



The Spirit of Service: Reexamining Servant Leadership in the Gospel of Mark

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In Mark 10, two of the disciples had just asked Jesus to sit on his right hand and left hand in glory at which the other disciples became agitated with the two. Jesus' response is to call the disciples together and compare Gentile leadership with Kingdom leadership. Jesus speaks not only of leadership but of greatness in this context as well. He uses the picture of a servant to convey this idea of leadership and greatness in the Kingdom. Then He shows the example of this leadership through his own life (Mark 10:40-45). This article focuses on the distinction between these two types of leadership as found in Scripture along with a comparison of contemporary servant leadership. The article focuses particularly on the ramifications of Jesus' statement concerning his example of this type of leadership.

The Concept of Servant

The foundation upon which Jesus makes statements concerning becoming a servant comes from certain Old Testament passages. It seems likely that there are echoes of Isaiah 53 in Mark 10:45, specifically Isaiah 53:11.¹ In Isaiah 53:11, the Scripture speaks of "My Servant, will justify many." Jesus, in Mark, reconfigures this servant motive for himself as the Son of man, as the one who came to serve. There are also other texts in the Old Testament that are echoed in Mark 10:45, particularly those about sacrifice and offerings for sin and Yahweh's

¹ Ben III Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 288-289.

redemptive work for Israel (Isaiah 35:9, 41:14, 43:1,14 44:22-24, 52:3, 62:12, 63:9).² Though these Scriptures speak of sin-offerings and redemption, they do not speak of the “servant” in the same way that is found in Isaiah 53 and Mark 10. There are others however, who question the connection between Isaiah 53 and Mark 10, since the connection is by no means as clear as has been believed.³ The issue surrounds the use of some of the different words in the two different pericopes.

For instance, the word *ransom* is not the same as the word *asam* that is used in Isaiah 53 which means an offering for sin.⁴ These two different words show up in a variety of ways in the Old Testament, but they are not the same concept. Hooker contends that the influence of Isaiah 53 on Mark 10:45 has been grossly exaggerated though the theology of Isaiah 40-55 and is an important part of the background for Mark 10.⁵ The servant motif is the background or the cultural intertexture of this particular pericope in Mark. However, is this a reconfiguration of Isaiah 53:11? The table below compares and contrasts these two verses.

Table 1 – Isaiah 53:11 and Mark 10:45 (NASB)

Isaiah 53:11	Mark 10:45
As a result of the anguish of His Soul	-----
He will see it and be satisfied	-----
By His Knowledge the righteous One	The son of man
My Servant	did not come to be served but to serve
Will justify the many	give his life a ransom for many
As He will bear their iniquities	-----

There are some definite similarities in these verses. The question remains, however, if they are speaking the same language. The picture of the servant is obvious in both texts and the actions of this servant will have ramifications for the many. However, are justify and ransom the same concept? The Isaiah passage goes on to

² Ibid. 288-289

³ Morna Hooker, *The Gospel According to Saint Mark*, ed. Henry Chadwick, Third ed., vol. II, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London, England: A & C Black (Publishers) Limited, 1991; reprint, 1999)., 248.

⁴ Ibid. 248

⁵ Ibid.249

tie this to bearing iniquity, and in verse 12, it speaks of his death. While justify clearly speaks of death and forgiveness of sin, ransom describes different transactions. These transactions include the payment of money to free a slave and the replacement of the firstborn with a lamb at Passover.⁶ The concept of ransom is a transaction where someone brings another out of bondage.

While this certainly applies to Jesus' death on the cross and his sacrifice for sin, is this specifically what Jesus is addressing in Mark 10:45? Mark does not view people here needing ransom from sin, but instead, from bondages like demonic powers and legalism. Therefore, by calling his death a ransom, it is the initiative of God to remove these bondages so people can live in God's *basileia*.⁷ Though the focus here is still on Jesus' death, it appears that ransom is not equal to justify in this situation. It is also significant that Jesus only uses this word here and in Matthew in a story of the same or similar situation (Matthew 20:28).

