

Full-service Christians in a Self-serve World

Are you following Jesus' paradoxical plan for leaders?

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I want to draw your attention to a true story by using some modern names in order to allow us to relate more readily to the story. Some years ago two brothers grew up with a father who taught them the meaning of hard work. He owned his own business, and from their earliest recollections Johnny and Jim worked with him. They knew how it felt to reach the end of the day too tired to sleep. They also learned to value the perks that accrue to the ones in charge.



Both brothers had short fuses and violent tempers. They were known as the "terrors of the neighborhood." But they were good workers, and their father came to rely upon his sons to maintain and develop the family business.

Then one day, just as Johnny and Jim were finishing up a major project with their father, they abandoned him.

What happened? A young leader building a new organization had arrived in town and handpicked Johnny and Jim to join his elite group. They saw the chance to hit it big. Abruptly they turned their back on their commitment, their plans, and their father's dreams to jump at the chance of a lifetime.

Almost immediately, Johnny and Jim ran into problems. They viewed life differently from their boss. He was patient and methodical; they were anxious and impetuous. He believed in serving people; they wanted to use people.

Worse, the two brothers had failed to recognize the implications of being little fish in a big pond. In the family business, they were the only ones next to the man in charge. Here, they were simply two members of an executive team—no jockeying, no power plans, no pecking order—and others on that team were smarter and more aggressive than they.

Johnny and Jim conspired to get an edge on the others. When they were alone with the boss, the brothers suggested that when he was ready to establish his formal organization, they could become his top men. Just in case their suggestions weren't enough, they arranged for a close relative to plead their case.

But their plot could not be concealed for long, and when the news leaked out the brothers were ostracized. Their peers (and erstwhile friends) plotted countermoves to protect their own rights.

Naturally the boss caught rumors of unrest and insurrection and called an executive committee meeting. Sorrowfully he informed his team that they had totally missed the purpose of his training sessions. He explained that his organization was built on giving, not getting—on service rather than privilege. It was a hard lesson to learn because it ran so counter to the prevailing culture.

PRINCIPLES FOR ALL TIMES

Have you heard the saying, "*The more things change, the more they stay the same?*" These events actually took place almost twenty centuries ago in the ministry of Jesus. James and John, the Sons of Thunder, had to learn that those who would follow Christ must live according to the values and principles of their Leader.

These principles are totally relevant today. They certainly run counter to the contemporary prescriptions of dressing for success, winning through intimidation, and manipulating others to do what you want. As Christ's followers we are called to serve. He expects us to seek ways to promote and elevate others—not to fight, scratch, and claw for our own rights.

The biblical principle is clear. **"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many"** ([Mark 10:43–45](#)).

Clear? Yes. Understandable? Probably not. This principle is not easy to accept. Our human desires scream out and contradict the principle of winning through losing, of getting to the top by heading for the bottom, of coming in first by trying to be last. Our natural, human drives shout, "*Stand up for your rights; use whatever clout you have to get an edge. If you don't look out for 'number one' who else will?*" Jesus expects us to act differently—to seek opportunities to serve others.

Which is exactly what He did. He gave Himself as a ransom for us, so we could become all He planned for us to be. While many people placed demands on Jesus, He always chose to do what was best for them. He served them rather than doing what was easiest or most convenient; He expects this of His followers in every age.

In the upper room, after Jesus washed His disciples' feet, He explained, **"I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him"** ([John 13:15–16](#)). In the Kingdom of God, greatness comes through serving others. As we promote and encourage them, we grow and mature in Christ-likeness.

One exciting aspect of this ministry is that we can serve anywhere, any time. We don't have to go overseas or raise support money. We don't need any sophisticated training or particular skills. We do need a willingness to obey Christ, to allow His Spirit to serve others through us. Once we make that decision we will find endless opportunities to minister.

