SELFLESS LEADERSHIP: AN ETHICAL FOUNDATION FOR LEADERSHIP

Philip Lloyd

This article argues that Jesus’ teaching and example of selfless leadership found in Matthew 20:20-28 strengthens the foundation for ethical leadership found in virtue ethics. An argument is made for the foundation of ethical leadership and is developed by contrasting the egoist, deontological, consequentialist approach with the virtue ethics approach. The article moves on to consider the shortfalls of virtue ethics due to phenomena of bounded ethicality and fading ethics and argues that the characteristics of humility, service, and suffering found selfless leadership provided leaders with additional tools necessary to avoid such failings. The article employs Robbins’ (1996) method of inner texture analysis of socio-rhetorical interpretation and exegetical analysis of the pericope.

I. INTRODUCTION

The challenge of ethical leadership is enormous. Ciulla (2014) lists the many ethical challenges leaders face as ranging from “the temptations of power, the problems of ego and self-interest” to “the burdens of being responsible for the welling of groups, organizations, or nations that consist of people who have a variety of needs and interests” (p. 25). Leaders face constant dilemmas, forcing them to consider the best decision for themselves, their organization, and their followers. Gini and Green (2014) argue that “we are dependent on each other to survive and thrive. Our collective existence requires us to continually make choices, be they good or bad, about ‘what we ought to do’ with regards to others” (p.33). The early 21st century was fraught with major ethical failures in large national and international organizations “such as the predatory subprime lending practices of Americquest, Goldman Sachs, and IndyMac Bank” (Thiel et al., 2012, p. 49). Additional scandals at “Enron, Worldcom, HealthSouth, Tyco, and
Parmalat – painted a picture of a corporate executive class running amok, flouting their legal and ethical obligations" (Bragues, 2008, p. 373). These failures may cause business and leadership experts to consider how to better equip leaders for ethical decisions. Knights and O’Leary (2006) argue that it is too easy to blame the ethical failures of business leaders “on the general influence of business-school education” (p. 126). Fedler (2006) argues that additional courses and workshops in ethics have done little to create ethical leaders. Instead, Knights and O’Leary (2006) suggest that “a more plausible account of the corporate scandals is the failure of ethical leaders that derives from the pre-occupation with the self that drives individuals to seek wealth, fame, and success regardless of moral considerations” (p. 126).

While Fedler (2006) argues that a virtue ethical approach can provide a foundation for ethical leadership, phenomena such as bounded ethicality and fading ethics can prevent even virtuous leaders from making ethical decisions (Bazerman & Tenrursnel, 2011). If this is the case, is there a way to strengthen the foundation of virtuous ethicality and help protect leaders from the phenomena of bounded ethicality? This article examines Jesus’ dialogue with the mother of James and John and the twelve disciples in Matthew 20:20-28 (NIV). Jesus’ teaching and example of selfless leadership not only seeks to serve followers but also places leaders in the position of extreme humility. It is in the position of extreme humility that the leader may even suffer for the benefit of followers.

This article will use the inner textual analysis, part of Robbin’s (1996) social-rhetorical analysis, to examine the pericope before providing a short exegesis. After the inner textual analysis and exegesis of the pericope, this article will then explore the concepts of virtue ethics and how the phenomena of bounded awareness can cause virtuous leaders to make unethical decisions. Finally, this article will conclude by arguing that the concept of selfless leadership as taught and exemplified by Jesus can strengthen virtue ethics and provide a stronger foundation for ethical leadership.

II. INNERTEXTURE ANALYSIS

Robbins (1996) describes inner texture analysis as an initial analysis of scripture that focuses on the words of the text. Interpreters look for patterns, repetitions, sequences, and basic structures in the text for hints of the author’s meaning. Robbins states that the purpose of inner texture analysis is “to gain an intimate knowledge of the words, word patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text” (p. 7). Robbins identifies six layers of texture within inner texture analysis, 1) repetitive, 2) progressive, 3) narrational, 4) opening-middle-closing, 5) argumentative, and 6) sensory-aesthetic texture (p. 7). This article will explore the first five layers of texture of the inner textual analysis but will not delve into sensory-aesthetic texture since the pericope does not lend itself to this textural analysis.

