

Portrait of a Servant-Leader

God does not depend upon heroes; he uses smudged and unattractive “jars of clay”—a betrayed brother, a reluctant desert herdsman, a fearful wheat thresher, an overlooked shepherd boy, a burdened cupbearer, and an ethnocentric Galilean fisherman. Rather than compile an extensive list of desirable attributes of a servant leader, this profile outlines three traits that penetrate the fundamental identity of all servant leaders—character, motive and agenda. Who the leader is and is becoming in one’s essential being (character), why the leader undertakes a course of action (motive), and what the leader pursues as the defined mission (agenda) are, we believe, the core components and interrelated foci of the kind of leadership ordered in Holy Scripture.

Proven Character

Character can be defined as a person’s moral constitution, in which is embedded a stable set of values. For the biblical leader these values are conditioned by revealed truth recorded in Holy Scripture. The apostle Paul establishes a set of criteria for elders and deacons that centers around moral virtues that spring from and evidence godly character. Paul’s philosophy of leadership is character-grounded rather than geared around personality, role, temperament, or gifting. This is because character possesses the staying power and impact potential necessary for a lasting legacy.

How does one develop the character that is the prerequisite for effective leadership? Paul refers to “proven character” as the refined product that emerges from a process of testing. Suffering endured from the perspective of faith is the soil in which perseverance grows, and from perseverance blooms character. Proven character is evidenced by a buoyant hope that has experienced the faithfulness of God to be more than adequate for the crisis. Those individuals that Scripture honors as effective leaders were people whose characters were tested and refined in the crucible of hardship.

Joseph experienced betrayal, slavery, false accusation and imprisonment over a period of 13 years before he was elevated as Vizier of Egypt. Moses felt he was ready to lead Israel at age 40, but God removed the pampered son of the Egyptian princess to the desert of Midian for 40 years to tend the flocks of Jethro. At age 80 he was now prepared, even if reluctant, to confront Pharaoh. After his anointing by Samuel, David received not a crown, but 15 years as a fugitive in desolate places trying to escape the murderous pursuit of Saul. A total of 22 years passed before David was crowned undisputed King of Israel. When Paul praises Timothy to the Philippians for his “proven character,” he is commending one who has served for 12 years in the rough and tumble of missionary work as his most trusted associate. Paul himself spent nearly a decade studying the Scriptures and developing his evangelistic gifts, first in Arabia then in Tarsus, before being rescued from obscurity by Barnabas and assuming a position of prominence in the church in Antioch. Years of preparation preceded the elevation of these leaders to positions of influence. Adversity was God’s refining tool to shape them into vessels of usefulness. Leaders with “proven character” are those who have learned to trust God in the hard experiences of life.

Doxological Motive

A passion for God's honor and a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of Israel drove forward the great leaders in the Old Testament. In the two watershed crises, the golden calf and report of the spies, Moses intercedes for the Lord to relent from his threat to destroy Israel. The basis of his plea is God's honor: to destroy the people He had redeemed and established a covenant with would damage His reputation among the nations. Moses is zealous that God's abounding love and tender compassion be magnified in His granting of forgiveness to a repentant people. David's dramatic arrival on the scene is as a shepherd boy who dares to defend God's honor against the insults of the Philistine giant. The "man after God's own heart", despite his colossal failures, is the shepherd-ruler who brings the ark to Jerusalem, establishes the joyful worship of the Lord at the center of national life, and rules over the people with reverential fear.

Jesus, in his training of the twelve, made a constant beeline to the matters of the heart, the center of the personality where motives and values mingle in the process of self-determination. It is not enough to do the right thing or even to have a stable and growing character. New covenant leaders must regularly assess why they are doing what they are doing. The inherent worth of "acts of righteousness," such as giving to the poor, praying, or fasting, depends on the underlying motive behind them. Are they the expressions of a grateful heart that is attuned to the glory of God, or are they self-serving acts performed to attract the approbation of one's peers? Jesus is warning his disciples to check their motives because even ministry can be carried out for the wrong reasons. It is the "pure in heart" who will have an undimmed vision of God's majesty.

How is a leader to act with initiative and boldness and not be paralyzed by a morbid introspection with constantly second-guessing one's elusive hidden motivations? The answer lies in the ruthless honesty to lay one's soul bare before the penetrating sword of Scripture, which has the power to penetrate, cut through, expose, and renew the "thoughts and intents of the heart." Servant-leaders must undergo daily spiritual surgery under the Spirit-illuminated exposure to God's word, undergirded by earnest prayer for God to search one's thoughts and meditations.

The heart, the "wellspring of life," is the place of decision and destiny. Careful and regular attention to one's heart motivation will prevent the servant-leader from the pitfalls that commonly attend positions of influence: concern for personal reputation, status, image, popularity, recognition, vocational "success" as defined by the prevailing culture, and the assessment of others based on external, extrabiblical criteria. One who seeks to please God above all else possesses a kingdom perspective, sublimating egocentric agendas and the need "to be someone" for a greater legacy—the building up of individuals into communities of worship and witness. This kind of leader yearns not for a place in history or a visible monument to one's accomplishments, but for the divine benediction on a stewardship fulfilled: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

Divine Agenda

The God of creation moves to graciously reconcile the fallen human race to himself. Servant-leaders are not visionaries who devise brilliant plans, then by dint of personal charisma draw others to fulfill those ambitions. Rather they are faithful stewards of the divine mandate—to fish and to feed, to evangelize and to teach, to pioneer and to pastor. Biblical leadership maintains a

laser-like concentration on God's clearly stated agenda, that is, the evangelization of the lost, the edification of the saved, and the establishment of vital churches.

The apostle Paul stands before us as the premier example of the missional leader driven by the divine agenda. A clearly defined mission "to preach the gospel," a regular reaffirmation of its core values and message, and the ability to contextualize the message to different audiences preserves Paul from three respective common pitfalls: (1) Mission ambiguity: failure to clarify from the outset one's purpose for existence; (2) Mission drift: subtle and gradual erosion of the sharp edges of the defining purpose; (3) Mission confusion: failure to adapt one's methodology and orient one's message to fit changing circumstances because the mission and its method for accomplishment are not clearly distinguished.

In conclusion, the biblical record applauds the successes of its greatest leaders without magnifying them, and censures their failures without excoriating them. Divine grace is always at work, and the human instruments, both in biblical history and in today's world, are but servants whose vocation is to magnify a majestic Lord. Those leaders' character, motive, and agenda qualify them as faithful servants of the greatest Servant leader the world has ever known.

Am I a Servant Leader?

A Self Assessment

1. Do I take the initiative and actively seek opportunities to impact others for the sake of the kingdom of God?
2. Does my character evidence in increasing measure the virtues of godliness so that I impact others toward a life of holiness?
3. Has there been a posture of faith in God's sufficiency when facing hardship and adversity so that my character exhibits a refined solidarity and resiliency?
4. In the innermost core of my being do I sense a passion for God's glory and the welfare of others? Or do I detect self-aggrandizing motives that have not yet been honestly faced and staked to the cross? Am I conscious of exercising leadership of others before the Audience of one or the audience of many?
5. Do my activities point toward a singular focus on God's mandate—the discipling of the nations—or are other competing agendas displacing a kingdom perspective with an organizational or programmatic one?

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