



Jesus as Humble Servant

Kamerin S. Lauren and Joshua D. Henson

Whether we consider monarchies or corporate giants, there exists a legacy. Some legacies are powerful such as that of Nelson Mandela, former president of South Africa, who left a legacy of one that served and sacrificed for his people. On the opposite end of the spectrum, Adolph Hitler, chancellor of Germany, left a legacy of torturing and murdering upwards of 5.5 million Jewish people. As leaders we must recognize the value of legacy and operate in such a way as to create a legacy of service to those who follow our vision. Van Dierendonck (2011) offered six fundamental features of servant leadership including empowerment and development of others, humility, authenticity, acceptance of each unique individual, instituting of direction, and stewardship.

K. S. Lauren
Oklahoma Wesleyan University, Bartlesville, OK, USA

J. D. Henson (✉)
Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, USA
e-mail: joshhen@regent.edu

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Servant leadership provides an important theological, social, and cultural model regarding ethical norms and principles in human interactions. This same theory may be applied across a multitude of organizations. The ability to serve others regardless of race or ethnicity has its roots in Scripture, but humanity has the roadmap through servant leadership to apply these values. According to Greenleaf (1977/2002) “The servant-leader is servant first...It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve” (p. 27). Furthermore, Greenleaf stated, “the servant always accepts and empathizes, never rejects” (p. 33). Finally, Hale and Fields (2007) defined servant leadership as “an understanding and practice of leadership that places the good of those led over the self-interest of the leader, emphasizing leader behaviors that focus on follower development, and de-emphasizing glorification of the leader” (p. 397).

Servant leaders create a shared bond and loyalty between leader and follower. This is done by setting an example. Bonds are created through the moral and ethical leadership behavior modeled by leaders. This bond is key as servant leaders often raise up future servant leaders by example and acting as servant mentors. An effective way to consider this dynamic is that the follower is a disciple and the leader is the apostle, the messenger; teaching and empowering. John 13:8: “Peter said to him, ‘You shall never wash my feet.’ Jesus answered him, ‘If I do not wash you, you have no share with me’ (ESV). Jesus models the way. Unless He served us and modeled the way for His followers, they truly cannot be a part of what He was doing. This philosophy applies across organizations. Lack of commitment and the passing down of values will fail to bond leaders and followers. Followers of servant leaders are invested in their organizations, and in their assigned roles, organizations and leaders create a positive culture with the power to create legacies.

One of the key distinctive features of servant leadership is its holy principal and heart. Horsman (2001) discovered a meaningful connection between private extents of spirit and servant leadership. Additionally, servant-led associations had advanced concentrations of workplace spirituality (Herman, 2008). This is due to the covenantal and morally grounded connections that servant leaders encourage (Sendjaya et al., 2008). Baba (2008) highlighted the core of holiness by stating, “true spiritual practice lies in joining hands and working for the progress of society as a whole” (p. 17).

This chapter will provide an exegetical analysis of John 13:7–17, Jesus washing the feet of His disciples. This act represents servant leadership,

servant mentorship and the equality between servant and master under Jesus' model. John 13:16 says: "Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him" (ESV). John 13:7–17 brings to light Jesus' servant nature. This socio-rhetorical evaluation brings forth such attributes aligned to servant leadership as: humility, authenticity, inclusiveness, and mentorship. Jesus taught His disciples the true meaning of serving others. Jesus knew His life was coming to an end and His washing of the feet, His role as servant, was the message He wanted to leave them with.

The servant leadership of Jesus, for the purpose of this chapter, should be considered through the lens of doularchy (leadership by servants), which was presented by Korean theologian Kim Yong Bock (1987) in addition to Greenleaf's (1977/2002) concept of servant leadership. Christians, according to Adiprasetya (2018), are able to straightforwardly comprehend doularchy as a rationalization to what Jesus communicated, in divergence to kyriarchy (leadership by masters). Both applications, doularchy and traditional servant leadership theory, hold value.