Repetitive Textual Analysis

Repetitive textual analysis focuses on the repetitive nature of the words used in the text (Robbins, 1996). Interpreters look for “multiple occurrences of many different kinds of grammatical, syntactical, verbal, or topical phenomena” that occur in the text (p. 8). While repetition may not reveal the deep meaning of a text, it can begin to “introduce
interpreters to the overall forest” (Robbins, 1996, p. 8). Repetition can provide a basic overview of the nature of the text and set the interpreter in the right direction. A repetitive analysis of the pericope reveals a contrast between the worldly concept of leadership as a place of honor with special rights and privileges with Jesus’ concept of leadership as a place of service and humility. At the beginning of the pericope, the narrative focuses on worldly leadership. Jesus suggests the defining characteristics of worldly leaders are self-seeking honor and pride. Certainly, this was the leadership Jesus’ disciple were seeking for themselves. Jesus argues that worldly leadership is displayed by the Gentiles who “lord over” (20:25) their followers. Jesus, however, introduces a new kind of leadership characterized by humility, service, and suffering. Table 1 outlines the contrast of this repetitive pattern of the pericope.

Table 1

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Progressive Textual Analysis

Robbins (1996) explains that in addition to the repetitive nature within a text, a progressive pattern can also emerge within the repetition. This progress pattern can add another dimension to the analysis (Robbins, 1996, p. 10). Robbins suggests that progressive patterns lead to an understanding of the deeper meaning of the whole text; progressive patterns can provide “stepping stones” to deeper meaning or other phenomena, or reveal additional subunits within the text (p. 10). Robbins explains that interpreters should look for progressions that may contrast or build upon ideas presented in the pericope.

In Matthew 20:21-28, a progressive pattern emerges as the worldly view and Jesus’s view of leadership is contrasted in verses 22 and 23 as seen in Table 2. The brothers, through their mother, are asking for the places of highest honor and Jesus refers to his greatest humiliation. Additionally, as the beginning of the pericope focuses mainly on the worldly concept of leadership, verse 26 provides a clear pivot point with Jesus’ emphatic challenge, “Not so with you.” Jesus describes his leadership in terms of great humility and ultimate service provided to followers.
Table 2

Progressive Textual Analysis

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Narrational Textual Analysis

Voices emerge from any text, sometimes voices may be attributed to people who speak words within a text, other times voices may be quotations from written text that speak, but often the voice that is present initially is the voice of the narrator who is setting the scene or telling the story within the text (Robbins, 1996). Robbins (1996), suggest that these voices also reveal patterns that “moves the discourse programmatically forward” (p.15). As narrational patterns emerge, the interpreter can gain greater insight as they identify the different voices.

In the pericope, three voices emerge. The first voice that emerges is that of the narrator. This voice plays an arguably minor role in the pericope. The narrator’s main action takes place in verses 20 and 24. Both times the narrator’s voice is heard it is setting the stage for a display of the disciple’s ignorance concerning Jesus’ kingdom and mission.

The second voice that emerges is that of Jesus’ followers. This voice emerges through the words of the mother of James and John, James and John, and the ten other disciples. It seems that the mother of James and John is speaking not only for her sons, but one could argue that her voice is, in fact, speaking for all the disciples. Each time the reader hears the voice of the disciples, their ignorance is outdone only by their boldness. In fact, Hendrickksen (1973) is astonished at this boldness and asked, “How was it possible that, in spite of all this teaching about humility and service, teaching constantly reinforced by the example of Christ himself,” his disciples still do not understand and are so bold to request the positions of highest honor. Not to be outdone, the remaining ten’s indignance is an indictment on their ignorance.

