

Teaching as a Path to Servant Leadership, Part Three

In the previous two parts of this study, we examined the ability of teaching to develop the skills and awareness necessary to become a servant leader. This relates to everyone and not just those considered teachers by trade or gift since there is an apparent biblical assumption that everyone will function as a teacher at one time or another.

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 and servant leadership 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.

We looked at Matthew 23 in the first two parts, since it was there that Jesus delivered a prolonged address to “the Pharisees and the teachers of the law.” In the midst of His stern rebuke of those two groups, He made the case for service in the midst of teaching:

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

Jesus Himself made the link between service and teaching and since most teachers are leading at least their class, then He also made the connection between service and leadership.

It is important to understand that service in this context is not simply being polite. Carrying someone’s luggage or opening doors are not examples of servant leadership. Paul summarized servant leadership when he described the role of the main ministry functions in the Church:

11 It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, 12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up 13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Teachers and servant leaders prepare people for works of service, works that are consistent with the pupil’s or disciple’s work assigned by God. The focus of teaching and leadership is not the teacher. Rather the focus is the student and subject matter. The teacher becomes the servant of both.

For a teacher to be effective as a servant and equip the student, the teacher must be competent in three areas. These three areas are described in the book of Ecclesiastes:

9 Not only was the Teacher wise, but also he imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. 10 The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true (Ecclesiastes 12:9-10).

First, a teacher must be competent in respect to the subject matter. A good teacher knows the material inside out. At the same time, there is no room for intellectual arrogance or smugness, for no matter how much the teacher knows, the teacher realizes there is always more to know.

Second, a teacher must be competent in respect to the technique and practice of imparting knowledge. Teaching does not rest on technique, but it cannot ignore it either. A good teacher is always striving for excellence, and that involves matching the correct style with subject matter and the students.

Finally, a teacher must be competent in living out the truths taught. A teacher cannot live by the old adage, "Do what I say and not what I do." Integrity and wholeness for a teacher, especially one who is imparting wisdom of how to live or lead, is not detaching from the truth being presented. A teacher is also a student and should live amongst the students as one learning and growing.

It is of note that the main emphasis of Jesus' earth mission was teaching and He was effective.

33 When the crowds heard this, they were astonished at his teaching (Matthew 22:33).

48 Yet they could not find any way to do it, because all the people hung on his words (Luke 19:48).

35 While Jesus was teaching in the temple courts, he asked, "How is it that the teachers of the law say that the Christ is the son of David? 36 David himself, speaking by the Holy Spirit, declared: "'The Lord said to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet." ' 37 David himself calls him 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight (Mark 12:35-37).

45 Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, "Why didn't you bring him in?" 46 "No one ever spoke the way this man does," the guards declared (John 7:45-46).

While Jesus was a good teacher, He saw that the essence of what He had come to do was to serve:

42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be

first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45).

Jesus wasn't the only servant leader to be an effective teacher. Joseph who served Pharaoh in Egypt also took on the role of a teacher:

20 The king sent and released him, the ruler of peoples set him free. 21 He made him master of his household, ruler over all he possessed, 22 to instruct his princes as he pleased and teach his elders wisdom (Psalm 105:20-22).

King Solomon, whose prayer for wisdom (literally a “listening heart; see 1 Kings 3:9), became a great teacher of his people, even though he was the supreme ruler:

29 God gave Solomon wisdom and very great insight, and a breadth of understanding as measureless as the sand on the seashore. 30 Solomon's wisdom was greater than the wisdom of all the men of the East, and greater than all the wisdom of Egypt. 31 He was wiser than any other man, including Ethan the Ezrahite-- wiser than Heman, Calcol and Darda, the sons of Mahol. And his fame spread to all the surrounding nations. 32 He spoke three thousand proverbs and his songs numbered a thousand and five. 33 He described plant life, from the cedar of Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of walls. He also taught about animals and birds, reptiles and fish. 34 Men of all nations came to listen to Solomon's wisdom, sent by all the kings of the world, who had heard of his wisdom (1 King 4:29-34).

Why is it that so many great leaders, servants of the people and society, have also been teachers? Perhaps it is because it has kept them connected to the people and their needs. No one can be an effective teacher unless they identify with their students as mentioned above. Perhaps too a teacher who has to live with what and whom he or she teaches is apt to be more relevant and less given to tangents and futile pursuits.

We saw in Ecclesiastes 12:10 that “what he [the teacher] wrote was upright and true.” Except for Jesus, many of the great servant teachers and leaders have also been writers (a case can be made that Jesus did not have to write since so many others after Him would undertake that task). Why is this?

