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# IS THE BIBLE RELEVANT TO SERVANT-LEADERSHIP?

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## Introduction

Robert Greenleaf's servant-leadership principles, as described in *The Servant as Leader* (1991), continue to be a challenge to people who aspire to be effective leaders. The depth of Greenleaf's thinking and observations reflect a great deal of insight into leadership issues. It can be shown that his servant-leadership principles are indeed based on biblical concepts. In this article, I will review these principles and relate each of them to specific passages in the Bible that reflect them. I will show the relevance and significance of the Bible, written more 2,000 years ago, to one of the most influential leadership theories of our time.

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must put the needs  
of those under his  
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above personal needs  
(Johnson, 2002).*

## Servant First, Leader Second

Greenleaf (1991) portrays the servant-leader as someone who naturally serves first and then makes a conscious choice to aspire to lead. Such an individual is different from the person who first has the desire to lead, establishes his or her leadership, then chooses to serve because of a moral sense or because that service is expected. This principle provides us with an excellent benchmark with which to compare and understand personal motives for aspiring to be a leader. *Note:* All scriptural quotations cited in this article are from the New American Standard Bible.

Several scriptural references relate to the principle that the servant-leader is a servant first and a leader second. In Mark 9:35, for example, Jesus says to His disciples, "If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all." Upon hearing them argue among themselves, Jesus immediately reprimanded them by asserting that the greatest of them would be the one who took last place and served the rest and thereby articulating the basis for servant leadership. In Philippians 2:7, the apostle Paul describes Jesus by stating that He "emptied Himself [Jesus], taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men." In this passage, Paul encourages the people in the church at Philippi to become like Jesus, Who gave up His position of authority and equality with God to become someone who had no rights, received no wages, and who had no appeal (Hession, 1950). There is also a command in Philippians 2:3 to look out for the interests of others, to "do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important

than yourselves.” A leader, then, must put the needs of those under his or her authority above personal needs (Johnson, 2002). Jesus modeled this behavior, then challenged His followers to do the same.

Another passage that calls for serving other people is found in Galatians 5:13: “For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.” The leader is called upon to serve others rather than to do whatever he wants to do (Darby, n.d.). In order for today’s leaders to serve their followers, they must spend time with their followers, understand their needs and abilities, ask their opinions, and seek their input. They must provide the resources their followers need to be successful in their roles.

The true test of the servant-leader is that people associated with the servant-leader become “healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, and more likely themselves to become servants” (p. xx). In addition, the least privileged members of society are helped or at least not further deprived (Greenleaf, 1991). The Bible has many references to this type of activity, in which the interests of other people are deemed to be important, in which to do good to all people is critical, and in which each person is considered to be important and valuable. Philippians 2:4 says, “Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.” Galatians 6:10 says, “So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people. . . .” Galatians 6:2 talks about bearing one another’s burdens. And Leviticus 19:18 encourages loving your neighbor as yourself. Barclay (1975b) notes how important it is, based on Matthew 19:16–22, to reproduce God’s attitude of love by caring for our fellow human beings.

Greenleaf also emphasizes that the least privileged in society will not be harmed while under the authority of the servant-leader. This principle is found in II Corinthians 8:9: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.” The writers of the Bible admonish that we do more than not make sure that the least privileged members of society not be additionally deprived. But they go much further by saying that we should fraternize with these individuals, not ostracize them. To do so requires personal involvement. Romans 12:16 says, “Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty in mind, but associate with the lowly.” This passage advises to treat all other people fairly, especially those who are poor, ignorant, or illiterate (Gill, n.d.). Finally, the Bible clearly states that each person is valuable, that no one is of lesser value than is someone else.

What do you think? If any man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go

and search for the one that is straying? If it turns out that he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine which have not gone astray. (Matthew 18:12-13)

Henry (n.d.) notes that even though only one sheep was lost out of 100 sheep, the one lost sheep was of no less value to the shepherd. Likewise, the servant-leader values each follower, including the least privileged or lowly. Today's leaders must be careful to value each person under their authority fairly, equitably, and without the influence of such factors as ethnicity, education or social class.

## ADDITIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SERVANT-LEADER

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After defining the nature of the servant-leader, Greenleaf describes other characteristics of the servant-leader. They are:

- The Leader Guides.
- The Leader is Goal-Oriented and Qualified.
- The Leader Listens and Reflects.
- The Leader is Fair and Flexible.
- The Leader is Intuitive and Aware.
- The Leader Uses Persuasion.
- The Leader Takes One Step at a Time.