The third voice that contrasts the voice of the disciples is the voice of Jesus. Jesus, as stated above, speaks of a new kind of leadership characterized by humility, service and ultimately suffering. This leadership is void of selfish ambition and seeks to provide for and serve followers.
Opening-Middle-Closing Textural Analysis

The opening-middle-closing textual analysis helps to reveal the structure of the pericope and can strengthen emerging patterns of repetition, progression, and narration (Robbins, 1996). Within pericope of Matthew 20:20-28 the opening can be identified in the verses 20-21, where the request is made by the mother of James and John which illustrates the attitude of all twelve disciples. The middle of this narrative is found in verses 22-25. In these verses, Jesus begins by identifying the ignorance of the disciples, “You don’t know what you are asking for” (20:22). Jesus then begins to introduce the concepts of suffering and humility in leadership and contrasts the worldly view of pride and selfish ambition. Finally, the closing is found in verse 26-28. Beginning with the statement “Not so with you,” Jesus continues to compare worldly greatness with servanthood, beginning first with the concept of a servant, then a slave, and finally explains how the disciples should lead in extreme humility as suffering servants.

Argumentative Textural Analysis

Robbins (1996) explains that the argumentative texture within a text searches for reasoning in the discourse. For instance, some discourse may present logical reasoning in which an argument is presented and then supported by logic and reason (Robbins, 1996). Other times, the author presents reasoning as qualitative; meaning that “analogies, examples, and citations… function in a persuasive manner.” This certainly is the case in Matthew 20:20-28 as Jesus compares and contrast understandings of leadership and prescribes the best way for his disciples. The world views leadership in light of honor, privilege, and as a means to lord over followers, while Jesus instructs his followers that this is not the way for them. Instead, followers of Jesus are to be extremely humble and seek to serve those whom they lead.

III. EXEGESIS OF MATTHEW 20:20-28

Many believe that James and John’s mother mentioned in verse 20 was Salome, the sister of Jesus’ mother, Mary. If this were the case, it would help to explain her boldness in approaching Jesus with such a request. Unfortunately, if the mother of James and John was, in fact, Jesus’ aunt, it would have created an ethical dilemma for Jesus at the very beginning of this event. It appears that James and John’s mother is making the request solely on the basis of their relationship with Jesus and not on any merit of their own. Even if James and John’s mother is not Jesus’ aunt, there is no foundation to support her request other than her influence (Meier, 1978). At the onset of this conversation, the mother of James and John asks Jesus to grant the request before she even presents her request. Obviously, to grant an unheard request would be unethical.

In verse 21 the mother of James and John makes her request. She wanted to secure a place of importance for her sons in Jesus’ Kingdom before he came into power. Both Morris (1992) and Hendrickson (1973) argue that the disciples, including those followers of Jesus who may have been on the fringes, like this mother, were under the impression that the culmination of Jesus reign was imminent, that Jesus’
Kingdom might happen as soon as they arrived in Jerusalem. The mother of the two disciples then is attempting to secure their place even before Jesus reign began.

The request, judged by Jesus response, demonstrates a complete lack of understanding. Hendrickson (1973) asks how is it possible that “the mother of these two disciples comes to Jesus and asks him to assign to them… the two highest positions in his kingdom” (p. 744)? Blomberg (1992) explains that the position the mother was requesting was not only influential but of privilege as well. James and John’s mother seemed to be seeking not only the position for her sons, but all the worldly accouterments that would accompany such a position for her entire family as well (Morris, 1992).

Jesus’ response in verse 22, “You don’t know what you are asking for,” is straightforward with the mother and her two sons. Hendricksen (1973) argues that Jesus’ responds to a wider or plural audience, not just the mother. Jesus understands that although the mother brought the request, the sons are in full agreement (Carson, 1984). Jesus response is simple and honest, “You don’t understand what you are asking for” (Matthew 20:22). Carson (1984) suggests that Jesus’ response was not a severe answer, but instead, Jesus was trying to bring to light the family’s wholesale ignorance of their request. Blomberg (1992) argues that the family does not understand Jesus’ mission, they do not understand the culture of his kingdom, and they do not understand the manner in which Jesus intended to usher in his Kingdom, namely the Cross! The brothers are equally ignorant of their ability as well. Morris (1992) comments on the brother’s exaggerated view of their ability to drink the same cup, noting that their response to opposition a short time later in Gethsemane was to run.