First, servant leaders and teachers want to maximize their impact, not for selfish reasons, but to help as many as possible with the information or wisdom that the teacher has. Second, writing helps teachers clarify their thinking and presentation. Someone once said, “We write to see what we think.” Third, the teacher and leader who writes has a chance to impact not just this generation, but the generations to come. I doubt if Solomon realized that his writings would be impacting people 3,500 years after he wrote them. This is of course the exception, for most writer's words don't survive the current generation. Finally, writing while undertaken for pay in some instances, gives the teacher the opportunity to give away the material if he or she so chooses.

Jesus said, “Freely you have received, freely give” (Matthew 10:8). While teachers must eat like everyone else, their teaching must be freely given where the

opportunity arises. Otherwise, the teacher may have to surrender some freedom of instruction in return for pay. This may limit his or her ability to serve and lead.

This is why I personally have invested so much in my website, <http://www.purposequest.com>. My website contains all that I am thinking and teaching for the world to access, criticize, reuse or publish in any way they see fit. I am giving away all that I am teaching in the hopes of serving the needs of those who read. Plus as a teacher I have found that the quicker I give away what I have received, the quicker more comes to supplement and augment what I've given. Jesus' words to this effect apply no less to teaching than the rest of life:

38 "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38).

I have also tried to teach in settings where the people have not always been able to pay. Some of my most effective teaching has been done in prisons, jails and Third World countries. It seems that when I am giving away my teaching and serving the people being taught, there is a fresh dynamic to my teaching that is missing in other settings.

I have also tried to model my teaching after that of Jesus. Let me explain. We saw a reference above from each gospel that gave testimony to how much the people enjoyed hearing Jesus teach. They hung on his words and delighted in his insight. I don't want to concentrate on the content of my teaching so much that my delivery suffers or is neglected. I watch the people as I teach and if I sense they are losing me (or I'm losing them), then it's time to stop or change something to win back their attention and heart.

I've observed teachers who made themselves the focus of their teaching and they truthfully don't care whether the people are worn out, confused or overwhelmed. The only important thing to these teachers is to finish the material. They allow little feedback and no dialogue. They are in control because it is their "show."

Several years ago I was going into a prison to conduct a chapel service as was my custom every Monday. I had a "lesson" prepared but had the distinct impression that I wasn't to deliver that lesson. When the class began, I didn't know what else to do, so I fielded questions. To my amazement, the questions all related exactly to the lesson I had prepared.

What was the difference? The difference was that the students were more eager to receive because they had a part in the learning process. We were discussing what was on their mind and heart and they left exhilarated, still talking about our time together. I opted to continue that format for many years after that with the same success. I have also tried to make my seminar and workshop formats more interactive with dialogue so that students can enter into the subject matter and I can make sure they comprehend what I am teaching.

We have already mentioned Solomon's teaching outreach. People from all over the world came to hear Solomon teach. On one occasion, the queen of Sheba, obviously a prominent queen in Solomon's day, came to pay Solomon a visit:

1 When the queen of Sheba heard about the fame of Solomon and his relation to the name of the LORD, she came to test him with hard questions. 2 Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan-- with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones-- she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. 3 Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her. 4 When the queen of Sheba saw all the wisdom of Solomon and the palace he had built, 5 the food on his table, the seating of his officials, the attending servants in their robes, his cupbearers, and the burnt offerings he made at the temple of the LORD, she was overwhelmed. 6 She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. 7 But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. 8 How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom! 9 Praise be to the LORD your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the LORD's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness" (1 Kings 10:1-9).

Notice that she has the opportunity to ask questions and note also that Solomon answered them all. The queen set the teaching agenda, not Solomon. Is that perhaps why she was so overwhelmed? Here was a man who had the answers to *her* questions, a world leader who didn't stick to a script or to subject matter or technique where he was in control.

And the queen also recognized how happy the people were who listened to Solomon's teaching. They enjoyed it! She actually broke into worship when the teaching session was finished. Now that's the sign of a great teacher!

In summary, teaching is a path to servant leadership because, done correctly, it makes the student and topic the center of attention, not the teacher. The teacher must focus on the needs of others. And the teacher who is a servant leader realizes just how much he or she doesn't know, which adds a touch of humility to the teaching process. This humility allows students to enter into the learning process, asking questions and challenging assumptions and facts.

*** * END OF PART THREE* ***