This is then a key verse in this periscope where Jesus is explaining to his disciples the ingredients to great leadership. The key ingredient is to be a servant like the Son of Man. There are two important pieces to understand this comparison. First, it was in response to the two disciples clamoring for greatness. Jesus then declared greatness to be through becoming a servant. This is paradoxical how one can become great by becoming a servant. This servant leadership is the opposite of Gentile leadership of lording and exercising authority over others. Greatness equates with leadership here and Jesus does not resist their desire to be great, but He changes the path to greatness. Nevertheless, the path to greatness is paved with becoming a servant, which is the opposite way from the traveled path to supposed greatness.

Second, the implication is that Jesus set the example in becoming a servant. However, when Jesus speaks of himself, He talks about the act of serving rather than becoming a servant as when He was describing this to his disciples. He served by giving his life as a ransom. Was this talking about the future sacrifice for sin on the cross? We have already established that there was something else at work here. If this was the act of justification, then it could not be an example for others, since only Jesus has the power of a sinless, eternal life. How had Jesus ransomed others? He was doing so by his life first, before his death and resurrection. Were there effects of ransoming many at the cross in the sacrifice for sin? Yes, absolutely, He is the only one

⁶ Ibid. 248-249

⁷ Mitzi Minor, *The Spirituality of Mark: Responding to God* (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 57.

powerful enough to set people free. However, the question that remains is: Is He, in fact, talking about his death?

Jesus is instructing the disciples to follow his example. They cannot offer their lives as sacrifices for sin, so how can they ransom people? Jesus lived his life engaging people in such a way; He served them in such a way that their lives changed by his encounter with them. He was a servant because He dedicated his life to setting people free. He set them free by healing them, delivering them, and by teaching them. His life was a ransom; He lived in such a way that when He encountered people they would be set free in some way. How did He do this? First, by His intimate connection with the Father, He said things like “I and the Father are one.”⁸ Second, by pouring His life into others by giving them life that extended from His life, He said things like “I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”⁹ The disciples had seen this servant model in Jesus and now He was setting this forth as an example for them to follow. While He did not dissuade his disciples from greatness, He showed them the way to greatness by becoming a servant and by living life in connection with God.

Servant Leadership

Robert Greenleaf, the originator of the term servant-leader, developed the concept of servant leadership as a contemporary theory of leadership.¹⁰ This model has been developed and critiqued in many different ways and has several layers of meaning. However, this type of leader is one who has two distinct roles, one as a servant and one as a leader.¹¹ This model of leadership is both provocative and refreshing in bringing these two roles together in one person in the contemporary context.

Servant leadership as a contemporary theory of leadership compares in various ways to the servant model of Jesus in the Scripture. Jesus saw himself as a servant leader whose purpose was serving humankind and advocated that those who want greatness should seek the role of servant.¹² This role of servant manifests in

⁸ John 10:30 NASB

⁹ John 10:10 NASB

¹⁰ Joe Anderson, "The Writings of Robert K. Greenleaf: An Interpretive Analysis and the Future of Servant Leadership," in *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable* (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University, 2008), 1.

¹¹ Ibid. 2

¹² Robert Russell, "A Practical Theology of Servant Leadership," in *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable* (Virginia Beach, VA: Regent University, 2003). 4.

several different places in the Gospels in the life of Jesus. In doing this, Jesus was self-consciously modeling this for the disciples. At the Last Supper, Jesus consolidated many of the concepts of servanthood, leadership, and greatness in the Kingdom of God and by washing the disciples' feet; He set the example and called them to follow this example.¹³ Just before He washed the disciples' feet, Scripture says, "He now showed them the full extent of his love."¹⁴ Thus, Jesus gave the disciples examples how they should serve and love others.

