

Hanging out with Jesus: Becoming a Servant Leader

Matthew 23:1-12

Good morning, men! We all know that the world we live in has a big tear in it. Something has gone terribly wrong, our walls are broken down, things are not as they should be, and it's extremely painful for all of us. Jesus wants to commission us to do something about it. We've seen this repetitively in different verses. Today we're going to see it in the context of becoming a servant leader. To solve this problem, he is going to commission you at some point in your pilgrimage when you reach the maturity level where you understand grace enough so that you are filled with a desire to do something to express your gratitude to God. He's going to commission you to do something to serve him. The role that he is going to give to you is that of a servant leader. Boy I didn't say that anywhere near the way I planned to say it! But anyway, the purpose of this talk this morning is to help you understand how you can become a servant leader, and so the title of the talk is *Becoming a Servant Leader*.

What is servant leadership?

The first thing we want to catch up with today is what is servant leadership? We're going to begin at Matthew 23:1.

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, because they do not practice what they preach.

The world is full of people willing to tell you what to do but not willing to lift a finger to help you do it! There were a lot of people, a lot of leaders like that back in the day of Jesus. There are a lot of people and leaders like that today! I have a Ph.D. in leadership and one of the things that you quickly learn about leadership is that the literature and talk about it is just filled with glittering generalities, things that are interesting to hear but have no possible practical application in your life. They just sound really good! However, in the literature on leadership, there is an enormous amount of great books, and one of the handbooks, or bibles of leadership is the book called *Leadership* by James MacGregor Burns. He won a Pulitzer Prize for it. It's a bit of a tour de force, and he talks about all different types of leadership. Just a few of them: intellectual leadership, reform leadership, revolutionary leadership, heroic leadership, opinion leadership, group leadership, party leadership, legislative leadership, executive leadership, and so on. The kind of leadership that we want to talk about today is not really a type of leadership like these, but it is more a style of leadership. Servant leadership is a style, in fact you can do servant leadership in any of these categories. You may not necessarily see it as much as we probably should see it today, and we certainly know, because of the big spot light that is focused on government, we know that legislative leadership does seem to be somewhat lacking in the area of servant leadership.

So what is servant leadership? Drop down to verse 11. In verse 11, Jesus installs a whole new way of thinking about what it means to lead. We're going to go back to the verses we skipped over, and we're going to look at what servant leaders don't do, but in terms of what servant leadership actually is, this is a very good Biblical definition:

“The greatest among you will be your servant.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say you shouldn't try to do great things, you shouldn't try to go for greatness. You should! You should shoot for the stars! Do something great for God, for his glory! But the way to do that is to become a servant, to serve others. Then Jesus uses a little bit of Hebrew parallelism. You see, in the book of Proverbs you'll often see parallelism everywhere. Often you will see two thoughts side by side, and the second one will either be synonymous with the first one, contrast with the first one, or expand, complete and fill out the first one. So you see that here, and really this next sentence is an amplification of the idea that the greatest will be your servant.

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.

So he's adding to this idea of being a servant to further humble ourselves, to be a humble man. You've heard me mention here before about the level five leader that Jim Collins came up with in his book *Good to Great*. The two big characteristics he mentions are this strong professional will and a deep humility. The best leaders out in the world are those with this profound humility. So the Big Idea for today is this: **The purpose of servant leadership is to help others while expecting nothing in return.** You've heard me say here before that the first thing every man really needs to settle is his sonship, his adoption. The Bible is the paperwork that God filled out to complete your adoption. You can't be a vibrant Christian unless you really believe that God loves you. God our father has lavished his love on us by sending his son, Christ, to die for us. Until we actually grasp that that's me he sacrificed for, until we embrace our sonship, then all of the appeals to be a servant really appeal to a works righteousness system instead of as an expression of a natural outflow of having grace in our lives.

So a servant, then, doesn't ask what do I want. A servant has gotten by that. Jesus said in Luke 17:10 when you have done everything you have been told to do, you should say we are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty. But you can't have that mindset if you don't also have the mindset that you're a son of God! So our walk with God deals with being the son, and work for God deals with being a servant. Today we're talking about being a servant. Jesus says the greatest among you will be like a servant. So a servant doesn't ask what do I want. When you get into a situation, when you meet somebody who's hungry, when you meet someone who can't pay their rent, or you meet someone who is downcast, you don't ask what do I want. A servant asks, what does the master need? What does the master need? We should be as servants, if you're that far along in your journey, and as servants we should always have on our minds that question. What does the master need? You want to go buy a new car? What does the master need? You're calling on a potential customer? What does the master need? Not what do I want, but what does the master need? That is the distinguishing characteristic of a servant. The Big Idea today, **the purpose of servant leadership is to help others while expecting nothing in return.**

So I'm out raising money at the end of the year, like all ministries are, and it's real easy to think if you're asking someone to make a donation or investment in a ministry, or buy your product, that you're being selfish. Well, not so much. In 90% of the work I do anyway, I'm talking with people who couldn't possibly help us! Financially speaking. I don't treat them any different than anyone else, and that's the key line of demarcation here. You shouldn't take this as a message that doing what God has called you to do is somehow selfish.

