

Teaching as a Path to Servant Leadership, Part One

The writings of Robert Greenleaf, who coined the phrase “servant-leader,” have held my attention and molded my leadership philosophy during the last four years. And there seems to be no end in sight as I am now re-reading many of the servant leader essays and books that first piqued my interest in 1998. Of course, I then take these insights to the word of God and receive even more understanding about what it means to be a servant leader.

At the same time, during the last four years I have found myself in many teaching settings, and I see myself in the role of a teacher more than ever before. This led me recently to study the concept of the teacher in the Bible. As you might expect, this study has yielded much fruit and contributed greatly to my ongoing “infatuation” with servant leadership issues. I thought I would take this opportunity to share with you what I have been learning.

Jesus was both the consummate servant and teacher. His followers and associates called him “rabbi” or “teacher.” It seems that Jesus expected all of His followers to teach at some point in time. One of His last commands on earth can be found in Matthew 28:19-20:

19 “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

The writer of Hebrews (and it is my opinion that it was the Apostle Paul) wrote:

12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! (Hebrews 5:12).

So the lessons we can learn about effective teaching need not apply only to those who officially function in that role, but to all those, whether they are teaching their children, grandchildren or employees in a business setting. In other words, the lessons we can learn about servant leadership from the role of a teacher are applicable to all of us.

For this paper, I will focus on Jesus’ address to the Pharisees in Matthew 23. You may want to take time to read this chapter in its entirety before we proceed.

It is obvious that the Pharisees and teachers of the Law dedicated themselves to instruction and teaching. They held the Law “in trust” for the nation and through dialogue and study were to instruct the common people in the interpretations of the Law. Thus they sat “in Moses’ seat.” But something was wrong with their teaching. Jesus urged the people, therefore, to do what these teachers taught them to do, but He instructed the people *not* to do what these teachers did:

1 Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: 2 "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. 3 So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach.

Jesus taught that there must be a consistency in a teacher's life between what is taught and done. These teachers of the Law obviously taught correct doctrine, but they were professionals. By that I meant that they were so familiar with their material that they made it a "head" thing and not a "heart" thing. Their teaching did not change their behavior. It was simply a body of knowledge to be taught correctly. Jesus understood that teachers impart who they are and not just knowledge. While the Jews may have been well informed about religious matters, their learning wasn't translating into changed lives that were pleasing to God.

Are you practicing what you believe? Do you "preach" honesty but lie? Do you "teach" generosity, but give very little? You lack integrity if you do, for you are not living what you are teaching? For that reason, your teaching isn't as consistent as it could be.

What did Jesus want to see these teachers doing for their students? Let's look at the next verse:

4 They tie up heavy loads and put them on men's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

An effective teacher doesn't just load people up with information about God, they lead people to be like God and to do His will. Teachers are to come alongside and help people apply the precepts they are teaching. This means that teachers should know what burdens people are carrying and then use that information to help people do what is being taught. In other words, teaching is supposed to be practical and relevant. For this to happen, teachers must be close to their students and know what each one is encountering. A servant teacher is involved and identifies with the students.

Then Jesus identified another key issue that renders teachers ineffective: authoritarianism.

5 "Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them 'Rabbi.'"

The teachers of the Law did what they did to gain public honor and recognition. They had set up a class system among Jews, with them at the top of the class! The word "rabbi" translates as "master" or "teacher." A teacher has a certain amount of power over the student. There is the power of superior knowledge and experience, and there is the honor that comes between the elder and younger. Jesus was making a point that teachers were to work to eradicate these barriers between student and teacher. Instead, these particular teaches worked to have a social system that exalted teachers at the expense of

students. This tendency toward superiority, while inflating the teacher's ego, deflated the students and worked against the spiritual impartation of knowledge. To address this class distinction that had been created, Jesus laid down some guidelines:

8 "But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. 9 And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. 10 Nor are you to be called 'teacher,' for you have one Teacher, the Christ.

Teachers need to see that they aren't above those being taught. In fact, they are to identify with them as "brothers." I don't believe that this admonition from Jesus prevents anyone from calling someone "teacher." But I do think that this prevents any teacher from insisting that students refer to them with a title for the sake of the title. Teachers must actively work to eliminate the power structure that could exist in favor of a team approach to teaching that includes dialogue, questions and answers and honest disagreement.

When I was pastoring, many people asked me what they should call me. I always responded, "You can call me 'John.'" Some people did call me "pastor" or "doctor." I did not object, but I did not insist that they call me anything. I was not interested in setting myself apart from the people since I was one of them. I often said when I was pastoring that I was a member of the church who happened to be employed by the church. Any role I had was an appointment from God and did not distinguish me from my brothers and sisters in any way except function. If someone chose to honor me, that was their choice and not my request.

Now when I teach at the college level, I still don't insist on any title. I give out all my email addresses and phone numbers. I want to be accessible and I want to come along my students to help them learn, whatever that means. I serve them by sending them their assignments when they are absent, returning class work and tests in a timely manner, and giving exams that help students learn. I tell my students that they all start out with an "A" and must actually work hard to lose their "A."

