role that leaders play in the church. They are called to a countercultural model of authority that embraces servanthood rather than domination. Choosing Christian styles and biblical sources, he develops applications of principles that ring true, reflecting the warmth and wholeness of sound interpersonal affiliation. He ably shows how Jesus' example of servanthood enables one to honor others while honoring God." (Michele Rickett, founder and president, Sisters In Service, and coauthor, Daughters of Hope). I highly recommend this book to Christian missionaries, pastors, and laypeople who work in cross-cultural or multi-cultural settings. It will help them understand how to better communicate the gospel in word and deed. It will also help them examine their own motives to make sure they are serving rather than patronizing others.