Jesus follows up his response with a question of his own, “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink” (Matthew 20:22). Most agree the cup Jesus is referring to is the concept of suffering. Hendrickson (1973), Carson (1984), Blomberg (1992), Morris (1992) all refer to the cup or drinking from the cup as an Old Testament metaphor for suffering. Jesus probably was not referring to specific suffering such as crucifixion, but to suffering in general. Neither was Jesus referring to the results of his suffering. The suffering of the brothers, and of future believers would not and could not provide for the redemption of the human race.

Even though the brothers respond in ignorance in verse 23, “we can,” their assertion is correct; they will face suffering on behalf of Christ. However, the places of prestige and authority are not for Jesus to assign. The places of honor are reserved for the Father to assign, not Christ. Even if Jesus was agreeable to the mother’s request, he could not grant it.

Matthew tells the reader that the other disciples are indignant. Their response in verse 24 is an indictment on their ignorance as much as it was on the self-centered egotism of James and John. Carson (1992) argues that the indignation of the ten was born out of their jealousy and self-interest. Morris (1992) contends that some of the ten had most likely “had their eyes on the same position” (p. 511). Their indignation was born the out of being outdone by James and John. Finally, Hendricksen (1973) argues that the spiritual attitude of all twelve was of the same ignorant mindset that was seeking to place themselves first. One could argue that the spirit of competition and rivalry was still dominant among the twelve.
At this point, Jesus gathers the disciples together in verse 25 to once again contrast the world’s attitude and actions with those of his kingdom. There seems to be agreement that Jesus’ commentary on worldly leadership is descriptive of tyranny, abuse of power, domination, and authoritarianism (Blomberg, 1992; Hendricksen, 1973; Morris, 1992). However, Carson (1984) argues that the phrase Jesus uses, “lord it over,” and “exercise authority over” (20:25) do not imply abuse of power; instead Jesus was simply contrasting leadership structures that “cannot be transferred to relationships among his followers” (p. 432). Either way, Jesus clearly lays out his expectations for his followers.

If, however, verse 25 is taken in context of the pericope in its entirety there is an application for motivation. Morris’ (1992) comments on this verse allude to the impure motivation when he writes that leaders “who are not quite in the positions of being rulers are still quite ready to use whatever authority they can exercise” (p. 511). Morris suggests that these worldly leaders are chasing after power and authority and will use any perceived power and authority they have as soon as, and even before, they have it.

Jesus cannot be clearer in his opposition to the worldly view of leadership, “Not so with you!” he says in verse 26. Jesus outlines a radical new teaching on leadership. Meier (1978) describes Jesus teaching as falling under “the law of eschatological reversal” (p. 142), Carson (1984) labels Jesus’ teaching as “revolutionary” (p. 432), Hendricksen (1973) as “an unforgettable paradox” (p. 748), and Blomberg (1992) a teaching that instructed followers to “behave in a diametrically opposite fashion” (p. 308). Truly Jesus is teaching a new way of living and leading that is to exist in his kingdom.

What, then is Jesus instruction on leadership? The leadership valued in Jesus’ Kingdom is truly a selfless leadership. Jesus uses two terms to describe selfless leadership, “servant” (20:26) and “slave” (20:27). Perhaps, as Carson (1992) suggests, Jesus wants to make sure “the full force of his teaching” is clearly understood, so he moves from one position of humility (servant) to a position of extreme humility (slave), which would be in line with the hyperbolic nature of Jesus teachings (p. 142). Jesus may also have used these two different terms to provide a complete picture of the type of leadership characteristics found in selfless leadership.

