

Teaching as a Path to Servant Leadership, Part Two

Let's continue with the study of teaching as a path to servant leadership that we began in part one. Since I have been studying my own role as a teacher and how that relates to my goal of being a servant leader, I thought I would share what I have found with you, even though the findings are in rough form. I trust you will add your own insights to this study and make it relevant to your life and world.

We were studying Jesus' address to the teachers of the law and Pharisees as found in Matthew 23:

16 "Woe to you, blind guides! You say, 'If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gold of the temple, he is bound by his oath.' 17 You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? 18 You also say, 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but if anyone swears by the gift on it, he is bound by his oath.' 19 You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred? 20 Therefore, he who swears by the altar swears by it and by everything on it. 21 And he who swears by the temple swears by it and by the one who dwells in it. 22 And he who swears by heaven swears by God's throne and by the one who sits on it.

Teachers are to be guides, not bullies. Guides know where they are going, but must go at a pace that is right for those following. The teachers of the law knew their material, but they weren't servants. They had become irrelevant in their teaching role, making their material so much the focus that they began to major in minor issues. They also had their priorities wrong, something that happens when teachers get too far removed from those they are teaching.

What's more, these teachers about God were actually resisting God! The very goal of their teaching had become so confused that the teachers of God were anti-God!

Jesus gave a practical example of what they were doing wrong. They were authoritatively teaching something that people were receiving as truth. The only problem was that it wasn't the truth! It was a misapplication of the truth.

You see, teachers must be servants, not only of the students, but also of the truth they teach. Teachers must see themselves as fellow students, who have a stewardship and duty to serve the subject matter. As a teacher, I cannot help but inject my personality and style into how I teach, but I must not let that affect the body of truth and information that I am committed to teach.

When I stop serving the truth and make the truth serve me (to make me look good, smart, or superior to others), I open myself to pervert the very truth I am trying to impart. While a teacher should have a superior knowledge of the subject being taught, the teacher must teach students how to apply truth to difficult issues of life and work. The teacher must also teach students to apply truth to new situations that have not yet surfaced or been defined.

The teachers of the law failed because they stopped being servants of truth. They felt they owned the truth. They also ceased being servants of God and were actually requiring that God serve them! Whenever that happens, teachers, who are all too human,

will allow their own interpretations and prejudices to be presented as factual. That destroys the teaching and learning process.

23 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-- mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law-- justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Teaching is not just impartation of knowledge and recitation of facts. It is also teaching students what to do with that knowledge, how to apply it to life and its problems. Teachers who don't see themselves as servants also don't distinguish the priorities of what they teach, because they avoid issues that aren't clear-cut. Issues of life, like justice, mercy and faithfulness, require dialogue and examination. They defy easy answers; they require wisdom. Wisdom is experience that teaches how principles can be applied to complex, human situations.

When I teach, I am a guide. And sometimes there is more than one path that will lead to the destination. I try to work with my students to help apply the truth to the decision of what path should be chosen. But that takes time and creates a certain amount of uncertainty in the teaching process. I must teach the student some specific facts (give a tenth of your spices), but also empower the student to apply principles (justice, mercy and faithfulness) to the unknown issues that lie ahead of them.

That is often threatening to my insecurities because I am never sure what question will be asked. The student may also go where I don't have any answers, and I must then be vulnerable to that student and the class. I must sometimes admit I don't know and I must sometimes prevent the student from saying that they know. Learning isn't always clean; it is a humbling experience. That means that teaching will be the same.

25 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. 26 Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Teaching and servant leadership are an internal process, not an external one. As I mentioned above, servant teachers are vulnerable to their students. They don't know it all, nor do they communicate that they have arrived in their life journey. They must impart to their students that learning is a journey and a process. This means that teachers must have more than knowledge to impart to their students. They must have gone through some of the inner journeys and "dark nights of the soul" that give an added dimension to their teaching.

