Service-The Unlikely Path to Power

Third and last in the series “Jesus Speaks to Our Times”

# Scripture: John 13:1-17; Matt. 20:20-28; Mark 9:30-37

# Key Thought: Jesus teaches us that serving others is the path to great leadership.

# Intro:

The Gallup polling organization has discovered that less than one-third of Americans are really engaged in their jobs. And the problem is usually the boss? How many of you have ever had to leave a job because the boss was just not the right kind of boss to work for? Here’s what Gallup found.

Our research shows that managers account for at least 70% of variance in employee engagement scores. Given the troubling state of employee engagement in the U.S. today, it makes sense that most managers are not creating environments in which employees feel motivated or even comfortable. A Gallup study of 7,272 U.S. adults revealed that one in two had left their job to get away from their manager to improve their overall life at some point in their career. <http://www.gallup.com/businessjournal/182321/employees-lot-managers.aspx>

What is it that leaders need to know to improve? Managers and leaders of all kinds, indeed all of us can profit immensely from Jesus’ lesson today on the best path to influence with others. It is summed up in a song I remember from years ago “Do you want to be great in God’s kingdom? Learn to be the servant of all.” We’ve undoubtedly heard that lesson but we relegate it to some spiritual realm that we think of as less than relevant to where we live every day and to the questions we face in our real job. That is our mistake. Let’s dig in and see why.

# The contrast in service between Jesus and his disciples

## The disciples argue along the road to Jerusalem

Let’s start by observing the situation in Jesus’ life as he headed for Jerusalem. Jesus’ disciples, in the last days of his ministry, were arguing about who among them was the greatest. According to Mark chapter 9 and Luke chapter 9, this was a running argument that had begun before Jesus began to go to Jerusalem for the last time. The disciples were arguing behind the scenes.

## Jesus counters with a lesson

Jesus had been sensing the tension, and seeking to combat their attitude. One way that Jesus had instructed the disciples was by setting children on his knee and telling them plainly,

Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, “Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For it is the one who is least among you all who is the greatest.” Luke 9:47-48

But the disciples were not getting the messages about the least being the greatest, the first being last and the last, first (Mark 10:31). Things got worse between the disciples instead of better.

## The argument gets worse

The height of the argument comes when the mother of James and John approaches Jesus with a request for special consideration for her two sons. We certainly see this request as part of this struggle among the disciples as to who was the greatest. The sons’ of Zebedee requests for positions at Jesus’ right and left in his kingdom are essentially requests to be number one and two among the disciples.

Why did this come argument come to a head at this time in Jesus’ life? The disciples did not know exactly what was up as Jesus approached Jerusalem. They did not quite understand or believe Jesus’ predictions about his death and resurrection. But I believe they did realize that Jesus ministry was approaching a huge climactic point. And in their naïveté, they wanted to be part of that high point in a very big way. But they were very much influenced by the world’s way of thinking. They were still looking for an earthly kingdom.

Of course, these requests by James and John make the other disciples mad. The Bible tells us there was discord among the disciples.

## Jesus teaches by contrasting example

As we look at the text of these passages further, one thing that we end up seeing is a huge contrast between Jesus’ attitude toward leadership and his definition of greatness versus that of his disciples.

In John 13, in the upper room shortly before his death, Jesus teaches the disciples again on the true path to greatness and effective leadership. This time he teaches with a powerful personal example. According to Luke, the dispute among the disciples as to who was the greatest was very much alive even as Jesus celebrated Passover with them in the upper room.

A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves.   
 Luke 22:24-26

In this case we need to compare the parallel accounts from Luke and the Gospel of John to get the full picture. Luke gives us the background. John tells us what Jesus did to give an example and teach the disciples a lesson. No doubt John remembered this event so clearly because he and James had been the ones at the focus of the argument.

He [Jesus] got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:4-5

John tells us that the apostle Peter objected to this procedure. No doubt Peter’s objections stemmed from the fact that the action that Jesus was doing was normally performed by the most menial servant. Peter and the disciples immediately recognized that by his action Jesus was taking a position that was considered lower in society, lower in status than they. To them, this was not at all proper. This did not fit with Jesus being their teacher and leader. That is most likely why Peter objected. Yet Jesus strongly rebuked Peter for his objection. Jesus wanted Peter to understand that he was teaching a different way of looking at status and greatness.