I'll tell you a story to give you an example of this. I had lunch yesterday with a former colleague of mine. His wife was at a Bible Study. There was a young woman, barely beyond being a teenager, who was at the Bible Study and she said she was having some real problems. The problems were that her mother had died of cancer a year and a half ago. Her father had abandoned the family many years ago and he wasn't in the picture. She had several older siblings and they didn't want to have anything to do with her, they didn't want to help in any way. Then, it came to light that she also had a sister very close to her in age, and they had been living with one of their sisters who was married and the husband was treating them like borders. They weren't even allowed to go into the kitchen and make food until the normal family had finished. So you can just see all kinds of dysfunction. So my friend's wife said if you need help, call me. Servant leadership. If you need help, call me. About a week later, she did. The husband of the girl's older sister had put them out on the street, taken all their possessions and put them out on the street. They had no place to go. So my friend's wife talked to my friend, and they decided to take them in.

How many of you have ever worked with homeless people? Now, you know that rule number 1 in working with homeless people is never bring them home. Why? Because you'll never get them out. But they took these two girls into their home. They didn't have the disadvantage of knowing what they shouldn't do. So, the upshot is that when they took them in, they didn't know how long they would be there. They were there for ten months! But during those ten months, they were able to work with the older girl and get her a full ride scholarship to Stetson University. They were able to work with the younger girl, and get her a job at Chick-fil-A, where she met some young Christian girls who needed a fourth roommate, and so she was able to move out and become independent. That's what servant leadership looks like in practice.

Footnote, my former business colleague was telling me in 2006 and 2007 he was making so much money, he didn't know what to do with it, and he was spending it as fast as he was making it. He said he was really riding high, but then the great recession came. In fact, yesterday when we were meeting, he said I'm making about 10% of what I was making in '06 and '07. He said with tears in his eyes, I'm barely scraping by! If things don't turn around, I don't know what I'm going to do! He's put his house on the market to sell, the big house that he built at the peak of his earnings. And he needs to sell it, and he will sell it. But then he said, you know what Pat? I needed this. I know in my heart that we would have never helped those two girls if the market had still been good. Servant leaders are helping others when they can get nothing in return.

What Servant Leaders Don't Do

Let's take a look at what servant leaders don't do. What is the opposite of servant leadership? We see that beginning at verse 4. He's talking about these people who don't practice what they preach. He says:

"They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

"Everything they do is done for men to see (for the show): They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long (in other words, they flaunt their religiosity, their piety. They want everyone to know how spiritual they are, even though they're not willing to help anybody); they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues...

I was president of my business fraternity in college, and I remember they had a banquet. I remember just assuming that I would be seated at the head table because I was a former president, so I walked up to the head table and they told me no there was no seat. Well, by then all the other seats around the front had filled up, so I had to walk past everybody all the way to the back of the room. That was a big lesson!

“They love to be greeted in the market places and have men call them ‘Rabbi’ (men who like to be a big deal. You know men like this in your businesses).

“But you are not called to be ‘Rabbi,’ for you have one master, and you are all brothers.

You know what that means? It means you are all equal. That means that the biggest, most important religious person in the world is equal with you. We’re all brothers in this!

“And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called teacher, for you have one Teacher, the Christ.

This doesn’t mean that if you have the gift of teaching, you’re not to be called teacher. There’s the sense in which you’re not to be called Rabbi and the sense in which you’re not to be called father, and the sense in which you are not to be called teacher. As in, the sense in when you are putting yourself on equal footing with God. In other words, there is a sense in which these words are reserved for deity. There is a glory, there is an honor that is reserved for God along, and we are not to allow people to adulate us or worship us. Even though winning worship and having people look up to us, to think we’re a big deal, appeals to our fleshly nature. We want that, and there’s nothing wrong with being appreciated, but not when it’s the goal.

So Jesus gives this searing critique of people who do those kinds of things. Don’t ever attribute to man some characteristic that is reserved for God. What was their sin? They were in it for personal gain. Maybe money, but surely for the praise of men. The Big Idea though, is **the purpose of servant leadership is to help others while expecting nothing in return**. If we give love and we receive love, we praise God for it! If we give love and receive indifference, we praise God, because that’s what servant leaders do! We’re not giving to get.