This type of love or *agapao* in servant leadership in Scripture and the contemporary model of leadership need examination. This *agapao* serves as the catalyst for servant leadership that produces a response in the servant leader to place authentic value upon people and to affirm their worth with the goal of building them up.¹⁵ This love motivates outward activity toward others in serving the people while leading them. Contemporary leadership theory has had the moral dimension of servant leadership from the time of Greenleaf's work, while Patterson in 2003 establishes servant leadership as a virtuous leadership with *agapao* as the first attribute.¹⁶ This moral aspect of leadership is the internal work in the person that gives this type of leadership its power. Researchers investigate the fruit or the activity of leadership and now the need is to consider what lies beneath the surface or the seed and the conditions for the healthy development of the seed.¹⁷ *Agapao* is part of this seed that lies under the surface; it is part of the motivation for effective servant leadership. However, are there other issues that lie below the surface?

It is of note, in the Mark 10 passage, that in verse 42 the great leaders of the Gentiles exercise authority over others. Whereas when Jesus turns to Kingdom leadership, He says that the great leaders become servants, then He repeats it – become servants. The world's leadership is rooted in exercising something – an activity. Kingdom leadership is in becoming a particular kind of person – a servant. In another passage in Philippians 2, the example that is set forth by Jesus is not of mere service, but of the radical quest of taking the form of a slave.¹⁸ The difference is one of activity versus embracing change as a person, change that happens deep in the

¹³ Ibid. 6.

¹⁴ John 13:1b NIV

¹⁵ Michael R. Ayers, "Agapao in Servant Leadership" (paper presented at the Servant Leadership Research Roundtable, Virginia Beach, Va, 2008)., 2.

¹⁶ James D. Lanctot, "Character and Leadership: Situating Servant Leadership in a Proposed Virtues Framework," in *Servant Leadership Roundtable* (Virginia Beach, Va: Regent University, 2007)., 8.

¹⁷ Ayers, "Ayers". 12.

¹⁸ Corne J. Bekker, "Sharing the Incarnation: Towards a Model of Mimetic Christological Leadership " in *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable* (Virginia Beach, Va: Regent University, 2008)., 10.

heart and soul of the leader. This self-emptying of Christ or kenosis as found in Philippians 2, finds its social scope in a resolute identification with the lowest members of the community.¹⁹ This is not a subtle shift in mentality; it is a radical internal change that has outward ramifications. When leaders take on this form of life and leadership, they take the posture of servants and create relationships of trust and healing that will bring mutual liberation and transformation.²⁰ This kenosis first transforms the individual and then brings transformation to those led. This kenosis, which brings healing and liberation, is the key to effective leadership among humans in need of this kind of change dynamic that includes all people.

Conclusion

Based on Jesus' example, the definition of greatness is that one becomes a servant not that one does the activities of a servant. Jesus is the example of a great leader by giving his life, not just his death, as a ransom for many. He did this by encountering people in such a way that affected them deeply through liberation or healing. Jesus endorsed and practiced this style of leadership for the disciples to follow. This is not a list of things to do to lead well; it is a dynamic of becoming a different person. This process does not happen by willing it to happen, but happens through an emptying of self in relationship to the Lord.

The Lord transforms the leaders in this process so that this leader can be a servant – truly a great leader. Agapao and contemporary servant leadership are important aspects of leadership; however, these do not get to the significant aspect of the issue. Jesus exemplified how to love by washing the disciples' feet, which is a wonderful event and process to follow. Nevertheless, the root of leadership by Jesus' definition is to become a servant and to follow his example of giving his life as a ransom. This is a process of giving your life in such a way that your life is changed. Then you have the ability to help people find freedom and liberation through the power of the life of Jesus. This power of a great life comes from self-emptying in following the example of Jesus. This is leadership from the inside of the person that manifests on the outside rather than leadership through exercising certain styles or traits.

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¹⁹ Ibid. 10.

²⁰ Ibid. 11.

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