Servant leadership is countercultural. According to deSilva (2004), "Jesus explicitly contrasts the world's way of evaluating greatness, which has dominated the disciples' vision of Jesus and their own calling, and the way God measures greatness" (p. 206). Where the world defines leadership as power, for God, greatness is found in giving of one's self for others (deSilva, 2004; Gotsis & Grimani, 2016). Jesus is clear on this point: those that wish to lead must be servants even as the "Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mt. 20:26-28, ESV).

It is important as we engage Matthew 10:26–8, to consider that when Jesus expressed His call to forfeit His life as a ransom for many, it meant all people—Jews, Gentiles—all people. Jesus understood, served, and loved across boundaries; Jesus embraced diversity. This all-encompassing servant theology unsettled Jewish leaders; however, it should not have as this servant-Messiah was foretold in Isaiah 42:1–9. Isaiah prophesied that a Savior that will bring justice to the nations and the coastlands; that no one is left out.

There are significant considerations regarding the Gospel of John. For example, John reports far more of Jesus' ministries in the south, in Judea and Samaria, than in Galilee. In addition, the Synoptics do not mention Jesus' turning water into wine or the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Furthermore, John does not utilize parables, discuss the temptations of

Jesus, or His casting out of demons. The Gospel of John, also referred to as the Fourth Gospel, sought to drive home the divine nature of Jesus. John identified his theme with more clarity than the additional Gospel authors (Carson, 1991). John wrote so that his audience might recognize and embrace Jesus as the Son of God, in order to find their spiritual existence and identity in His name (John 20:31). To realize this goal, John offered a captivating and characteristic image of Jesus, one in comprehensive accord with the portrayals in the other three gospels, but one that also meaningfully enhances the Bible's exposure of Jesus Christ as God in the form of man. John 13:7–17 provides approachable themes as it pertains to servant leadership in a variance of spectrums.

SOCIO-RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN 13

The book of John is written in such a way as to keep the focus on the words and actions of Jesus. According to Harrison (1945), “everything in this opening word (John. 1:6-8) is so stated that attention will not be fixed upon John, but move readily to the Greater One that came after him” (p. 75). Harrison further indicated that “Jesus had a beginning (εγένετο); that One was (ἦν) in the beginning. John was sent forth from (alongside) God, but the Son was with Him, in His bosom. John came for witness; Jesus Christ, the world's true Light,” Jesus was the subject of that observer (p. 75).

John 13:7–17 provides rich insights into the servant leadership model offered by Jesus. The Johannine writing is said to have culminated into its final structure between AD 90–110 (Lincoln, 2005). We must note that John's Gospel, which was composed at a time when conflicting assertions for religious leadership existed. There existed worldly and human ideas of leadership. Jesus on the other hand was a distinctive and archetypal leader, who, by performing the deed of foot washing, exhibited that genuine leadership influence resides in lasting love for people, in humbleness and service (Kanagaraj, 2004).

The Gospel of John is written in Greek and two titles held by Jesus, *Lord* and *Teacher* convey the utmost amount of Jesus' love for and leadership over His disciples and His openhandedness to humble Himself as a servant. Jesus' status and provision highlight a leader with the purpose of inspiring the lives of His disciples and followers through the approach of serving them (Kanagaraj, 2004). In His proving to be a servant-leader, Jesus' enactment of servant leadership “puts an obligation on those

who received His service of love and humility to express the same love, simplicity, and service to the world (13:14-15)” (Kanagaraj, 2004, p. 19).

In reviewing the John 13:7–17 pericope, we should consider the events that preface Jesus’ washing of His disciples’ feet. In John 12, Jesus discusses His impending death and fulfillment of the Scriptures. Jesus goes on in John 12:26 to say, “If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there will my servant be also. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him” (ESV). As John 13 commences, prior to the commencement of the Passover meal, “Jesus knowing that his hour had come, that he should move from this world to the Father, loving His own in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13; Green, 1984, p. 294). In structuring this narrative, the writer depicted a feast as the space through which Jesus’ central conversation with His disciples occurs, consequently highlighting the social undercurrents among Jesus and His disciples (John 13–16–17), grounded upon the social expectancies related to meals (Van der Watt, 2017). Furthermore, as social occurrences, meals created accounts regarding the associations, distinctiveness, intimacy, and honor of the attendees (Smith, 2002).