SERVING YOUR SPOUSE

Most married Christians have come to grips with the need to serve their spouse. I say most, because obviously some still expect their husband or wife to **"parent"** them. Elia and I have a friend who treats his wife like a hired hand. Rather than seeking ways to serve, he expects her to jump to his beck and call. And while we feel sorry for her, we feel even sorrier for him. Although our friend is bright and competent, he violates Christ's guidelines for leaders. He lives as one of the lords of the Gentiles, who Christ described in [Matthew 20:25](#). He cannot enjoy God's full blessing.

While I have determined that I will not treat Elia that way, a long time ago I recognized a weakness in my own serving attitude. On the way home from work one afternoon I decided to encourage Elia with something special. She had experienced some frustrating circumstances recently. I thought of what I could do to support her, to say "I love you," to serve her; but all my ideas—dinner out, candy, flowers—seemed easy for me to do. I desired to serve my wife, but I really didn't want to put myself out.

Then I remembered one genuine, ongoing frustration in Elia's life: our vacuum cleaner. Every time Elia used the vacuum the handle came apart, sometimes hurting her hand. We couldn't replace the vacuum since it's a built-in central unit. Unfortunately, the manufacturer had discontinued that model, so I had to modify whatever parts I could get. Repairing this tool was a way I could serve my wife.

For three days I considered alternative ways to please Elia. Finally, deciding that procrastination was ridiculous, I determined to do what I knew I should. I served by fixing the vacuum cleaner. Obviously, spending two hours in the evening after work was harder than picking up flowers on the way home. But legitimately serving my wife means doing things that are meaningful to *her*, not the easier things that I feel like doing.

Many times since that evening Elia has expressed her gratitude for the repair job. But serving doesn't relate only to repair projects. We can practice it in the routines of life. Running an errand or placing a needed phone call (on the first request) shows a servant's heart. Serving may mean taking an interest in books, handicrafts, gardening, music, antique car restoration, sports, or some other avocation that isn't your favorite.

Actively listening will sensitize you to what is important to your spouse and enable you to serve intelligently. And as spouses serve each other and their children, they model Christ-like attitudes. In this way they set a powerful example for their children to emulate.

SERVING AT WORK

Most of us have stereotyped images of business executives who wield great power ruthlessly. We hear of an executive moving into a failing company and taking credit for turning it around through personal power and charisma. Or we read of corporate raiders who determine the fate of major corporations and thousands of workers as nonchalantly as we choose our brand of toothpaste. But that's not what corporate life is all about. The true leaders serve those who report to them. They are effective. And these executives serve God through the routine of corporate life.

Recently a young lady related her experience of working for a leader who served her. She had been sent on a business trip to the East Coast. Since she traveled alone infrequently, she left with some anxiety. Neither she nor one of the executives realized that they had been scheduled on the same flight, and both were surprised when they met near the baggage claim area. Although he had no luggage to claim, he waited for hers to arrive and helped her with it.

Then came the rental car. They had both rented from the same company, but there had been a mix up on her reservation. Although the executive already had his assigned car, he waited and helped clear up the confusion. When she finally got her car, he went out of his way to lead her through city traffic to her motel. After helping her carry her luggage to her room, he went onto his own hotel to prepare for his meetings.

Later, this young lady related to me that she observed servant leadership in action. Although it was inconvenient, the executive chose to give his time to help a coworker far below him in the corporate structure. By serving her, he became an excellent leader to her. And he earned the additional fringe benefit of loyalty and appreciation that even a salary raise cannot buy.

Work affords many opportunities to serve. Going out of the way to be helpful and courteous to customers is an obvious way to serve. Managers who strive to achieve better wages and working conditions serve those for whom they fight. Even an occasional word of thanks or encouragement to a boss can serve Christ.

SERVING IN THE CHURCH

I have spent much of my life working with Christian educators. In addition to local church ministry, I have taught and administered in Christian higher education. While some people feel academics live in obscure ivory towers, I've found that serving is the key to leadership in this area, too.

One friend of mine chairs a department in a graduate school. In addition to his earned doctorate, he has many other credentials and his name is recognized worldwide. He loves his discipline and thrives on the challenge of working with eager graduate students. But if you want to see him really excited, ask him about the boys' Sunday school class he teaches. He is more enthusiastic about one preteen boy who makes a commitment to Christ than about the accolades of those impressed with his great knowledge.