### The Leader Guides

The essence of leadership involves guidance. The leader initiates, provides the ideas and the structure, and then bears the burden of risk as well as the chance of success. The leader asks people to follow even though the path is uncertain and possibly dangerous. Jesus did exactly this, as the following examples attest: (1) He called Peter and Andrew, His disciples, to be fishers of men (Matthew 4:19), (2) He told Matthew, the tax-collector, to follow Him (Matthew 9:9), and (3) He told the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions and follow Him (Matthew 19:21). In the case of the Matthew 4:19 reference, it is likely that Peter and Andrew already had talked with Jesus and had listened to Him, but there came a moment when Jesus, as the Leader, challenged them to make the commitment to join Him (Barclay, 1975a). Today's leaders must be bold, confident, willing to take risks, and to share success with their followers while taking personal responsibility for any failures.

## The Leader Is Goal-oriented and Qualified

Another mark of a leader is that he has a goal and is qualified to reach that goal. He knows the goal and he can articulate it clearly for anyone who is unsure. Maxwell (1998) avers that almost anyone can steer the ship, but it takes a leader to chart the course. This gives certainty and purpose to others who may have difficulty in achieving the goal themselves. One biblical example of this principle is when God guided Joshua in how to conquer Jericho. First, God told Joshua, march the Israelite army around the walled city once a day for seven days. Then, He directed, on the seventh day, blow your trumpets and shout. The walls of Jericho will fall down. And they did.

Needless to say, this exercise must have seemed futile to the people of Jericho, as well as to the Israelites (Mears, 1983). Joshua was surely ridiculed by some of his people for this unlikely plan; yet he clearly knew his goal and was able to convince his people to follow him to implement the plan. Greenleaf (1991) says that “the one who states the goal must elicit trust, especially if it is a high risk or visionary goal” (p. 9). Joshua’s plan for destroying the heavily fortified walls of Jericho without using force was certainly a high-risk goal that required trust on the part of his people to follow him in this plan. He earned the trust of his people and was successful in completing the goal.

Moses was another leader, who, as did Joshua, took a dangerous chance—in this case to lead the Israelites out of their 430 years of bondage in Egypt. The Israelites knew that they would risk their lives if they tried to escape. Moses obeyed God, took initiative, and at the appropriate time convinced the Israelites to flee Egypt. They were not sure where they would go, but they were willing to follow Moses out of Egypt because they had confidence and trust in him and because they understood the goal. Today’s leaders must articulate a vision of where they are going in order to encourage and challenge the followers to come along, even if the path is uncertain. Followers do not follow if they do not trust their leader or if they do not understand the goal.

## The Leader Listens and Reflects

A leader will automatically respond to any problem by listening first. A good leader needs to communicate well, and Greenleaf suggests that the best test of whether the leader is communicating is to ensure that he or she is listening. Several references in the book of Proverbs pertain to this principle. Proverbs 18:13, for example, advises that “he who gives an answer before he hears, it is folly and shame to him.” Proverbs 12:15 cautions that

“the way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel.” And Proverbs 15:32 warns that “he who neglects discipline despises himself, but he who listens to reproof acquires understanding.” Listening first, then, is a critical principle of servant-leadership. If today’s leaders do not actively listen, they will be perceived as not valuing the feedback and ideas of their followers, which in turn may de-motivate and cause poor morale among their followers.

According to Greenleaf (1991), the ability to withdraw and reorient oneself is a useful art for anyone person in leadership. It is either a change of pace for leaders who perform best when they are totally immersed, or it is a defense for leaders who avoid pressure by withdrawing from potentially unpleasant circumstances. Withdrawal allows a leader to apply the art of systematic neglect to distinguish more-important matters from less-important ones and to distinguish important matters from urgent ones. It is interesting to note that Jesus practiced such withdrawal at certain times of His life. For example, when Jesus was with His disciples shortly before His betrayal and arrest, He “said to them, ‘...remain here and keep watch.’ And He went a little beyond them, and fell to the ground and began to pray. . . . Again He went away and prayed. . .” (Mark 14:34-39). And when Jesus heard the news that John the Baptist had been beheaded, “He withdrew from there in a boat to a secluded place by Himself” (Matthew 14:13). He left the excited crowd and He evaded the efforts of the people who wanted Him to lead a revolt (McGarvey & Pendleton, 1914). Today’s leaders need time alone to reflect about the path ahead. They need to use discipline to remove themselves from the pressing events of the day in order to maintain a healthy relationship with God and a clear vision for the future.