Becoming a Servant Leader in your Family and Beyond

Finally, let’s talk a little bit about becoming a servant leader in your own family and beyond. At Man in the Mirror, we say there are five types of men that we’re trying to reach. They’re on a continuum. At one end of the continuum are men who need Christ, then the next group of men are cultural Christians. The next group of men are Biblical Christians, men who are or would like to be disciples. Then the next group after that is servant leaders. Here’s my experience, most of you are servant leaders already. The things that you men do without fanfare, without looking to be noticed, are astonishing! The investments you make in each other and the things that you go about quietly doing, you are already the essence of what we’re talking about this morning! But it is the highest development of the Christian life to be a servant leader. The fifth type of men are hurting men, and that’s an umbrella over the other four types because you always find men hurting in each category.

I’ll give you a short illustration of being a servant leader both in your family and beyond. I was at Mobile, AL for two days this week where we were launching an Area Director for the Central Gulf Coast region.

Rev. Tim Smith, Anglican Priest, and former lawyer as well, you can figure that out. God has called him to help churches in that region to be more effective in discipling men, and it was so encouraging to see the outpouring of local support for him. People who are servant leaders, who get it, that they need to have an investment into men's discipleship in their region. People who realize they have been treating this spiritual cancer with band aids. They have teenage crisis pregnancy centers, they have prison ministries, they have drug recovery programs, they have alcohol recovery programs, they have initiatives to deal with poverty, hunger, and homelessness, but ultimately, all of those are symptoms of a much deeper problem. In other words, you can treat those symptoms, but unless you solve the problem, the underlying disease that caused them in the first place, then you will never see any kind of systemic change over the long haul. That's men's discipleship! If you get men right, you get marriages right. If you get marriages right, you get families right. If you get families right, you get churches right. If you get churches right, you really can impact the world! So there are a bunch of people there in Mobile, AL who get it! And what they've done is they've really fulfilled this Big Idea, **the purpose of servant leadership is to help others while expecting nothing in return.** They're giving their time, their talent and resources. There were over seventy pastors and leaders at the kickoff meeting! A group of thirty five people were present at the existing donor event and he has a dozen men who met at the conference room of the local Cadillac dealer, a council of advisors to help him.

By the way, Pat Leupold is trying to do the exact same thing here! Raise your hand Pat! He's in the process, he went through Boot Camp with Tim Smith, and they both were commissioned and sent forth. I'm speaking at his event in January and it's going to be great!

And then, an illustration about how to be a servant leader in your family. A man was telling me this story and I'm just going to call him Aubrey. Aubrey got a call from his parents. He had been married for a couple of years. Aubrey is the oldest of four boys and his parents said we need to have a family meeting. Your mother and I have something we need to tell you. He said oh no. So they got together, sat down, and his parents announced they were going to be getting a divorce after about 27 years of marriage. Aubrey said no you're not! You've got to be kidding me! Are you crazy? You can't do that! Don't you understand the implications of you getting divorced? Don't you understand the importance of a legacy? He gave them a number of scriptural basis for this, and he said you can't do that! You can't do that to your children! You can't do that to my children! You can't do that to my children's children! There's no way! They went back and forth a while, but he just kept leaning in on them, saying there's no way! You're not getting divorced! After about an hour, his mother and father were sitting next to each other on the couch. She looked at him and said well I guess this means we're not getting a divorce then, doesn't it? That was twenty-five years ago, and they are still together. All four boys have become Christians and the legacy that they have created is amazing! This has so many different levels to it, but the mother and the father became servant leaders to their children. Helping others while expecting nothing in return! And they really still don't have a great marriage, but they're together! They made that commitment! That they would honor God by honoring each other, that they would honor their children by staying married. Think about the son being a servant leader to the parents. Now that you've heard this story, you can never be the same again, because if your parents ever came to you and said they were getting a divorce, this is in your mind now! You couldn't just let it go, could you? You would have to challenge them! By the way, I think if you had kids who came to you and told you they were getting a divorce, it's the same there. You're not just going to let that happen now, you're going to remember this story, and you're going to remember what it means to be a servant leader and challenge them! You're going to say no you're not! Are you crazy? Don't you know what kind of legacy you're getting ready to destroy? Yeah! That's what it means to be a servant leader! **The purpose of servant leadership is to help others while expecting nothing in return.** Let's pray!

Closing Prayer

Our dearest father, Lord, we want to be servant leaders. We want to be men who are asking not what do I want, but what does the master need in every situation. We want to understand the purpose of servant leadership, to help others without expecting anything in return. We want to be like Timothy was to Paul when Paul said I have no one else like him, for everyone looks out for their own interests, and not those of Jesus Christ. Lord, help us to be like Timothy. Lord, help us each to figure out how we will apply these truths in our own lives for your glory and your praise. We ask this in Jesus' name and everybody said, amen!