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. “Do you understand what I have done for you?” he asked them. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. John 13:12-15

In Luke’s record, Jesus puts the lesson very simply,

But I am among you as one who serves. Luke 22:27

## Our identification with the disciples

What a contrast! On the one hand we have the disciples arguing among themselves about who is the greatest, seeking self-glory, unwilling to volunteer to do the foot-washing. On the other side, we see our Savior, Master and Lord, demonstrating the humility of service. Unfortunately, even today, we too easily identify with the disciples’ position in this contrast rather than that of Jesus. We look out for ourselves, we seek our own advancement. And this holds us back from prioritizing service to others as Jesus desires us to do.

# Jesus' spiritual standing enabled him to be a servant

## Why could Jesus humble himself like this?

Today we might not ask that question. But it certainly was on John’s mind. And he answers it in writing his gospel. As we look at the text of John thirteen, we have to ask ourselves why verse three is included. What is the relationship between verse three and what follows? The most likely answer is that John is trying to tell us on what basis Jesus was able to humble himself as he did in the events John was about to relate. John is saying that the secret was Jesus’ supreme confidence in his relationship to God. Jesus was fully aware of his spiritual standing. Listen to John again.

"Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God. So he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him. John 13:3-5

In Greek, verses 3, 4 are one complex sentence as in the NRSV. Verse three begins with a particle – “knowing.” This is reflected in the NRSV text. In the NIV text and most modern translations, each verse is one sentence and they are connected with “so” indicating the implied logical connection. Whichever way the verses are translated, John is implying that it is on the basis of Jesus’ spiritual confidence growing out of his standing with God that our Savior could humble himself and become a servant--could take the spot of the lowest servant of the household and wash the disciples' feet. Because Jesus had a confidence in God, he was unthreatened by acts of humility and servanthood.

The consciousness of his greatness – "knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands" – was the secret of his humility – he washed his disciples’ feet. Only the great can afford to stoop. The proud stand straight because they fear that in bending their littleness be exposed. E. Stanley Jones in The Word Became Flesh p. 346

People who are insecure have trouble being servants. They constantly need to shore up their self-worth. They erroneously think that being served by others will help them feel good and lift them up in the eyes of others. So they don’t take the risk of serving others. They also erroneously think that serving others will somehow subtract from their value.

## For us too, spiritual confidence enables ministry

The apostle John is here giving us an insight into a great secret of self-confident leadership. In order to have a servant leader attitude, one must first be confident about oneself. How can we do that? We are not Jesus. Yet we can have confidence in our relationship with God. We can have confidence in the character of God who is compassionate and merciful, gracious and forgiving. He is faithful to his promises to be present with us and to help us in our time of need. We can be confident in our relationship with God. In the book of 1 John which we are studying in our Bible study, one of the key concepts is how we know, how we have certainty, about our relationship to God. The apostle John seeks to build our confidence in our relationship to God so that we can be confident just as Jesus was. Listen to this series of confidence building verses from 1 John chapter 5.

This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. 1 John 5:2

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life. 1 John 5:13

We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. 1 John 5:19-20

This spiritual confidence that John is encouraging is not the kind of confidence that is egotistical and braggadocios. It is not the kind of confidence that this world calls “attitude.” The kind of confidence that John is building up in us is an underlying certainty that allows us to go out and do what God has called us to do. It allows us to serve others without being threatened by humbling ourselves.

Leadership expert Bobb Biehl wrote this relevant piece:

To lead others confidently, you must have a certain faith in yourself. You must trust your motives and your recommendations. Unless you believe in your own presentation, your own program, your own dreams – others will not feel confident to follow you…frankly, I've learned that the anxiety associated with a lack of confidence is frequently a symbol of self-centeredness. If you are self-centered today, you're probably anxious – and the reverse is also true. At the bottom line, anxiety is self-centeredness. Think right now about some situation in which you want more confidence. In that situation, are you considering the needs and interests of others? Where are you focusing almost exclusively on yourself, and your concerns about not coming across as unwise or weak or indecisive? Is your desire to be giving to others in this situation, or is it to be getting something from them? Are you afraid that others will not give you the attention and recognition and affirmation you need? Or are you thinking about how you can provide what they need to succeed?

Bobb Biehl in Increasing Your Leadership Confidence p. 59, 60

# Jesus demonstrated the path to greatness

## Two kinds of leadership contrasted

We’ve been discussing the contrast between two kinds of leadership that are illustrated in the two passages that we read this morning. Let’s review that contrast in a different way. I have made a chart for you describing the self-serving leadership which the disciples were displaying on one side and the Servant-Leadership of Jesus on the other. These two different kinds of leadership have totally different descriptions and results in the passages that we read. For a few moments let’s just highlight the complete contrast once again so that we get further insight into how these two types of leadership differ.