I have found that many teachers and leaders are insecure. They cover their insecurity with many techniques: aloofness, authoritarianism, condescension and a rigid style that precludes dialogue and personal interaction with the exception of a privileged few. Yet Jesus, the Master teacher and rabbi, wasn't like that at all. He was accessible, open to questions, and secure. He drew on stories and parables to impart His lessons.

Most importantly, He was what He taught. His pure inner life translated into an authority in His teaching that was recognized by His students.

Jesus had authority because of who He was, not what He knew. He could teach with authority on humility because He had humbled Himself. Jesus taught effectively on love, justice and mercy, because He had processed those issues internally and could teach them externally.

27 Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men's bones and everything unclean. 28 In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

The Greek word for hypocrite is “hupocritos.” It refers to the mask that was worn by actors on stage. Jesus repeatedly accused the teachers of the law of wearing masks and pretending to be something they were not. Since they were teachers of morality and theology, Jesus expected them to *be* what they were teaching. Unfortunately they were not, and did not appear to be open to change.

James wrote in his epistle:

1 Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. 2 We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check (James 3:1-2).

The Apostle Paul wrote:

17 Now you, if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God; 18 if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law; 19 if you are convinced that you are a guide for the blind, a light for those who are in the dark, 20 an instructor of the foolish, a teacher of infants, because you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth—21 you, then, who teach others, do you not teach yourself? You who preach against stealing, do you steal? 22 You who say that people should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? 23 You who brag about the law, do you dishonor God by breaking the law? 24 As it is written: "God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you" (Romans 2:17-24).

A servant teacher allows God to work on the inside and then becomes a guide for others who must go through the same process. Someone who has been through that process can be a gentle yet firm guide, drawing on their experience to help others in this learning process. But this kind of teaching is messy, because it involves being personally involved at a level that makes the teacher vulnerable.

Recently I taught a class on how to start a nonprofit ministry. I had each student share their dreams for their organization and then tried to come alongside to help them

get started. I recently visited a board of directors meeting for an organization started by one of the students. I did this free of charge because I am a servant teacher. I know what it's like to have faith and start an organization and I want to support this student in any way I can. I cannot just teach a class; I must teach my students and that means I must be a servant. Service is in many cases inconvenient but it is a necessary step in the learning relationship between teacher and student.

29 "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. 30 And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our forefathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' 31 So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. 32 Fill up, then, the measure of the sin of your forefathers! 33 "You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell? 34 Therefore I am sending you prophets and wise men and teachers. Some of them you will kill and crucify; others you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town. 35 And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar. 36 I tell you the truth, all this will come upon this generation.

Finally, a servant teacher knows history, its proper perspective and the role of the teacher in it. For instance, I teach many African Americans. I read African American history on a regular basis and try to relate to the history and roots of my students. But that's not all I can do if I am going to be an effective teacher for persons of color.

I have had to face my own role in oppression and racism that African Americans have endured. While I wasn't actively involved in the oppression, I was a member of the oppressing group. And I certainly did nothing to stop or reverse the injustice. So when I teach, I don't condemn the white majority for their past sins. I identify with those past sins and realize that I am to play a small part in the healing process. For me, that is another way I can be a servant leader.

The teachers of the law had a warped sense of history and that affected their ability to serve their generation. They perpetuated a false interpretation of the past and took a posture of moral superiority to the sins of their fathers. But they were destined to repeat the sins of the past because of their faulty perspective. This was because they refused to allow God to do the work inside them as we discussed earlier. They were teachers externally, but were not prepared internally. For that reason, God rejected them as teachers of His law and principles.

So in some sense, a servant teacher is a servant of history in that he or she must help students properly relate to and learn from history. Learning from the mistakes of history can prevent current mistakes as students learn the difficult task of applying the lessons of history to today. As a servant teacher, I must observe history as objectively as I can and recognize my own role in it all, even if it's through my ancestors.