John 13 indicates that the foot-washing event occurs after the feast (John 13:4). This divergence from the standard custom of washing feet prior to the commencement of a meal may rather signify exceptional or representational meaning beyond the expected practice (Kobel, 2011). Performing the deed at an unanticipated occasion may aid in underscoring the deed itself. The account in Chapter 13 commences with a short foreword, “structured as a ring composition that focuses on the concept of time (ἡ ὥρα), as well as the return of Jesus to his Father” (Van der Watt, 2017, p. 27). According to the Van der Watt, the breakdown is as follows, “(A—v. 1) ὅτι ἤλθεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ὥρα ἵνα μεταβῆ ἐκ τοῦ κόσμου τούτου πρὸς τὸν πατέρα⁷. (A1—v. 3) καὶ ὅτι ἀπὸ θεοῦ ἐξῆλθεν καὶ πρὸς τὸν θεὸν ὑπάγει⁸” (p. 27). Two key themes are unearthed through the utilization of this ring structure within the meal narrative. The initial and overarching theme is love, “*second* is the reference to the devil, which has already entered the heart of Judas so that he would betray Jesus” (p. 28). Two counterparts, “namely love on the one hand and betrayal on the other, come into focus, highlighting the two attitudes towards Jesus that qualify behavior as being of God or of the devil” (pp. 27–28).

deSilva (2004) indicated that learners of the Fourth Gospel “are called most dramatically to be servants one to another, specifically following Jesus’ example in John 13:2-17. In this scene Jesus takes on the role

of a domestic slave, bending down to wash and dry the disciples' feet" (p. 433). The first major scene of John 13 depicts Jesus cleaning the feet of His disciples (13:3–17). Due to the dialogue between Peter and Jesus (13:6–10), the impression of the act emerges to be that of the "disciples gaining and retaining a spiritual connection with Jesus (13:8–'share [μεροῦς] with me')" (Brouwer, 1999, p. 110).

According to Rainbow (2014), during dinner Jesus took off His vestments, swathed Himself in a towel, and began to *wash* (νίπτειν) the disciples' feet (John 13:5–8, 12, 14). Since they were already bathed and clean (John 13:10), it made Peter's request unnecessary (Rainbow, 2014). Furthermore, the disciples "had been made clean" by receiving the word, the Gospel of Jesus (John 15:3). According to 1 John 1:7, Jesus' blood cleanses from sin all those who walk in the light. The ideas of servanthood, leading by example, and putting others first are all prevalent in servant leadership.

The currency of Heaven is service and servanthood is pleasing to God. Jesus humbled Himself to the point of death to set an example. One of Jesus' last acts was to wash the feet of His disciples; a final way of modeling the behavior that the disciples should follow after His death and resurrection. According to Bennema (2014), the foot washing narrative in John 13 is comprised of a two-fold meaning: "in 13:1–11 Jesus speaks of the disciples' spiritual cleansing that he will complete for them on the cross, whereas in 13:12–17(20) Jesus explains the foot washing in terms of humble, loving service that needs ongoing repetition" (pp. 263–264).

John's rich narrative of Jesus' activities "builds up to the mimetic imperative that follows in 13:14–15, which suggests that one can only imitate what is observed first. In other words, showing is the *basis* for mimesis" (Bennema, 2014, p. 265). This is not a new concept. According to the Bennema, Jesus mirrors the practices of His Father: just as the Father revealed to Jesus what to do (John 5:19–20), so Jesus lives out His life, displaying to the disciples what they are called to do. The whole point of the referenced mimesis is for followers to mirror the actions of their leader, living a life of servanthood, sacrifice, and love.