Carson (1992) suggests that servants are helpers of others. Meier (1978) suggests that a servant is one who lives their lives for the “advantage of others, not self” (p. 142). However, Jesus then uses the term “slave” (20:27). Morris (1992) argues that in employing the term slave Jesus “could scarcely use a more graphic term to bring out the lowliness his people must seek” (p. 512). Morris adds that a slave’s “whole life is lived in service for which he can claim neither credit nor reward” (p. 512). Meier argues that a slave is “a non-person with no rights, whose existence consists in obeying others” (p. 143). Selfless leadership is characterized by humility and seeking the benefit of others, not self. The selfless leader not only lives a life of service, but resists credit or reward and resists things that might be considered rights.

Several suggest that the term used in verse 28 that the NIV translates “ransom” refers to a price that was paid to buy a slave’s freedom (Blomberg, 1992; Carson, 1984; Hendricksen, 1972; Morris, 1992). Morris (1992) also argues that “ransom” was also used as a term to describe the price paid to “bring a prisoner of war out of captivity” (p. 512). Either way, it is clear that Jesus intended to become even less than a slave, by
becoming the ransom used to buy one out of captivity. One could easily argue that slave is more valuable than the ransom paid by the purchaser, because the purchaser is willing to part with one to gain the other.

After describing the worldly concept of leadership and his Kingdom’s concept of leadership, Jesus demonstrates which leadership concept is preferable. Morris (1992) argues Jesus “sought no such place for himself” in reference to the worldly view of leadership (p. 512). Meier (1978) suggests that Jesus is both the “enabler and the exemplar for his disciples” (p. 143). Not only does Jesus teach this radically revolutionary concept of leadership, but Jesus also takes it to its farthest extreme. One could argue, not only to provide salvation, but Jesus also provides an example of complete selflessness in his leadership. Carson (1984) writes “Jesus entire thrust is on enabling and empowering others rather than wielding power for oneself” (p. 308). Jesus provides the ultimate example of selfless leadership.

IV. SELFLESS LEADERSHIP

Selfless leadership can strengthen the foundation for ethical leadership. Brooks (2014) suggests that a leader can be “driven by either a sense of the common good or from a sense of selfishness, greed or blind ambition” (p. 205). What will determine whether a leader chooses good or selfish motivation? Brookes argues that leaders motivated by virtue, as opposed to values, are guided toward ethical behavior and decision making.

Fedler (2006) makes a similar distinction when he compares the two common questions that help define the ethical platform on which moral leadership is built, “What should I do?” and “How should I be?” Fedler describes three approaches to answering the “what should I do?” question. The first approach is the ethical egoist approach or decisions based on ascertaining the best results for the individual making the decision (Fedler, 2006). The second approach; the deontological approach, or decisions based on following a certain set of rules and that breaking certain rules is in itself immoral (Fedler, 2006). Finally, the third or consequentialist approach in which decisions are judged to be moral by the results of the action and not the action itself (Fedler, 2006). Fedler then answers the second question, “How should I be” with the introduction of virtue ethics or ethics based on the character of a person and not solely on the actions of a person.

Fedler (2006) continues to define virtue ethics as a focus on more than just doing the right thing. “One must also feel the right way and do the right things with the right motives and intentions” (Fedler, 2006, Kindle Loc. 505). Virtue is about character. Fedler argues that people are continually in the ongoing process of character development. Virtue ethics is not just How should I be, but who I will be moving forward (Fedler, 2006). Fedler suggests virtue ethics develops character through consistent habits of doing and thinking.