Several years ago a group of Christian educators in Romania asked me to conduct a series of seminars. I noted that whether I met with academics, or church leaders, the different people who introduced me invariably included the fact that I taught a chapel class at our small Christian school.

People are moderately interested in credentials. They are polite when you tell them where you earned your doctorate. Some even stifle boredom enough to ask the topic of your dissertation. But the bottom line is, "**Can you serve?**" And people know that you serve when teaching a Sunday school class is high on your priority list. (You don't teach boys for glory and prestige.)

Professors and executives who cook hamburgers for the high school youth group serve God while they serve the teens. Women who share their love in a noisy infant nursery, although they prefer participating in the adult service, serve by emulating Christ's attitude, "**Let the little children come unto me.**" Corporate leaders working in children's church do not stoop beneath their dignity, but minister as servants.

Private intercessory prayer asking God to bless another's efforts demonstrates a servant's heart. Washing church linens, maintaining attendance records, counting the offering, setting up chairs, and countless other jobs comprise the indispensable "**behind the scenes**" servant corps.

SERVING IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD

When the expert in Pharisaic law asked Jesus, "**Who is my neighbor?**" ([Luke 10:25–37](#)), he seemed more interested in debate than insight. But Jesus answered his query with a parable about the Good Samaritan. The essential message of this parable is that we can become the neighbor of anyone we serve.

The Samaritan went out of his way, spent his money, risked his life, and committed to future liability—all for a Jew who might rebuff him in disdain as soon as he was well enough to begin hating again! We demonstrate obedience to God's Law when we love those who have needs—our neighbors. We demonstrate our love for them by serving them.

A professor I knew helped to supplement his salary by painting houses during the summer. His next-door neighbor was impressed with this and decided to paint his own house. But it was a new experience for the neighbor, and progress was painfully slow.

One Saturday, when the neighbor was out of town, my friend called his teenaged son aside and suggested that they do some painting for the neighbor. Naturally the son asked what they would charge for the painting, and the young man was incredulous when his father said there would be no charge. They would do it as neighbors.

That Saturday the father-and-son team was able to paint one whole side of the house—more than the neighbor would have accomplished in a week. When he arrived home he was overwhelmed by this expression of love by an acquaintance.

To talk about loving your neighbor is easy. But when you spend a day in service, there can be no mistaking the message. And an unforeseen benefit came from the son's response. At the day's end, when the neighbor had expressed his gratitude, the son came to his father. *"That was really neat,"* he said. *"When can we do it again?"* Not only had the father demonstrated neighborly love by serving, but his son caught the vision for reaching out to others.

Let your imagination soar in thinking of creative ways to welcome new people into your neighborhood. Go out of your way to show tenderness and compassion in times of family illness or death. Be willing to plan, host, or clean up the residue from entertaining family and friends at holidays, graduations, or special celebrations so that others can enjoy the blessings of those occasions. Be willing to invite others into a house that is less than perfect, and in so doing, serve by creating a home known for love and hospitality.

OUR PRIVILEGE OF SERVICE

We encourage Christians to learn how to share their faith and then challenge them with the importance of discipling others after salvation.

But it is possible to do these good things with improper motives. A public lifestyle of teaching, preaching, writing, and leading others can turn into an ego trip.

On the other hand, carrying suitcases, painting houses, and teaching Sunday school is grunt work. It isn't glamorous and there may be no public acclaim. But if we are concerned about power, position, and the perks that come to leaders, we are no different from the non-Christians who seek such things. We live as lords of the Gentiles.

When His disciples tried the power play, Jesus reminded them that they were to operate by a set of guidelines different from those of the lords of the Gentiles. Whether we serve as leaders in key positions or as subordinates with little acclaim, we all are called to serve. As serious disciples of Jesus, we must take to heart His instructions: **"Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave"** ([Matthew 20:26–27](#)).