Principle One: Christ-like leaders are to lead and love as Christ did, taking on the role of a servant.

A SERVANT IS HUMBLE

The nature of a servant is that of humility; regardless of one's organizational role or societal standing. Jesus, as both King and Savior of the world, lived as a servant. John 13:16–17 (ESV) says: “Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them”. It is important to note that Jesus made this statement after washing the feet of His disciples. He said this after setting the example of humble service to be echoed after His crucifixion. Jesus lived an intentional life and His instructions carry with them both the import and perspective of eternity.

Consider the act of foot washing, the physical posture of bowing, lowering one's self to your followers, paints a pure picture of a humble stature. The implication of the foot washing in John 13 resides in recognizing the necessity for humble and devoted service to one another (Bennema, 2014). How, then does this posture apply to leaders today? Humans often deal with issues of pride and, obtaining positions of power, often highlight these issues. What is the answer? The furtive correlation between servanthood and leadership is also highlighted by the Johannine portrayal of Jesus by conjoining His act of foot washing the two respected titles, the Lord and the Teacher (13:13–14). Jesus rendered this humble service as an eminent leader in Jewish society, as His followers themselves acknowledged (Bennema, 2014; Kanagaraj, 2004, p. 19; Van der Watt, 2017). The designation of Lord identifies Jesus as a leader who carries a distinctive influence over their lives, since He alone is praiseworthy of all righteousness and adoration owed to God only (John 5:23; 12:20–26). According to Kanagaraj (2004), the book of John depicts “Jesus as the Lord in the sense that He is the revelation of the Lord God, the object of human worship and faith, and the one who has overcome ‘the prince of this world’ (12:31–32; 20:28)” (p. 19). Bauckham (2007) contends that Jesus' washing of His disciples' feet is an act that not one person but a servant might, under any circumstances, be expected to execute for another. If someone other than a slave did it, exceptionally, it was as an expression of the deepest love, the love that makes one willing to be a slave to the beloved, to perform the most humiliating of acts of service.

It is our human pride that creates barriers to servant leadership. Essentially, leadership crises are created through the mindsets through which leaders purpose and employ their influence. In the time of Jesus, there too

existed a leadership crisis with those in power confiscating liberty from the Gentiles, subjugating their innovation, and lording their supremacy over them (Van der Watt, 2017). Jesus' model of leading completely controverts human nature. While reflecting on His actions, Jesus refers to Himself as "Lord" and "teacher", not a humble servant (John 13:13). This denotes that Jesus as the leader "washed the feet of his disciples not to humiliate himself, but, precisely in his function as the more important person, to illustrate the extent of intense (εἰς τέλος) love" (Van der Watt, 2017, p. 32). This love depicts servant leadership as others-focused.

Principle Two: Love for our followers creates a space to set aside pride and ego for the benefit and growth of others.

SERVANTS LEADERS SET THE EXAMPLE

In John's telling of Jesus' act of washing His disciples' feet, it is clear that Jesus was setting the example (John 13:15). We recognize through the act of foot washing that Jesus placed human needs first and strived to bring out the best in His disciples. He also addressed their mindsets and interpersonal connections through the same deed of love and humility. The modeling of foot washing, according to Kanagaraj (2004), indicates that "the Johannine Jesus is portrayed as a group-centered leader, the one who showed a genuine interest in the development of the group and in the achievement of its goal" (p. 18). Servant leaders take accountability for the organization in relations with assorted stakeholders, "modeling ethical behavior so that others might emulate them, and in turn, serve others, accepting other people for who they are, and seeking ways to fulfill and empower others" (Kiker et al., 2019, p. 194). Leaders that set the example earn authority with followers and likely have the ability to have more influence due their personal commitment and engagement by practicing what they preach. Kouzes and Posner (2012) suggested *modeling the way* included "clarifying values and setting the example by aligning actions with shared values" (p. 10).

