

## EMBRACING THE TOWEL: A BIBLICAL MODEL OF SERVANT LEADERSHIP FOR HUMAN FLOURISHING

Oscar A. Rodriguez

---

Dominant cultural values of competition, efficiency, and performance are clearly in tension with human dignity, empowerment, and flourishing. This manuscript will seek to connect the transformative and strategic impact of servant leadership in organizations, weaving together exegetical work done on John 13:1–17, Philippians 2:1–11, and Matthew 20:25–28, to describe the servant leadership that is exhibited by Jesus Christ. The analysis shows how this is relevant in today's modern context, especially as organizational leaders can be transformed into servant leaders who impact institutions with the empowering leadership of Jesus.

---

### INTRODUCTION

Contemporary leadership is often idolized for its decisiveness, innovation, and performance, yet too frequently functions in hierarchies that exalt authority over service. Scripture provides an alternative model in servant leadership, which inverts this ethos by prioritizing the needs of others (Matt. 20:26). Defined by its roots in the life of Jesus Christ, servant leadership is characterized by humility, empathy, and a commitment to the growth of others (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1995). Theological and organizational scholars have been discussing this approach for over a century, exploring its capacity for transformative impact on organizations (van Dierendonck, 2011). Recent research has connected servant leadership to organizational outcomes like engagement, trust, and sustainable performance (Eva et al., 2019). However, the biblical basis of this model and its contribution to human flourishing are under-examined. This study roots the practice of servant leadership in John 13, Philippians 2, and Matthew 20,

demonstrating how when it is Christ-centered, it revolutionizes organizational dynamics by nurturing cultures of humility, empowerment, and service. The Christ-based model is also like parts of the transformational model, particularly its focus on inspirational influence and moral example (Bass & Riggio, 2006), as well as to authentic leadership, in terms of the emphasis on relational transparency and ethical grounding (Avolio & Gardner, 2005). These parallels open the possibility for a fuller conversation with biblical interpretation and current leadership research.

#### EXEGETICAL FOUNDATIONS: JOHN 13:1–17

There are so many powerful passages about leadership in the New Testament, but one of the most powerful is John 13. In this chapter, Jesus, who fully understands His power and authority and is completely aware of the imminent event of his crucifixion, kneels and washes the feet of his disciples. This is not an isolated incident, and it is not a coincidence. This is an extended meditation on servant leadership placed in the narrative immediately before the passion narrative of Jesus' crucifixion. The chapter starts with a clear statement of who Jesus is and his mission: "Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God" (John 13:3, NIV). Fully aware of His authority, he did not use it to demand obedience; He bent down to serve.

The exegetical point here is that, fully aware of his authority, he chose to kneel and serve his disciples. Note that the chapter starts with a clear statement of his authority. Also note that in verse 4, when He stands up from the table, the Greek verb *egeirō* (ἐγείρω), which can be literally translated as "he got up from the meal." The point is, Jesus did not just passively move from the meal to serving; the verb is in the sense of standing up, not just from the meal, but is often used in reference to resurrection and action. Subsequently, Jesus "laid aside his outer garments" (*tithēsin ta himatia, τίθησιν τὰ ἱμάτια*) and "began to wash the disciples' feet" (*ἔρχατο νίπτειν τοὺς πόδας τῶν μαθητῶν*, John 13:5). The act of "laying aside" is reminiscent of the kenosis in Philippians 2:7, where it is stated that Christ "emptied himself" to become human. Thus, the foot washing becomes a microcosm of the Incarnation: the very Son of God assuming the very form of a slave.

When Peter objects, Jesus corrects him, saying, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me" (John 13:8, NIV). This statement is not about ritual cleanliness but relational belonging. Jesus is redefining leadership as a means of restoration rather than control. Scholars like Köstenberger (2004) suggest that this act is a foreshadowing of the ultimate cleansing at the Cross, yet it also sets a pattern for spiritual leadership based on sacrificial love.