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| --- | --- |
| Descriptions of two contrasting leadership styles | |
| Self-serving leadership | **Servant leadership** |
| Discord (Matt. 20:24; Luke 9:46) | **Harmony (Rom. 12:16)** |
| Pride (Matt. 20:25) | **Humility (James 4:10; Gal. 5:13)** |
| Over-reach (Matt. 20:21-22) | **Proper self judgement (Rom. 12:3)** |
| Authoritarian attitude (Matt. 20:25) | **Willing to serve (Matt. 20:28)** |
| Vindictive with opposing factions (Luke 9:49, 54) | **Forbearing (Luke 9:50, 55)** |
| Growth of followers inhibited (1 Sam. 18:6-9) | **Growth of followers fostered (Acts 4:13)** |
| Limited success (Luke 14:11; 1 Peter 5:5, 6) | **True greatness (Matt. 20:26,27)** |

## An historical example of selfish leadership

Allow me to give you a real historical example of selfish leadership. There are many to choose from. Many of you probably work or have worked for this kind of leader, unfortunately.

If the original Henry Ford had listened to Jesus and followed his leadership style, the Ford Motor Company would likely still be the undisputed king of the auto world. The first Henry Ford had a great vision, a vision to build a car that was simple, low-priced and available to almost everyone. By 1914, Ford was producing 50% of all automobiles in the United States even though he had something like 15 competing companies. (Wikipedia lists more than 15 car companies in the US in 1914.) But Henry Ford could not stand having true leaders working for him. He was threatened by them.

One day when a group of his designers surprised him by presenting him with a prototype of an improved model, Ford ripped its doors off the hinges and proceeded to destroy the car with his bare hands. For almost 20 years, the Ford Motor Company offered only one design, the model T, which Ford had personally developed. It wasn’t until 1927 that he finally – grudgingly – agreed to offer a new car to the public. The company produced the model A, but it was incredibly far behind its competitors in technical innovations. Despite its early head start and the incredible lead over its competitors, the Ford Motor Company’s market share kept shrinking. By 1931 it was down to only 28%. Henry Ford was the antithesis of an empowering leader. He also seemed to undermine his leaders and look over the shoulders of his people. He even created a sociology department within Ford Motor Company to check up on his employees and direct their private lives. The Twenty-one Irrefutable Laws of Leadership by John Maxwell p. 122

That is one sad example of the kind of leader that Jesus was teaching the disciples not to be. That kind of leader discourages their best employees and limits the horizons of their organization severely.

## Servant Leadership

I was reading a passage by pastor, missionary to India, and author E. Stanley Jones that is very relevant. He is talking about the British style of political organization which is also used in India where E. Stanley Jones served.

We call the head of the state a "prime minister," or "first servant." And if he doesn't prove to be the "first servant" of the people but is rather servant of himself we put him out. Not re-elected. E. Stanley Jones in The Word Became Flesh P. 364

Here’s another illustration, this one from our human bodies.

The cells that serve the rest are normal cells, the cells that do not serve the rest are cancerous, so they are operated on and eliminated. E. Stanley Jones in The Word Became Flesh P. 364

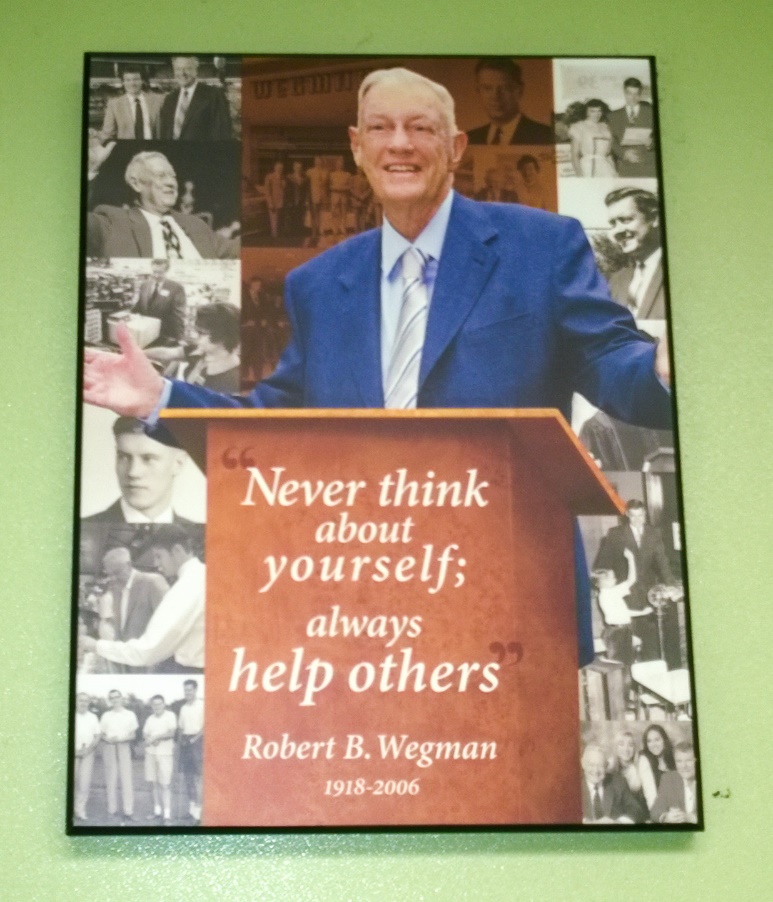
Former prisoner-of-war in Vietnam, head of the Naval War College for three years, and one-time vice-presidential candidate Adm. James B. Stockdale declared,

