

Jesus the True Model of Servant Leadership (1)

A Synopsis of the opening sermon at Orientation Day, 2 February, 2017, Dumisani Theological Institute, Eastern Cape, South Africa

Dr. Jack C. Whytock

Text Mark 10: 35-45

The theme for Term One at Dumisani in 2017 will be *Servant Leadership*. This is the great goal to be kept in view in all studies here at Dumisani, to train and equip Christian leaders as servant leaders.

From the text of Mark 10:35-45 we will focus upon three aspects of servant leadership. We will consider two bad examples of wrong styled leadership and then look at the true model of leadership which is centred in Jesus Christ.

#1. Wrong Styled Leadership: THE JAMES and JOHN WAY (vs 36-40)

We begin with a story of two sons and a mother. Mark abbreviates the situation but Matthew expands the story for us. Parents can often be very ambitious for their children. You will hear many stories like this here in your classes in Church History at Dumisani. James and John had a mother who was very ambitious for her sons. She is the representative of a "pushie mama". Yes it is good to push children to mature and develop and excel but this can also turn into the wrong type of ambition for some parents—so examine your ways as a parent! Now James and John had been promised leadership positions back in Matthew 19:28 so they now go to Jesus basically asking a question which is like asking for a blank cheque to be given to them—"we want you to do whatever we ask". Quite arrogant! What does this tell us about their understanding of leadership? Briefly we can summarise it as five things are revealed here through this question and story about how John and James understand leadership:

First, they really show **IGNORANCE** of the real issues at hand. Second, they reveal a very **WORLDLY** understanding of leadership rather than a **SPIRITUAL** understanding of Christian leadership—the throne chairs are very appealing to them! The outward appearances have deceived them and they reveal a very worldly attitude and understanding about the Kingdom of God. Third, they reveal themselves to be very **BOASTFUL** and **PROUD**. Their answer to Jesus in

verse 39 “*we can*”, is very boastful and arrogant. It has all the marks of human merit being exalted and a real over-confidence in themselves. Fifth, and closely related here is a real sense of their own SELF-IMPORTANCE.

Consider carefully now the remedies needed for this story and apply it to your situation now as a students of theology and also if you are currently in leadership. Beware of pride which quickly demonises the theology student. A little knowledge can temp one to much self-importance—beware. Beware of misjudging your own strengths and abilities. It can take many forms, for example “others will take four courses, but I can handle 8 courses”. Beware of having wrong desires and ambitions. Ambition cuts two ways, not just one way! 1 Timothy 3:1 speaks of a godly ambition which is a passionate calling in the soul not an ambition which is about position, status, robes, and power. Beware of exalting yourself over others. God honours leaders positionally, so do not be a seeker but rest upon the Lord to position you. The fruit often of such position seeking will be seen in jealousy and envy gripping many leaders around you. The fruit in this story was anger by other disciples.

#2. Wrong Styled leadership: THE GENTILE WAY (vs.42)

Now we turn to the second bad example of wrong styled leadership. I call this one *The Gentile Way of Leadership*. Jesus describes the Gentile way of leadership in verse 42. It can be summarised in a two-fold manner: it is seeking “top-dog” status and it is “lordie”. Let me unpack these two ideas.

The first way of Gentile leadership is *aggressive seeking* to be the big one or the one in charge. Underneath this is a very self-serving desire. It is about one’s own gain in the end which counts, and in some way your status or your life will be improved or enhanced through finally climbing up to this leadership position. It is manifested in wanting to be the one at the top, hence my descriptor “seeking top-dog status”. History and contemporary life –including churches -- are littered with numerous examples of this. One can usually see it quickly, but sometimes it can take time to actually be manifested.

The second way of Gentile leadership is the “lordie” way. This is where leaders are oppressive and disrespectful towards others. The basic idea is “lording” it over others. The apostle Peter grew to understand the Gentile way of leadership and spoke out against it in Christian leaders. In I Peter 5:3 he writes, “not lording it over those entrusted to you...”—that is the negative example which we will call from Jesus words in Mark the Gentile way of leading. Then Peter asserts another way of leading in direct contrast to this, which is verse 2b, *servant oriented* and in verse 3b, *exemplary*. Gentile styled leadership is

neither servant oriented or exemplary but rather does not understand self-sacrifice and denial or the goal of imitation by others to bring about a true growing and maturing people of God. The Gentile way fails to recognise in fellow Christian leaders and workers, that there are gifts in others and that the Holy Spirit is present in their lives also gifting and blessing. Hence the descriptor that it is fundamentally oppressive and not liberating and fundamentally disrespectful and “lordie”. Leaders must lead, never forget this BUT the manner of the leading is the point here.

The remedy is to replace such manifestations of aggressive seeking and “lordieness” with a new servant attitude which is not centred upon seeking top-dog status and oppressing others but cultivating a new vision that actually is inverse—up is actually down, The Kingdom of God operates on a different way than the Gentile way of leading. (I will not include the illustrations here in this print synopsis).

But there is a better way now to consider than the Gentile way of leading!

#3. The True Style of Leadership: THE WAY OF JESUS (vss. 45, 43-44)

That better way is to look to Jesus as the model servant leader. Here in Mark 10:45 is the great fulfilment of the prophesy of the coming of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53. Jesus has come to serve His people.

I want you to be very clear as to a basic definition of serving and of servanthood. It can be stated very simply—*to be a servant is to be useful to others*. Memorise that basic definition and ponder it continually in leadership. Ask yourself, was Jesus useful to others? YES, YES, YES and in so many ways! But the most important of all was that he came to be a ransom price for the sins of His people. We are talking here about Jesus’ death at the cross which was truly useful for sinners. He laid down His life at the cross as a voluntary substitute and made payment for the sins of His people. To redeem is to buy and, so is ransom, it is to pay a price for the purposes of setting free. My, what a benefit of Jesus the suffering servant for you! This was once for all BUT the manner and spirit of this now must characterise His followers, and Christian leaders are not exempt from displaying such manifestations of the servant role of being useful to others. Here is the remedy to the James and John way of leadership, here is a remedy to the Gentile way of leadership, here in Jesus is the real way of leading, that of the servant leader.

So now begin to apply this to your life. Why are you here being trained? You might say it is personal but it should also be to be trained to become more useful to others. It will be manifested in self-denial and self-giving service to others—the way of Jesus. It is not just about being trained to find a stable position in leadership it is fundamentally about sacrifice and labour—*useful to others.—the Jesus way*. Christian leadership must not become characterised in your life by worldly ambition and honour and titles. It is about giving and about attending to others. (Again for this synopsis I will not include my illustrations here on this).

I want to close with a famous quotation from the great North African theologian, Augustine:

“A bishop’s office is a name of labour rather than of honour; so that he who covets pre-eminence and status rather than *usefulness* must understand that he is not a bishop in reality.”

So ask yourself:

Which will it be?

- ***The wrong styled leadership of the James and John way? – ambitious and self-exalting.***
- ***The wrong styled leadership of the Gentile way? --seeking the top-dog positions and the oppressive way.***
- ***Or will it by God’s grace, be becoming leaders in the true way—the way of Jesus?—truly useful to others.***

May God bless you as we begin this adventure together here at Dumisani in 2017.