Crucially, Jesus ends the foot washing with a directive for emulation: "I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13:15, NIV). But the call to imitation here is not simply prescriptive; it is a definition of a new norm of leadership. The Greek word here is *hypodeigma* (ὑπόδειγμα), which means "model" or "pattern"—it is something that is to be imitated or reproduced. Leadership, as Jesus

demonstrates and teaches, is never about power and control but about transformation, and that transformation is grounded in nearness, humility, and service.

For daily life, this passage has a deep message for leadership. In our world, where leadership and authority are synonymous with title and position, and positional leadership is a human and organizational given, Jesus confronts all of us with a call to lead from nearness and action. In an organizational system where dispassionate rules dominate, the foot washing of Jesus is not simply a call to a new ethic of leadership; it is a mandate for an ethic of leadership which grants legitimacy not by power, but by proximity—proximity to those who are led and, because of that nearness, the humility and strength to act on their behalf.

### EXEGETICAL FOUNDATIONS: PHILIPPIANS 2:1–11

Servant leadership has been elucidated and explained through many approaches over time, and the Christ hymn of Philippians 2:1–11 offers one of the most theologically substantial attempts. First, there is the communal nature of leadership (Phil. 2:1–2). Leadership must not be a vehicle of self-promotion but rather be used in the community for the common good. The hymn quickly refocuses on the issue of self-exaltation in verses 3–4: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves” (v. 3). Vain conceit (*kenodoxia*, κενοδοξία) in Greek implies “empty glory,” that is, glory without substance or authenticity (Fee, 1995). Humility (*tapeinophrosynē*, ταπεινοφροσύνη) is proposed here as the keystone virtue of Christ-like leadership. Humility is not weak leadership, however; on the contrary, Paul offers up the example of Jesus to clarify this: “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage” (v. 6). Most scholars have noted that the phrase “did not consider equality with God something to be grasped” (*harpagmon*, ἄρπαγμὸν) is debated. However, the consensus appears to be that it is a volitional act of relinquishment of privilege (O’Brien, 1991). It is a “setting aside” of status, but not divestment. The resulting *kenosis* (self-emptying) is what is found in verse 7 (“but made himself nothing”). This is key, for it suggests the functional and theological groundwork for servant leadership: voluntary descent for the sake of others.

Christ, in all his divine glory, descended for all humankind. The result is obedience “to death—even death on a cross!” (v. 8). This is the point of the hymn where I must stop and read it again. Not only is Christ humble, but this humility takes him all the way to the Cross! What is the result of Christ’s descent? His exaltation, of course (vv. 9–11). So this is the lesson: The way to the top is through the bottom. Although it is true, this statement speaks to the paradox of Christ’s humility and exaltation; Paul’s Christology takes us further than the reversal of position. Paul’s presentation of the descent of Christ is rooted in God’s self-giving for the reconciliation of all things (Col. 1:20), not the route to being exalted. Therefore, the “bottom” is not a means to achieve the “top,” but an act of love that redefines what greatness is.

As Patterson (2003) maintained, servant leadership begins with the individual, but it is in the inner parts that the transformation toward servant leadership needs to

take place. This is relational wisdom and self-forgetfulness as practical theology. The Christ hymn confirms this, for this is the transformed life, the result of which has an impact upon others. As community members, we can and must submit to the self-emptying, kenotic leadership of the Holy Spirit in our lives so that we might exemplify for the rest of creation what true transformational impact is all about.

#### EXEGETICAL FOUNDATIONS: MATTHEW 20:25–28

Matthew 20:25–28 provides a significant teaching of Jesus on servant leadership. Jesus, in this passage, is specifically addressing the disciples' misconceived notion of greatness following their mother's request for places of honor at His right and left hand. Jesus immediately intervenes by saying: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you" (vv. 25–26a, NIV). He is teaching here that leaders in this world are domineering and self-promoting. Kingdom leadership, on the other hand, is the polar opposite of world leadership: the former being rulers who serve, the latter being rulers who rule.