I end this first part of the teacher servant series with a long quote from Robert Greenleaf's book *The Power of Servant Leadership*. Greenleaf addressed the issue of teaching within universities and ties that in with the role of churches in today's society. I think his insight is pertinent to what we have discussed and perfectly aligns with what Jesus taught in Matthew 23. See if you agree.

The prospect for the servant idea rests almost entirely, I believe, on some among us investing the energy and taking the risks to inspire with a vision. In our large and complex society, a single compelling prophetic voice may not, as Grundtvig did in the 19th-century Denmark move those few who will educate and inspire enough young people to rebuild the entire culture. In our times, the orchestration of many prophetic visionaries may be required. But I believe that the ultimate effect will be the same: teachers (individuals, not institutions) will be inspired to raise the society-building consciousness of the young. And teachers may be anybody who can reach young people who have the potential to be servants and prepare them to be servant leaders. These teachers may be members of school faculties, presidents of colleges and universities, those working with young people in churches. Some may be parents, others may be either professionals or volunteers working with youth groups. But whoever and wherever they are, these teachers will catch the vision and do what they know how to do. First, they will reinforce or build hope. Young people will be helped to accept the world, and to believe that they can learn to live productively in it as it is—striving, violent, unjust, as well as beautiful, caring and supportive. They will be helped to believe that they can cope, and that, if they work at it over a lifetime, they may leave a little corner of the world a bit better than they found it. Then these teachers will nourish the embryo spark of servant in as many as possible and help prepare those who are able—to lead!

Thus I do not see the prospect for the servant idea being carried by a great mass movement—not soon.

I have premised this discussion on building hope in the young and preparing some of them to serve and lead. As an oldster, I have hope that is supported by the belief that some seminaries and foundations will have (or find) trustees of the stature who will help them (seminaries and foundations) to be self-regenerating institutions. These then will become sources of prophetic visions for, and supports of organizational strength in, schools and churches which will minister to individuals and to the vast structure of operating institutions that make up our complex society. Central to this ministry will be the encouragement of teachers and servants—some of whom will become leaders who make their careers as regenerating influences within institutions of all sorts, including seminaries and foundations—thus closing the loop. But the prime movers in this process are trustees of foundations and seminaries. It is for these exceptionally able and dedicated trustees to initiate and to sustain the process. I believe that a few will. This is the basis of my hope.

Beyond my hope, I have a speculative prospect to share that some of these servant-leaders will bring together communities of seekers who find—and continue to seek, thus adding a new building force that works toward an evolving caring society.

Greenleaf continued:

My estimate of the chief institutional problem of some churches is that they have put too high a priority on *preaching* and too little priority on *being*. The churches of today will have more influence on the quality of society as a whole (which means, to some extent, the quality of the institutions that comprise it) if they think of their prime influence as *being*, through what they model as institutions. It may be that what a church *is* as an institution will have more impact on its own member than what it *says* to them. This is not to denigrate what is said, that is terribly important—just not as important as what it *is*.

As I reflect on my experiences with the radical students in the 1960s I despair when I think of the sea of words they were engulfed in. Where were the models they might have learned from? Faculties had taken advantage of the teacher shortage, in the years of expansion of higher education after World War II, to bargain down their obligations to teaching. By the time the sixties' generation came along, they realized that, too much, they were supporting faculty who used positions as pads from which to do their own things. There were other causes for the unrest, but this one helped direct the venom of disturbed students to the universities and colleges—as *institutions*. Students of that period simply did not sense a sufficient dedication of teachers to their calling. The result was disastrous in some places.

The ultimate model of servant is one whose service is rendered in one's own personal time for which one is not paid. Students saw too little of this model in the 1960s. They still don't see much of it, I am told. This is what my book *Teacher as Servant* is about. I tried to describe what a dedicated university professor who accepts this premise would look like.

Churches then, have the opportunity to be institutional models for the universities. Many of those teach in and administer universities as well as those who shape policies in business, government, hospitals, etc. attend churches. Do they just hear words, or do they see a model—a model of strength and effective religious leadership? And what would the model of a serving institution look like—*any* institution?

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