One cannot stress enough the value of leading by example. Servant leaders inherently recognize the import and value-added by living out their guidance. Words carry no value if actions are contradictory. When leaders generously offer support and authority, followers observe in order to see the ways that the leader practices it. Is the support and power utilized in a self-interested fashion? Leaders that expend authority for the follower's advantage will naturally garner trust. On the opposing

side, when a leader selfishly utilizes authority, the support of followers recedes. A servant leader is a leader who lays aside personal ego and “subordinates herself or himself by trusting people and letting them act” (Nobles, 2019, p. 3). Finally, there can be no dual standards or special privileges, which can become like a cancer to an organization’s culture (Davids et al., 2019).

Principle Three: Leading by example builds trust and organizational culture.

SERVANT LEADERS RAISE UP OTHER SERVANT LEADERS

As servant leaders are others-focused, it makes sense that one outcome is the development of other servant leaders. Servant-leaders highlight the knowledge and enlargement of others more than economic results (Frick, 2004). Humans often echo familiar behaviors, and followers are no different. Through the foot washing of His followers, Jesus taught Peter that to be a servant of others is a consistent outcome of being Jesus’ friend. This depiction of servanthood by Jesus realigns Peter’s single-mindedness to forfeit His existence for Jesus to His call to serve followers of Christ: from being a companion who “martyrs his life to a pastor who faithfully cares for others. Jesus teaches Peter not only to have courage to die for Jesus, but rather to have courage to live meaningfully for others” (Adiprasetya, 2018, p. 51). According to Sengupta and Sengupta (2018), “A particular strength of servant leadership is that it encourages everyone to actively seek opportunities to both serve and lead others, thereby setting up the potential for raising the quality of life throughout society” (p. 7).

Servant leaders not only lead by example but also mentor their followers; creating a model that develops followers into future servant leaders. A key role of an organizational leader and mentor is to “pass on the culture of an organization. Culture plays a key role in an institution’s makeup” (Pearson, 2013, p. 347). Furthermore, “maturing leaders understand that they can leave a lasting impact through the intentional act of pouring their knowledge and experience into the life of another, much like the master and apprentice of old” (Pearson, 2013, p. 347).

Mentoring is the process of passing on job comprehension and proficiency (Ragins et al., 2000). The servant leader interprets the mentoring correlation as a chance to pass on his or her passion, the value entombed in the exertion, and commitment within the organization. People play a

significant role in the servant-leader's attitude to living. In concert, it is the mentoring aspect of servant leadership that helps lead to the maturing of each individual's uniqueness. Yet the paramount focus and satisfaction for the servant-leader is found within the actual act of serving (Batten, 1998). "Mentoring plays a key role in the servant-leader's ability to serve the next generation" (Pearson, 2013, p. 353).

In the narrative of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30–37, a man was robbed, beaten, and left for dead. Dying on the road he was passed by and avoided by a priest and a Levite—men called in service of God—and was left to die. It was not until the Samaritan came upon him that help was given and a life saved. Regarding the compassion and care provided by the Samaritan, Jesus reveals to His disciples that the mercy given by the Samaritan was the posture favored by God. Jesus states: "Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?" He said, "The one who showed him mercy." And Jesus said to him, "You go, and do likewise" (Luke 10: 36–37, ESV). All of the lessons Jesus passed down—His teachings and behavior—served as mentoring sessions for His disciples such that they would carry this servant leadership throughout the establishment of the New Testament Church.

Principle Four: As creators of organizational culture, servant leadership is passed down through the development of other servant leaders.