The Greek word for "lord it over" is *katakuriuousin* (κατακυριεύουσιν), which implies the domination and exploitation of others, or, in other words, oppressive leadership (France, 2007). But Jesus said, "Not so with you," which is a startling and countercultural statement that follows this passage's narrative logic. Jesus redefines power not as over- but under-ness, so to speak. As the Son of God, He could have lorded over people, but instead, His leadership model was self-sacrifice (France, 2007). Furthermore, instead of craving for status, Jesus informs His disciples, "Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant (*diakonos*), and whoever wants to be first must be your slave (*doulos*)" (vv. 26b–27, NIV).

Two key observations can be made from Jesus' statement, with the first being the double use of "servant" and "slave." The former, *diakonos*, is a voluntary and (often) joyful service that usually means ministering to others and is most often used as a reference to hospitality in Matthew's Gospel. On the other hand, a *doulos* is one who is bound and totally surrenders his or her will and entire existence to the one he or she serves, often used to refer to Jesus' submission to the Father. As such, Jesus is not just instructing His followers to be kind to others but to completely re-identify their leadership as one whose identity is forgotten as it is entirely for others (Blomberg, 1992).

The passage's theological climax then comes in the final verse: "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (v. 28, NIV). Jesus here is no longer just an example of servant leadership, but He is servant leadership personified. His self-sacrifice on the Cross is not just for the redemption of the many, but the focal point of redemption, as a "ransom" (*lytron*, λύτρον) is not just service, but service tied to the atonement narrative (France, 2007). Jesus both teaches and embodies servant leadership as it relates to redemption, where leadership is not just about people but is for people.

For leaders in the present day, this passage curtails the typical trajectory of personal influence as the way to leadership effectiveness. Instead, leaders are called to a radical ethic of downward mobility that shatters not only business sense but self-interests altogether. As such, servant leadership, according to Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), is not only ethical and relational, but it is, most importantly, inherently spiritual.

## SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND HUMAN FLOURISHING: A CONCEPTUAL BRIDGE

Servant leadership's call to humility (John 13), self-emptying (Phil. 2), and redefined greatness (Matt. 20) aligns closely with the biblical vision of *shalom*—holistic flourishing in relationship to God, self, others, and creation (Plantinga, 2002). Today, many secular leadership models also reflect a growing consensus that organizations are healthier and more successful when the people in them are. The Gallup organization, for example, has conducted decades of research on employee engagement, purpose, and well-being, and found these to be closely correlated with specific leadership behaviors—listening, empathy, development—aligning closely with servant leadership (Gallup, 2022). According to Greenleaf (1977), servant leadership originates from an intrinsic desire to prioritize serving others above all else. Spears (1995) later extrapolated ten distinct characteristics of servant leaders, including healing, awareness, stewardship, and growth of people, many of which have strong overlaps with the concept of flourishing.

Theologically, human flourishing can be defined as the state in which people are most deeply and fully human. We flourish, that is, when we live and work in ways that affirm our created dignity as image-bearers of God (Gen. 1:27). Nouwen (1989) once said the biggest temptation of leaders is to be relevant and in power, but the way of Christ is downward mobility: to lead through humility and compassion, not control. Servant leadership often works in secular settings because it resonates with deep human longings for belonging and value. When grounded in Scripture, however, servant leadership goes beyond being merely effective to being faithful. It is not just a recipe for organizational success, but a spiritual calling to make the character of Christ visible in leadership. This practical vision of flourishing comes not from theory, but from the teaching and action of Christ himself. In John 13, flourishing is shown to us through the model of washing the feet of the disciples. In Philippians 2, it is displayed in the Incarnation, an act of emptying that is the very heart of God's mission. In Mathew 20, it is described by a kingdom of reverse discipleship, a turning upside down of all traditional notions of power. In all these scriptures, the flourishing of those we lead is intimately connected with the leader's spiritual life.

## APPLICATION IN THE WORKPLACE

It can be difficult to translate the servant leadership of the Gospels to the workplace because it can feel counter-culture to corporate life and can be easily reduced to "pie in the sky" platitudes. Fortunately, and as both research and practice bear out, it is not only feasible but necessary. All the primary ingredients—service, empowerment, self-sacrifice—are as much a part of contemporary organizations as

ever before, and research has proven that, indeed, people thrive best when led in this way (Liden et al., 2008; Eva et al., 2019).