## The Leader Is Fair and Flexible

The servant-leader accepts and empathizes with another person but sometimes refuses to accept that person’s effort or performance as satisfactory. Greenleaf compares this situation to a family relationship, in which, for the family to be a family, no one can be rejected. The leader has a sincere interest in and affection for his or her followers, affection that the followers do not always deserve. Because there are no perfect people, accepting others requires a certain amount of tolerance. The apostle Peter serves as a notable biblical example of this. Peter was imperfect. As such he denied even knowing Jesus—and he did so three times. Yet Jesus chose to appear to Peter after the Resurrection in order to challenge him to tend His sheep (John 21:17). Despite Peter’s shortcomings and failings, Jesus loved him and gave him significant responsibility (Boice, 1979).

The story of the Prodigal Son also shows clearly how a family member was not rejected, despite his negative actions. After squandering his inheritance, a son returned home and asked his father for forgiveness. His father not only immediately forgave him, he also hosted a welcome-home celebration. The father truly acted as a servant-leader (Luke 15:11-32).

People grow taller when a leader empathizes and accepts them for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing (Greenleaf, 1991). Today's leaders must not only have a sincere interest in their followers. They also need to be able to distinguish between skills and knowledge that can be taught and the talent that cannot be taught. They are capable of determining whether or not the follower has sufficient potential to succeed in assigned responsibilities.

## **The Leader Is Intuitive and Aware**

Leaders are often faced with the need to make important decisions without full information. He or she must bridge this information gap by having a sense for anticipating the unforeseeable. This is intuition, a sense for perceiving patterns, and the ability to use prior experience to make generalizations (Greenleaf, 1991). Intuition depends on more than facts; Maxwell (1998) calls this ability "informed intuition," and describes it as a combination of natural ability and learned skills. In the Bible, when Saul and his army were pursuing David and his band of 600 men, David made countless decisions based on partial information. David was fleeing for his life as well as the lives of his men, and making poor decisions would have been fatal. His men trusted him with these critical decisions, and David eventually led them to safety (I Samuel). Today's leader must be confident about making decisions based on partial information. It is a requirement of the job. An unwillingness to do so causes the leader to appear indecisive, erodes the trust of his or her followers, and ultimately diminishes his or her effectiveness.

Greenleaf discusses the importance of a leader having an awareness of his or her environment. Cultivation of awareness allows a person to be detached and to stand aside and see oneself in the context of one's own experience. This helps the leader to sort out the urgent from the important. It enables the leader, in the midst of stress of real life situations, to compose himself in a way that permits the creative process to operate. He uses as an example the story of an angry mob of people confronting Jesus with an adulterous woman (John 8). The mob challenges Jesus' leadership by saying that the law demands that she be stoned. He is asked for an answer. Greenleaf suggests that Jesus withdraws from the mob for a moment by

writing in the sand to increase his awareness of the situation before he gives His response to the question.

## **The Leader Uses Persuasion**

Another servant leadership principle identified by Greenleaf is that a leader must lead by persuasion rather than coercion. Greenleaf uses John Woolman, an American Quaker, as an example of this principle. Woolman almost single-handedly abolished the practice of slavery among the Society of Friends. Rather than censure the slaveholders in a way that triggered their animosity, he persistently visited them and raised questions that eventually convinced them to change the practice voluntarily. Woolman used persistence and persuasion, rather than coercion and oppression, to accomplish his goal. Proverbs 28:16 says, “A leader who is a great oppressor lacks understanding.” The general method of Jesus’s teaching was to use reasoning and persuasion rather than force and coercion. He used various parables to teach and persuade people. He did not encourage the use of power and force to bring about change. In most situations, followers do not respond well to leaders who issue commands without soliciting the input and advice of their followers. This form of leadership is demeaning to followers and causes them to feel unvalued by their leader.

## **The Leader Takes One Step at a Time**

A final leadership principle that Greenleaf (1991) describes is how leaders advance to their goal, one action at a time and often with great frustration along the way. Leaders know who they are and are determined to be their own persons as they proceed toward their goal. Noah exemplifies this principle. Noah’s goal was to build an ark in anticipation of the flood that would cover Earth. His friends and neighbors mocked him. With no rain in sight, he built a huge ship on dry land and then filled it with all sorts of living things. Noah knew his goal and knew how to achieve it. He took one action at a time until the ark was completed, and he reached his goal. Perseverance is a critical character quality of today’s leaders. They must be steadfast in the pursuit of their goals. There invariably are people who question the leaders’ motives, goals, or methods, but leaders must be willing to withstand the doubts and questions until they reach their goals.

In summary, there is much support and evidence for the premise that Greenleaf’s servant-leadership principles are closely associated with and derived from biblical concepts. There are biblical teachings, instructions, commands, and examples to support each of the servant leadership princi-

ples that he describes. Clearly, then, the Bible is foundational and relevant to the issue of servant-leadership.

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