

# SERVANT LEADERSHIP PERSONIFIED

*‘What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead’ – Nelson Mandela<sup>7</sup>*

*‘We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith; if it is serving, then serve; if it is teaching, then teach; if it is to encourage, then give encouragement; if it is giving, then give generously; if it is to lead, do it diligently; if it is to show mercy, do it cheerfully.’ – Romans 12:6-8*

## GRAB A TOWEL

True servant leadership is most powerful when it's experienced, rather than merely expressed in words. South African President Nelson Mandela is revered as a global example of leadership in the face of adversity. Countless books have been written on the lessons to be learned from his reconciliatory humility and strength of character. For me, two snapshots from his life demonstrate these qualities in particular, as he recognised the responsibility that came with his position of influence, and how he shaped the response of a generation of subjugated South Africans.

At the height of the apartheid regime, Mandela was one of several accused in the Rivonia Trial between October 9, 1963 and June 12, 1964. There was a very real possibility that the chief activists in the anti-apartheid movement would be executed as the National Party sought to silence all opposition to their white-elitist regime. On April 20, 1964 it was the turn of Nelson Mandela to testify. A qualified lawyer, his meticulously prepared speech explained his actions, exposed the injustices of apartheid, and rationally argued for regime change in South Africa by any means possible. Mandela was acutely aware that most of what he said would confirm the assessment of those in power of him as a dangerous terrorist. Yet Mandela saw beyond that. He wasn't just speaking to the courtroom – he was speaking to his people. More than that, he was speaking to the whole nation. In closing his speech, he gave an insight into his character and vision for South Africa... he was not a terrorist bent on violent revolution, but a human being dedicated to restoring dignity to all the people of South Africa. He said:

During my lifetime I have dedicated myself to this struggle of the African people. I have fought against

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white domination, and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die.<sup>8</sup>

Mandela's leadership mastery is seen in this short extract. He was first of all leading *himself* – prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in order to see his dream fulfilled. He was also leading *his movement* – the ANC – who had formed the Freedom Charter and were committed to fulfilling the ideals embodied in that document. Furthermore, he was providing leadership to *the subjugated people of South Africa*, those who may not have been ANC members, but with whom he could identify because of the injustice of their situation. But, critically, he was also leading *his oppressors*. He rose above their hate and prejudice in order to paint a picture of a new South Africa that would free the oppressor from their hatred, and usher in a new era of freedom for all.

We need to jump forward 30 years to 1994 for the second example of his influence in action. Mandela had spent 27 years in prison, and undergone incredible suffering, yet did not compromise on his dream. Formerly an accused man in a trial that could have resulted in his execution, he was now the president of his country and in leadership over those who had oppressed him, tortured his family and killed his friends. Once again, Mandela shone as a beacon of servant leadership – able to put aside any desire for vindication and revenge, and instead focus on the hope that his dream of a free and democratic country was now becoming a reality. In his inaugural speech as president he said the following:

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We enter into a covenant that we shall build a society in which all South Africans, both black and white, will be able to walk tall, without any fear in their hearts, assured of their inalienable right to human dignity – a rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world...

Today we are entering a new era for our country and its people. Today we celebrate not the victory of a party, but a victory for all the people of South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

Mandela's victory was a victory of servant leadership and his example has become synonymous with the definition of a servant leader.

It is abundantly clear from Mandela's example that leadership always focuses on others. As a mission movement, The Message is focused on others, too. The main purpose of our organisation is to present the gospel to the least, the last and the lost, and to see them become transformational leaders. We are leading in that direction and everything we do will be evaluated against the goal of raising up generations of urban heroes. Our leadership is not defined by how well we run the organisation, whether we are financially viable, or even if we have the funkiest programmes in the city. We are ultimately a movement of people with a gospel goal – the belief that God wants all people to be saved.