Informed by the towel-and-basin ethic of John 13, the kenotic posture of Philippians 2, and the “not so with you” mandate of Matthew 20, my leadership in global companies such as Citigroup and TD Bank, as well as in startups, has been shaped by these Scriptural imperatives. For example, at Citigroup, one manager impressed me by “multiplying” the voices of his team, by really listening to their ideas and creating a sense of psychological safety in which no one was afraid to speak up; this behavior was the essence of Philippians 2:3, “in humility value others above yourselves.”

At Avec, servant leadership also meant stepping up and taking responsibility for failure, but sharing the credit when succeeding, and helping people to “lift up” one another, as Jesus taught in Matthew 20. As a BI leader in banking, I employed “servant intelligence” by data-wrangling to understand what was burdening frontline employees and then “servant-leader-advocating” for eliminating those unnecessary tasks. My experiences have taught me that servant leadership is not determined by the prestige of the company nor its closeness to the centers of power; rather, it is defined by a laser-like focus on a higher purpose: to serve.

Servant leadership encourages followers to lead from a place of self-giving to others. Employees who are heard, seen, and valued can thrive and reach their full potential as more creativity, retention, and mission alignment are achieved (Hunter et al., 2013). Servant leaders lead by example as they model Christ’s call to love people relationally.

Servant leadership can be inculcated through strategic leadership development. Leadership development can be less about developing new skills such as decision making, innovation, or negotiation—though these are all critically important—and more about how to develop the character, spiritual posture, and relational habits that enable leaders to maintain influence for the long haul. Servant leadership offers a biblically grounded model for this type of development that prioritizes humility, empathy, and sacrificial commitment to the welfare of others (Wong & Page, 2003).

Religious and business leadership development can draw upon the theology of John 13, Philippians 2, and Matthew 20, in addition to practicum experiences that model downward mobility and others-centeredness. Spending time as a shadow or volunteer in a place of poverty or vulnerability (where “titles” do not “matter”) may have more impact on the making of a leader than a lecture or a case study, formed through surrender (Mulholland, 2016).

Performance reviews with upward and 360-degree feedback, mentoring that models vulnerability, and theological literacy to appropriately apply Scripture for ethical, business, and relational leadership can all help fortify leadership pipelines for both corporate and faith-based environments. As Banks and Ledbetter (2004) put it, theological literacy is not the ceiling but rather the floor of creativity, while the

Philippians 2 model of authority also reminds servant leaders to "descend into greatness" by means of moral power rather than positional power.

Servant leadership development should also include community accountability. Jesus did not form leaders in isolation but in a community of teachers, learners, and practitioners. Churches, nonprofit boards, and executive teams should practice patterns of shared leadership, such as confession, service, and celebration, to shape values and habits.

Servant leadership development requires training not only to change what we do but to change who we are. It is not a one-time workshop but a lifelong posture of learning. Organizations that put the formation of such leaders at the center will not only see increased performance. They will become places where human flourishing can occur in profound and life-giving ways. This is the core of both good leadership and true flourishing in the kingdom of God.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus is our hope, and the example he set as a servant leader is one we desperately need to follow in an age marked by disruption, disillusionment, and burnout. Jesus redefines leadership and greatness throughout John 13, Philippians 2, and Matthew 20 by modeling humility, self-emptying, and sacrificial love. Servant leadership is a Christ-centered approach that is not just for management; it is a way of life that builds trust, meaning, and collaboration. Whether leading in boardrooms or classrooms, local communities or global communities of faith, our leaders need a renewed call to take up the towel rather than the throne and live a posture of service that transforms both people and institutions. Greatness is not determined by status or prestige but by the depths of one's service. Scripture charts a trajectory from the upper room to the Cross. There are no flash-in-the-pan displays of servanthood, but a persevering in the humility, self-emptying, and servanthood of the life of the man who "took up the towel." We should hold fast to these theological anchors as we translate the principles of servant leadership for today so that our practice of leadership flows from the heart of One who took up the towel. In equipping the servant leaders of today and tomorrow, may we form leaders not driven by control or prestige but by an unrelenting desire to protect the dignity of others and to facilitate flourishing.