Even when leaders develop character through virtues, leaders face a constant challenge because of the sin nature in all people, namely self-centeredness. Knights and O’Leary (2006) argue that the “pre-occupation with self… renders ethical leadership unattainable” (p. 126). So, leaders must continually keep self in its proper place. Otherwise, the selfish nature can tempt a leader to make decisions that are inconsistent with their character. Bazerman and Tenrunsel (2011) contend that most people
overestimate their own ethicality. Even more concerning is the concept they introduce, bounded awareness. Bounded awareness can create a gap between who people believe they are and who they are in reality (Bazerman & Tenrunsel, 2011). Bounded awareness is the tendency to miss or “exclude important or relevant information” from the decision-making process (Bazerman & Tenrunsel, 2011, p. 7). Unfortunately, most people are not initially conscious of the limitations bounded awareness places on their decision-making process (Bazerman & Tenrunsel, 2011). Chugh and Bazerman (2007) list several ways in which bounded awareness can prevent otherwise virtuous leaders from making ethical decisions. Bounded awareness can manifest itself as *inattentional blindness*, as information is visible and available yet is missed during the decision-making process because leaders are focusing on other information (Chugh & Bazerman, 2007). Chugh and Bazerman also note that bounded awareness can take the shape of *change blindness*, in which leaders fail to notice a change in information that is readily available. Leaders fail to “explicitly notice that a change took place” making the information leaders have outdated and, as such, no longer relevant or useful (Chugh & Bazerman, 2007, p. 5). *Focalism* is another phenomenon that can occur with bounded awareness, Chugh and Bazerman (2007) identify focalism happening when leaders “focus too much on a particular event and too little on other events that are likely to occur concurrently” (p.6). While Chugh and Bazerman (2007) list other phenomena associated with bounded awareness, the point is clear, even with the best intentions leaders can make unethical decisions. Bazerman and Tenrunsel conclude that bounded awareness or bounded ethicality can “make us unaware of the moral implications of our decisions” (p. 30). The challenge with bounded awareness or bounded ethicality is that leaders can experience ethical fading (Bazerman & Tenrunsel, 2011). Ethical fading is the process by which ethical dimensions are eliminated from the decision-making process (Bazerman & Tenrunsel, 2011, p. 30). Bazerman and Tenrunsel suggest this was what happened in the 1970s with Ford’s decision not to correct a flaw that was discovered in the design of the Ford Pinto. The leaders at Ford made the business decision that it would be cheaper to settle any potential lawsuits than go back and correct the design flaw (Bazerman & Tenrunsel, 2011). Ford could have prevented dozens of fatalities if its leaders had made an ethical decision instead of a business decision.

When one combines bounded ethicality with the selfish nature of the human condition it is easy to see how ethical fading can lead, even virtuous leaders, into a spiral of bad and unethical decisions. Selfless leadership can strengthen the foundation of virtue ethics. Selfless leadership as taught and exemplified by Jesus, not only looks toward the best interest and service to followers, selfless leadership places the leader in the position of extreme humility and service to the point of suffering. As mentioned above, Jesus was not suggesting that his followers would suffer in the same manner as he did or that their suffering could provide the salvation that his could. However, could it be argued that Jesus was teaching that as a leader serves their followers, the leader’s service should be at the expense of the leader and not the followers? Selfless leadership then benefits the follower more than it ever benefits the leader. If this the case, with the focus on followers and not the needs and wants of the leader, selfless leadership can strengthen virtue ethics because the attention is placed solely on the benefit of the followers and never on the leader. If this is true, there is little room for
selfishness or self-serving decisions which is arguably the starting point for unethical decisions. Selfless leadership, as taught and exemplified by Jesus will strengthen a leader's foundation for ethical leadership.

About the Author

Major Philip Lloyd has been an officer in The Salvation Army for over 20 years. As a Salvation Army Officer, he has served as a local pastor in several Salvation Army churches and as a Divisional Youth Secretary, in which he had oversight for youth ministries in The Salvation Army’s Southwest Ohio, Northeast Kentucky Division. He has also served as the Territorial Youth Secretary for the army’s USA Eastern Territory where he had oversight for youth ministries in the Northeast region of the United States. Presently, he is appointed as the General Secretary for the Western Pennsylvania Division of the Salvation Army, where his responsibilities include the oversight of The Salvation Army’s work in Pittsburgh, PA.

Phil earned his undergraduate degree in Biblical Studies and Christian Leadership at Cincinnati Christian University, his MA in Strategic Communications and Leadership at Seton Hall University, and presently working towards his Doctorate in Strategic Leadership at Regent University. He lives in Pittsburgh with his wife Jodi, and their four children Zac, Sam, Sophie, & Ben.

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V. REFERENCES