## **WHAT'S SO SPECIAL ABOUT BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP?**

This is an important question. There are clearly many great leaders who are not Christians and it is true to say that Christians can

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learn from leadership lessons drawn from secular sources and examples (and in this book I draw from a variety of sources). However, if our goal is to have a spiritual impact in the world, we need to consider how to differentiate our leadership, given that the Christian mission is ultimately committed to gospel-centred outcomes.

Romans 12:8 lists leadership as a gift given for the service of God's church, and notes that if someone's gift is leadership, then they should govern diligently. There is clearly a gift and calling available to Christian leaders – a calling to be servant leaders who are empowered by the Holy Spirit in order to lead effectively. Henry and Richard Blackaby helpfully define spiritual leadership as simply 'moving people on to God's agenda.'<sup>10</sup> And that's what Christ-centred servant leadership does. Leadership always comes with an assignment – it is not purely a position for a position's sake. Our assignment as Christian leaders is to move people from the point where they are at, towards an encounter with Jesus Christ which equips them to live wholeheartedly for him in the world in the service of others.

This is the crux of Christ-centred servant-leadership, and this book aims to equip you for your specific task as a servant leader.

### **DO WE LEAD FIRST OR SERVE FIRST?**

The primary focus of a servant leader is that they are committed to serving others first, not leading others. Their primary intent is to serve, and their focus is on being a servant and a steward, not a leader or an owner.<sup>11</sup> Servant leadership became a common phrase

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following the writings of Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. He wrote the following:

The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions... 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.<sup>12</sup>

This table shows the contrast between a leader focused on leading first, versus a leader focused on serving first:

<b>LEADS FIRST</b>	<b>SERVES FIRST</b>
Vision is for self-advancement	Vision is for the common good
Leads from power through position	Leads through people from relationship
Followers are a means to an end	Followers are valued of highest importance
Focus is self	Focus is others
Promotes own agenda	Listens and welcomes feedback

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Surrounded by ‘yes-men’	Values different opinions
Prioritises projects	Invests in people
Autocratic	Accountable
Influences from fear	Influences from trust
Selfish ambition	Self-sacrificial
Success = fulfilling own agenda	Success = others fulfil potential

The contrast between those who lead first against those who serve first can be most helpfully defined in terms of aspirations. Although Christians can aspire to be leaders, their motivation must be driven by their heart to serve, not merely leading for leading’s sake. A Christian leader aspires to serve Christ by serving others. Their position of leadership provides opportunity for service.

I believe that Greenleaf’s understanding of servant leadership needs to be rediscovered in the 21st century and applied through the lens of Jesus Christ. As we have already seen, Jesus was the ultimate servant leader, the world’s greatest leader and the epitome of servanthood.

In the film *The Passion of the Christ*,<sup>13</sup> there is a powerful scene depicting servant leadership. It depicts Jesus being whipped and beaten by a Roman soldier. He is lying on the ground, bloodied and in agony. Semi-conscious, he rolls on his side and sees the sandals

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of his persecutor... and the scene shifts as Jesus' mind recalls his final gathering with the disciples as he knelt and washed their sandaled feet. In that moment we are reminded that Christ's act of servanthood, when he grabbed a towel and knelt at his disciples' feet, was a metaphor for his ultimate act of service. As our loving friend, he willingly took the punishment that we all deserved for the wrong things we have done. Jesus, although innocent of any wrongdoing, paid the ultimate price. Just as he demonstrated his love by washing his disciples' feet, we also recognise that he loved the Roman soldier who beat him, Pilate who handed him over for crucifixion, and all of us who were represented by the crowds who either jeered or stood idly by as the Son of God succumbed to death.

Our motivation as servant leaders in following Jesus' example is, therefore, not simply that he grabbed a towel and washed the disciples' feet, but in that through his act of self-sacrifice on the cross he effectively washes our feet *every day* of the muck and dung of our wrong actions, thoughts and motives. And, even though we may not feel qualified, he commissions us to follow his example and serve others as he has served us. When it cost him so much, how can we refuse?

Jesus is passing the towel to us. Let's learn how to follow his example.