SERVANT LEADERS SERVE ACROSS ALL LEVELS

Jesus, the Son of God, served across caste systems elevating human need. Consider His healing, forgiving, and restorative ministry: a leper, a soldier's servant, and an adulteress all transformed by Jesus (Matt. 8:1–4; Luke 7:1–7; John 8:1–11). Purpose trumped posture. This theme is of particular import due to the highly diverse global community organizations operate within. Each person carries within them intrinsic value, and servant leaders not only recognize it, but celebrate it. Servant leaders focus on key servant personality characteristics to realize all-encompassing goals. A servant leader's conviction in the intrinsic value of each person will enable subordinates to realize their true potential (empowering and developing people), properly benefiting from diverse employees' experiences (humility) (Gotsis & Grimani, 2016, p. 252). Additionally, servant leadership aids in mirroring one's genuine purposes and promises: "cognitively adopting the perspectives of diverse others, exhibiting empathy and

compassion toward disadvantaged group members (interpersonal acceptance), as well as enabling new approaches (providing direction), and stimulating others to act and behave for the common good (stewardship)” (pp. 252–253).

Principle Five: Servant leaders inherently seek to serve all people. Servant leaders embrace diversity and culture, creating an enveloping and celebratory ideology amongst the groups they are invested in.

SUMMARY

In closing, it is important to remember that Jesus provides the ultimate model of servant leadership. Efrain Agosto (2005) correctly argued, “At the heart of Gospel message... lies the cross of Jesus Christ, the ultimate symbol of service, sacrifice, commitment...” (p. 120). The most valuable take away is that servant leadership offers modern-day applications. The biblical account echoes comparable leadership issues to those that exist today. Additionally, the merits of modern “managerial literature speaks of are similar to those of the ancient world, and hence the old narrative becomes a ‘formative metaphor’ or source for a contemporary ethic” (Harris, 2002, p. 67).

Let us consider Proverbs 31:9, “Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy” (ESV). This passage is a short instruction to King Lemuel by his mother regarding his duty to serve and care for those that cannot do so for themselves. Regardless of position; King, CEO, or Son of God, servant leadership is close to the heart of God. The act of Jesus washing the feet of His disciples represents love through service, inclusiveness, and a humble example for all of us to mirror. The heart of this passage is that Jesus, as the Lord washes the feet of His disciples. Keener (1993) highlighted the point that, in contrast to Greco-Roman culture, Judaism stressed unpretentiousness; but similar to other cultures, it also maintained common roles. Jesus upsets views of social standing. During this period, the slave should wash the feet of the master. Bauckham (2007) stated that “for a superior to perform the act for an inferior would be an incomprehensible contradiction of their social relationship” (p. 193). Bauckham (2007) further indicated that “if foot washing is not beneath one’s dignity, then nothing is” (p. 195).

We must remember that God’s ways are above human ways. The prominence and glory that humans seek does not align with the calling of God. “In God’s sight greatness consists in serving others and pouring

oneself out for them, even as Jesus Himself came “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (deSilva, 2004, p. 206). Jesus’ life provides many examples of servant leadership and it is our responsibility to serve as His hands and feet. Sun (2013) categorizes four key characteristics encompassing a servant character: calling, humility, empathy, and agape love. Furthering this idea, van Dierendonck and Patterson (2015) theorize that a leader’s agape love encourages honorable positions (humility, appreciation, compassion and self-sacrifice) that ultimately inspire servant leadership behaviors.

Finally, Lumpkin and Achen (2018) stated that “Effective leaders use awareness, empathy, fairness, integrity, moral values, motivation, trust, relationship management, respect, and self-management contributing to needs satisfaction in followers’ autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (p. 6). These traits are associated with servant leadership. Characteristics of servant leaders include listening, understanding, restorative behavior, attentiveness, encouragement, conceptualization, insight, stewardship, duty to followers’ growth, and constructing community (Spears, 2004). It is the emphasis on others in the organization that supports the formation of a protected leader/follower relationship (van Dierendonck & Heeren, 2006).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In what ways does pride hinder leaders from serving their followers?
2. How can leaders model qualities such as service and sacrifice in a contemporary organizational context?
3. Why do you think Peter was opposed to Jesus washing his feet? Are there any implications for contemporary followership in this example?
4. If servant leaders develop other servant leaders, how does this happen in an organization in which leaders have many followers or with whom followers have little interaction?
5. How can contemporary organizational leaders “serve across all levels”? What does this look-like from a practical workplace perspective?

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