

The Responsibility of Servant Leadership (It is not about you!)

It appears that the apex of Jesus' popularity was at the feeding of the five thousand (John 6:30-34). It was at this time that zealots were trying to turn the Jesus movement into a political uprising against the Romans.¹ Those who partook of the fish and loaves accepted Jesus' blessing but rejected His message. They were materialists whose motive was to force upon Jesus a kingship that was not genuine, but consequential. When He refused their desires, He was rejected, His popularity diminished, and much of the crowd departed. So, Jesus said to the twelve, "Do you want to go away as well?" Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life, and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God." (John 6:67-69)

At the heart of my thoughts upon John's passage is Pettit's Foundations of Spiritual Formation's concept of servant leadership. Jesus Christ demonstrates the attributes of an effective leader in many ways, but the core significance is His selfless desire to please God the Father. Pettit said, "A servant leader is not motivated by personalized power or benefit but motivated by fulfillment of God's mission and the lives of people who are part of the ministry."² The passion of the leader is not self-focused on power, benefits, reputation, perks or privileges, but a fulfillment of a godly purpose and on the good of those being led. What would the gospel look like if Jesus pleased Himself rather than satisfy the mission of His Father?

As a young sailor in the U.S. Navy, my experience with basic training was filled with many questions. Though I did not have the nerve to comment or ask for that matter, I believed that much of the iteration that occurred throughout the training phase was a waste of time; but I

¹ James Smith., Jesus: God's Servant, Commentary on Mark's Gospel, nd., 17

² Paul Pettit. Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming like Christ. Grand Rapids, MI.: Kregel Publications, a division of Kregel, Inc., 2008: 180

soon learned the method behind my misconceptions. A transformation was taking place. Little did I know that what I perceived as repetition and wasted moments eventually changed my life. I thought differently, dressed differently, approached problems differently, and so forth. The leaders who were responsible for training me and others were not there for my convenience; they had a job to do. It was their mission to transform me into a sailor who would be accountable for others' lives, government property, and to protect a nation against all threats. Pettit said, "Servant leadership is so critical to God's purpose in the world that God will go to great lengths to develop it in His followers."³ Not that my company commanders were God, their influence and example were the catalysts for turning everyday civilians into sailors.

Incorporating servant leadership into pastoring requires a different approach to God, His Word, and His church. As J. Oswald Sanders commented, God's method has always been a man with capacity for a growing faith. There is no limit to the pains God is willing to take in His training, neither limited by heredity nor environment. As Pettit would explain God's method, he compares it to a pilgrimage rather than a process. The Navy training story that I shared was along the lines of processes because it incorporated "mechanics," but God's pilgrimage has been personal, filled with hardships, darkness, and peril. These have been God's methods to extend me beyond the boundaries of comfort, aggrandizement, personal struggles, into true transformation.⁴ I have seen my pastorate within the last ten years take on a totally different perspective, and even more so the last two years of attending seminary.

In his book *Exegetical Fallacies*, D. A. Carson said, "This study is important because exegetical fallacies are painfully frequent among us – among us whose God-given grace and

³ Paul Pettit., ed. *Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming like Christ*, 180

⁴ *Ibid.*

responsibility is the faithful proclamation of the Word of God. Make a mistake in the interpretation of one of Shakespeare's plays, falsely scan a piece of Spenserian verse, and there is unlikely to be an entailment of eternal consequence; but we cannot lightly accept a similar laxity in the interpretation of Scripture. We are dealing with God's thoughts: we are obligated to take the greatest pains to understand them truly and to explain them clearly. Careful handling of the Bible will enable us to "hear" it a little better. It is all too easy to read the traditional interpretations we have received from others into the text of Scripture. Then we may unwittingly transfer the authority of Scripture to our traditional interpretations and invest them with a false, even an idolatrous, degree of certainty. Because traditions are reshaped as they are passed on, after a while we may drift far from God's Word while still insisting all our theological opinions are "biblical" and therefore true. If we are in such a state, we study the Bible uncritically, more than likely it will simply reinforce our errors."⁵

To my friend, who is planning to enter the seminary, I offer this advice. As Carson appealed to the careful handling of God's word with responsibility to faithful proclamation, I would appeal to character responsibility as well. Tozer said, "Sin is dismissed as inconsequential to our worship of God. Sin, however, is serious, and God never smiles upon it and never looks at any heart with sin upon it." In describing the path of heathen darkness, he continues, "I believe that if the Christian Church has not crossed the line already, it is perilously close to slipping into heathen oriented worship, rendering to the creature what rightfully belongs to the Creator. Let me explain what I mean. Never has there been a time in Christian history where the Church has been more plagued with celebrities than today, especially in the music department."⁶ God's core issue with the servant leader is the heart. Pettit said, "He orchestrates our experiences as

⁵ D.A. Carson., *Exegetical Fallacies.*, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2007., 15

⁶ A.W. Tozer., *The Purpose of Man.*, Bloomington, MN: Bethany House, 2009., 64-65

challenges to mold our heart, to jar us out of our comfort zones, to shake up our complacency, to make us look inward, deep into our heart, because at its core, leadership is more a matter of the heart than it is of knowledge or skills.”⁷ In contrast, for self-centered leaders, work will always be first and foremost about what they get— fame, fortune, adulation, power...⁸ Ministry is not about the one who is called, but about the ONE who gives the call. This is the responsibility of servant leadership. It’s not about you!

⁷ Paul Pettit., ed. Foundations of Spiritual Formation: A Community Approach to Becoming like Christ, 180

⁸ Ibid., 178