Jesus continued with the most significant statement for the subject of this paper:

11 The greatest among you will be your servant. 12 For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

I am not saying that teaching is not a position that carries honor and authority. I am saying that teachers need to work to minimize this aspect of their leadership. Teachers need to be authorities in the subject matter they are teaching. But teachers need to assume the role of servants if they are going to effectively impart their expertise. This doesn't mean simply being polite and efficient when teaching. This means actively serving students and working to minimize the barrier that naturally exists.

A truly great teacher is not only someone who masters the material or who conceives creative teaching techniques. A truly great teacher is one who serves, not one who has the biggest office or tenure. A teacher comes alongside to help the student. The teacher can and must make a conscious choice to be humble. The teachers of the Jews had obviously missed this aspect of teaching.

When I was teaching every week at a jail in Orlando, Florida, I had an experience that brought this home to me. Without realizing it, I had an attitude of superiority to those I was teaching. I was teaching once a week in this jail while I was pastoring and working on my doctorate. Then one day, an inmate misbehaved badly and I asked him to leave, as was my right.

A few minutes later, the chaplain appeared with the expelled inmate and put him back in the class. When I protested, the chaplain responded in front of everyone, “If you don’t like it, Pastor Stanko, *you* can leave!” Needless to say, I was angry.

When I was still angry three days later, I asked the Lord to show me why I was so upset. This question came to my mind: “Are you smarter than that inmate?” Without hesitation, I said, “Yes!” And I saw that this was the problem. I wasn’t going to school to be smarter than anyone, even an inmate. I was going to school to be more Christ-like. I realized that morning that I wasn’t going to the jail to serve, I was going to show off my “knowledge.” That was the wrong motivation. I had chosen to exalt myself and God had chosen to humble me. From that point on, I learned to humble myself so God wouldn’t have to do the job.

Now let’s move into the portion of Matthew 23 that contains the seven woes Jesus outlined for these teachers. Servant leaders and teachers can learn from these seven woes

13 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces. 14 You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

A teacher is not to discourage the student or make the subject matter seem out of reach. A spiritual teacher is also expected to help a student grapple with and respond to the kingdom or government of God in that student’s life. I think many teachers set up boundaries between them and their students because they are scared. They are scared because they may not have all the answers. That being the case, they try to reduce teaching and the material to a set of rules and formulas.

Again drawing on my prison experience, I came to realize one day that neither I wasn’t the focus of the class nor was the subject matter. The focus of any class was the student and his or her needs to learn and truly comprehend the material. As I was signing in to the jail one day, I had my prepared lesson under my arm. I had this overwhelming sense that I wasn’t supposed to present that material. I couldn’t get away from this sense, even when I finally stood up to teach. Not knowing what to do, I said, “I am not going to teach today. Let’s talk about what is on your mind. Who has a question?”

What followed is that awkward period of silence when you don’t know if anyone is going to ever ask anything. Then finally one inmate asked a good question, which was followed by another and then another. Before I knew it, the class time was over. What’s was amazing to me was that we had covered all the material that was on my outline for that day, but the material had emerged out of the students’ hearts and not my own mind. I felt like I was helping those inmates to enter the kingdom of God. I wasn’t expecting them to listen to me every week, but I was now listening to and helping them.

Since then, I have worked to engage my students in the learning process more diligently. I have sought to help them “enter the kingdom of God” and to share with them my own struggles, including the good, the bad and the ugly. I have tried to honor

the students' questions and problems, and help them work through the issues that were pertinent to the class subject matter. For this reason, I seldom have an outline before me when I preach and I am open to adjusting my lesson plans in class if I sense the students have issues that need to be discussed.

Let me share one more example. After teaching a mission's class at a local college, I didn't feel the class was over until I took the students on a trip. So I took half the class with me on a trip to South Africa. That was a great teaching and learning experience that changed all our lives forever. I didn't burden them with guilt or just head knowledge about missions; I helped them do it by going with them!

15 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are."

Bad teaching leads to bad learning and good teaching produces good learning. This is what verse 15 is saying. The teachers of the law actually traveled to find converts to Judaism and legalism. When they found a candidate, they trained him to be even more legalistic and rigid than they were. A good teacher frees the student to be who he or she is created to be. An ineffective teacher makes the student a prisoner of trying to be like someone else.

I teach a great deal on purpose. In my travels, I have seen firsthand the magnificent creativity that God has placed in each person. I try to unlock that purpose when I teach. That takes time and getting to know each student whenever possible and where the student permits it. Even in a large class or seminar, I try to connect with where the students are and try not to impose my formalized material, assuming that "one size fits all."

When the teacher tries to make everyone to be the same, it is clear that the student is not the focus of the teacher. The teacher and the teacher's agenda is the focus. A servant leader is always making the other person the focus. As Robert Greenleaf stated in his essay, *The Servant as Leader*:

The servant-leader *is* servant first—as Leo was portrayed. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. He is sharply different from the person who is *leader* first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve – after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature.

The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer, is: do those served grow as persons; do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants? *And*, what is the effect on the least privileged in society; will he benefit, or at least, will he not be further deprived?

The question that every teacher must answer is: Are your students growing as individuals? If they aren't, they are becoming worse than the teacher: disillusioned, cynical or discouraged. And Greenleaf also raises a question as to what a teacher's motivation is: Does it start with a desire to serve or to teach? If the motivation is to teach, then the focus is on the teacher. If the motivation is to serve, then the focus is on the student where it should be.

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