---

### About the Author

Dr. Oscar A. Rodriguez is an Enterprise Data Strategy leader and Doctor of Strategic Leadership whose work integrates biblical theology and organizational leadership. With more than twenty years of experience in global financial institutions, he specializes in ethical analytics, governance, and leadership formation. He is the creator of the FLAME Framework (Faith, Leadership, Analytics, Morals, and Ethics), which advances Christ-centered decision-making in complex systems. Dr. Rodriguez lives in South Carolina with his wife, Karen, and their three children—Daniel, David, and Elizabeth—and is

committed to forming leaders who embody humility and servant-hearted excellence. More information is available at [www.droscarrodriguez.com](http://www.droscarrodriguez.com)

---

## REFERENCES

- Banks, R., & Ledbetter, B. M. (2004). *Reviewing leadership: A Christian evaluation of current approaches*. Baker Academic.
- Blomberg, C. L. (1992). *Matthew* (Vol. 22). Broadman Press.
- Eva, N., Robin, M., Sendjaya, S., van Dierendonck, D., & Liden, R. C. (2019). Servant leadership: A systematic review and call for future research. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 30(1), 111–132. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2018.07.004>
- Fee, G. D. (1995). *Paul's letter to the Philippians*. Eerdmans.
- France, R. T. (2007). *The Gospel of Matthew* (NICNT). Eerdmans.
- Gallup. (2022). *State of the global workplace report 2022*. <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace-2022-report.aspx>
- Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. Paulist Press.
- Hunter, E. M., Neubert, M. J., Perry, S. J., Witt, L. A., Penney, L. M., & Weinberger, E. (2013). Servant leaders inspire servant followers: Antecedents and outcomes for employees and the organization. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 24(2), 316–331. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2012.12.001>
- Köstenberger, A. J. (2004). *John* (BECNT). Baker Academic.
- Liden, R. C., Wayne, S. J., Zhao, H., & Henderson, D. (2008). Servant leadership: Development of a multidimensional measure and multi-level assessment. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 19(2), 161–177. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2008.01.006>
- Mulholland, M. R. (2016). *Invitation to a journey: A road map for spiritual formation* (2nd ed.). IVP Books.
- Nouwen, H. J. M. (1989). *In the name of Jesus: Reflections on Christian leadership*. Crossroad Publishing.
- O'Brien, P. T. (1991). *The epistle to the Philippians: A commentary on the Greek text*. Eerdmans.
- Patterson, K. (2003). Servant leadership: A theoretical model. *Servant Leadership Research Roundtable*. Regent University. [https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/sl\\_proceedings/2003/patterson\\_servantpdf](https://www.regent.edu/acad/global/publications/sl_proceedings/2003/patterson_servantpdf)
- Plantinga, C. (2002). *Engaging God's world: A Christian vision of faith, learning, and living*. Eerdmans.
- Sendjaya, S., & Sarros, J. C. (2002). Servant leadership: Its origin, development, and application in organizations. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 9(2), 57–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107179190200900205>

- Spears, L. C. (Ed.). (1995). *Reflections on leadership: How Robert K. Greenleaf's theory of servant leadership influenced today's top management thinkers*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Van Dierendonck, D. (2011). Servant leadership: A review and synthesis. *Journal of Management*, 37(4), 1228–1261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206310380462>
- Van Dierendonck, D., & Patterson, K. (2015). Compassionate love as a cornerstone of servant leadership: An integration of previous theorizing and research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 128(1), 119–131. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-014-2085-z>
- Wong, P. T. P., & Page, D. (2003). Servant leadership: An opponent-process model and the revised servant leadership profile. In *Proceedings of the Servant Leadership Research Roundtable*.