Leadership must be based on goodwill. It means obvious and wholehearted commitment to helping followers. What we need for leaders are men of heart who are so helpful that they, in effect, do away with the need of their jobs. But leaders like that are never out of a job, never out of followers. Strange as it sounds, great leaders gain authority by giving it away. . Quoted in The Twenty-one Irrefutable Laws of Leadership by John Maxwell p. 128

Sounds like Admiral Stockdale had been learning from Jesus, doesn’t it? No wonder he was so successful.

Before you can do anything else in the lives of others, you must show them love. Without it, there can be no connection, no future, and no success together… The length and breadth of our influence on others are directly related to the depth of our concern for them. Becoming a Person of Influence by John C Maxwell and Jim Dornan p. 40, 41

## Consider a contrasting example:

The other day I stopped at a Wegmans grocery store. It is one of JoAnne’s and my favorite places to shop. Whenever we go back to Central New York we stop at Wegmans. Wegmans is a family-owned company with forty-seven thousand employees and 8.3 billion in annual sales. It was led from 1950 until 2006 by Robert B. Wegman. Wegmans is obviously a great grocery chain.

But one of the most unusual things about the grocery chain is this. Year after year it is ranked among the best places to work. Now that’s not what you usually think of when you think of a grocery chain. In 2016 it was number five on Forbes magazine’s list of America’s best employers. In 2016 it ranked number four on Fortune magazine’s 100 best companies to work for. In 2005 it was number one on that list. It has never been off Fortune’s list since the list started in 1998.

When I visited Wegmans this time, I had an experience which explained it all for me. We had been traveling and stopped in for a rest stop as well as to pick up a few things. When we went to the restrooms they were closed for cleaning, so the staff directed us to the back of the store to use the facilities normally reserved for the employees. When I turned around to leave the locker room area, over the door, under which all the employees would walk multiple times each shift was this picture and accompanying motto, “Never think about yourself; always help others!” Robert B Wegman 2018-2006.

Friends, that is a servant leader motto. It is a motto that is, whether consciously or unconsciously, modeled after the teaching of Jesus Christ. That is also the kind of servant leadership that author Jim Collins discovered takes a company from good to great. Robert Wegman built Wegmans’s into a powerhouse grocer in Upstate NY. But more than that, it is a company that is among the best to work for in the entire country. I did a little digging on their website. I found their list of values. Four out of five had to do with helping people! Number one was “We care about the well-being and success of every person.” <https://www.wegmans.com/about-us/company-overview.html> The employees probably don’t think about it, and I’m sure the customers don’t but the attitude behind that motto is the secret to the success of Wegmans.

# Conclusion:

So the choice is ours. Will we follow the example of the disciples, scramble among ourselves for greatness, creating discord, jealousy and inefficiency as we go? Or, will we take the high but more difficult road, the road of servant leadership modeled by Jesus our Lord. This road costs something. It is not about amassing things for ourselves, it is about helping others along the way. But the servant leader believes that in helping others, the greatest good is achieved.

Choosing to be a servant leader multiplies our influence. Those we invest in in turn learn to be servant leaders and invest in others and the chain of goodwill that Jesus set in motion continues.

When you nurture people and add value to them without expecting anything in return, they feel significant. They realize that they are valued, that they matter to themselves. And once they consistently feel positive about themselves, their free to live more positively for themselves and others. Becoming a Person of Influence by John C Maxwell and Jim Dornan P. 53

This is one way that faith expresses itself through love (Gal. 5:6).