



journal of biblical
perspectives
in leadership

LEADERSHIP REFLECTION: SERVANT LEADERSHIP—A PERSONAL JOURNEY

DAVID J. GYERTSON, PH.D.

The theory of servant leadership popularized by Robert Greenleaf and extended by the work of the Greenleaf Center is a key concept in training and development throughout contemporary leadership thought. Much of Greenleaf's insight appears to be shaped by his own religious background and personal spiritual convictions. It seems clear that he had, at the core of his theory and practice, the life and teachings of Jesus Christ as a significant influence.

Servant leadership demands a personal commitment that goes beyond mere pragmatic application and theoretical construct. Since servant leadership runs contrary to many leadership assumptions and applications, it requires of most who pursue it an intimate exploration. Such is my experience. This presentation is a way for me to examine, connect, and describe my own personal journey. Given my commitment to take the claims, life, and teachings of Jesus Christ seriously, the journey is deeply spiritual. I present this personal account in the hope that you will be encouraged to chronicle and examine your own journey as you explore the theory and practice of servant leadership.

I am privileged to have spent much of my life in leadership roles—most of which I never anticipated. As a teacher, consultant, pastor, broadcaster, and university president, I desire to walk worthy of my callings following hard after Christ's example. No portion of Scripture has provided me with deeper insights into the mind, heart, and will of a Jesus-modeled servant leadership than Philippians 2:1-11. While reading this Pauline hymn, I found myself reflecting on a sobering question, "Whose needs are you meeting as you lead—your own or those of these I entrust to you?" In the capstone years of my calling, I returned often to this question to evaluate my progress in both serving

and leading. The opening stanzas of Philippians 2 confront the motivations of the heart, emphasizing the “why and who” of serving rather than the “what, when, where and how.” Those who desire to serve like Jesus must unite around a commitment to humility, self-denial, and other-centeredness. Actions and attitudes, for those who follow the Christ, must be without selfish ambition and prideful arrogance.

Paul turns next to the ultimate case study, the core curriculum for the master’s degree in servant leadership. The foundation stones of service, as Jesus’ life so powerfully illustrates, first must be established in the mind and heart. I applaud the exhortation popularized by the question WWJD (What would Jesus do?). However, as revealed in these next verses, we can only do as Jesus did as we see as Jesus saw and feel as Jesus felt. Servant leaders also wear bracelets that call us to WWJS (What would Jesus see?) and WWJF (What would Jesus feel?).

While much of serving and leading is motivated and evaluated by what we receive personally from the experience, Jesus was driven by the desire to be what we needed so that our greatest good might be accomplished. Laying aside His essence as Lord of all, he humbly moved from Creator to the created taking on our state in order to identify with those he came to lead. He came to serve and save, not to be served or saved.¹ Jesus embraced our deepest longings, endured the pain of sin, and finally paid the price for liberation and regeneration. The Son gave up what he was and identified with what we were so that we could become all the Father intended—heirs and joint heirs with the Son for eternity.²

Thinking back on my childhood, I have to acknowledge that I was not a strong student. My guidance counselor told me that I had no natural abilities for the life of the mind. As a result, other endeavors were pursued as the means to self worth. Music and athletics became the center of my identity.

For many Canadian boys, hockey is the national religion. I anticipated the first hard freeze when the outdoor rinks would be readied and I could assume my self-declared identity as the Maple Leaf’s next great goalie. After the ice was gone, baseball became the substitute passion. However, unlike hockey, I did not have the same star qualities and abilities. I was a utility player. Many games I sat the bench “riding the pine”—as some have called it. When I did play, it was in a position that either needed relief or required only a temporary replacement.

In my leadership roles, I longed to be a star goalie rather than a baseball utility player. So much of my energy was spent on an emotional roller coaster looking for that one specific calling where I would rise to prominence and personal fulfillment. However, I never found that all-consuming call—my one true vocational destiny of service through which I might some day attain recognition and perhaps sainthood.

As I pondered the biblical call to servant leadership, I was awakened to a life-changing concept. There is at least as much need for utility players as stars in today’s arenas of leadership. Biblical examples like Barnabus, John the Baptist, Aaron, Hur, Caleb, Esther, the two Marys, and a great cloud of witnesses including David’s mighty men and the unnamed of Hebrews’ Faith Hall of Fame are now my inspiration. They willingly served another’s mission so that those others, in turn, could fulfill God’s call on their lives.

¹ Matt. 20:28.

² Rom. 8:17.

I believe there are unprecedented opportunities for servant leadership in the twenty-first century. These opportunities will be available to those who have a clear and compelling vision of service committed to “we for them and not just for me.” Many will be asked to use their distinctive gifts to full capacity and beyond in the work they undertake. Most will be required to pool their talents and availability with others because the work is too great to be done by an exceptionally talented few. Most will be required, at some point in that service, to work outside their giftedness and beyond personal resources.

Are you one of those who will serve whomever and wherever with whatever is entrusted to you? If so, let me suggest some things I am considering in my exploration of servant leadership:

1. Explore and give thanks for the unique person God is making you. Take advantage of the many tools available to help you understand your giftedness. However, do not be afraid to uncover your limitations—strength is made perfect in weakness.
2. Surrender the hurts and disappointments of not being fully utilized or recognized. The ancient wisdom that they also serve who only stand and wait has been a great help during my less active and fulfilling seasons. Use these times to celebrate God’s work in you, examining your primary motivations, and supporting his work in others.
3. Look for opportunities to serve where needs are greatest even if you do not possess the skills and talents normally required. Get outside of your cultural and performance comfort zones. Mother Teresa had one thing to give—compassion for those who needed it most.
4. Expect to fully deploy the gifts you possess. Like Moses, the skills and experiences symbolized by the shepherd’s staff can become the “rod of God” rescuing the lost and delivering the bound.
5. Do not be surprised when you are required to serve out of frailty, inadequacy, inconvenience, and discomfort.
6. Be prepared to “ride the pine” from time to time. Both the stops and the steps of servant leaders are necessary and beneficial.³
7. Soak up the character of servant leaders like Jesus Christ. Spend time in Philippians 2, the Beatitudes of the Sermon on the Mount⁴ and the fruit of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Servant leadership is more who you are becoming than just what you are doing.

³ Isaiah 40:31 and Psalm 37:23-24.

⁴ Matt. 5:1-12.

⁵ Gal. 5:16-26.

About the Author

Dr. David Gyertson is the Distinguished Professor of Leadership Formation and Renewal at Regent University's School of Global Leadership and Entrepreneurship. He has served in a variety of executive leadership roles in education, business, broadcasting, and ministry. He has served as President of two charitable Foundations as well as three accredited Universities including Regent University. He has been a senior minister of Methodist and Presbyterian congregations. David holds a Ph.D. in Administration and Management (Higher Education) from Michigan State University. His undergraduate work was completed in Philosophy and Religion at Spring Arbor University with additional graduate work in Counseling at Michigan State and Comparative Higher Education, in his home country of Canada, at the University of Toronto. He serves as an executive coach, strategic planning consultant, and leadership-training specialist for non-profit and human services organizations. He has published widely and lectures frequently on religious, historical, and leadership topics. In addition, he hosts a weekly news and current issues television magazine program distributed nationally on Canada's Vision Television Network.
Email: dgyertson@regent.edu