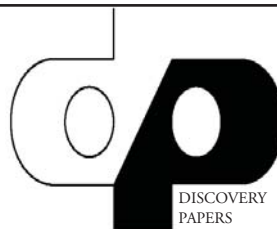


# SERVANT LEADERSHIP

**SERIES: A CONSIDERATION OF CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP**



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Mark 10:35-45  
1st Message  
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In a few months, this congregation will be 60 years old. Anniversaries are good occasions to reflect back on history, to remember relationships and adventures and battles fought and won. But anniversaries are also great occasions to appreciate the present and to look forward to what God will continue to do in the building of his church.

This message is the first of four in a series entitled “A Consideration of Christian Leadership.” Discussing leadership is a way to talk about how we function here in this place, but beyond how we function, who we are. We want to talk about *the* Church, the body of Christ at large, and we want to talk about *this* church, Peninsula Bible Church. In this message, we will focus on servant leadership—what it is and what makes it distinct from a worldly exercise of power.

As Jesus began his public ministry, crowds followed him. From among these followers, Jesus called twelve into a close relationship with himself. (He would later call them apostles and give them authority to head the Church after his death and resurrection.) We can think of them as the first Christian community.

If you turn to the tenth chapter of Mark, you will see that the twelve have committed their lives to Christ. They believe him to be God’s promised Messiah and trust him for their future. As we observe the dynamic of this small community, we recognize some similarities to our own Christian community—messy relationships, self-serving attitudes, discovery of truth—from which we can learn something important.

Verse 33-34 of Mark 10 sets the scene:

“We are going up to Jerusalem,” he said, “and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise.”

Jesus has just revealed that he is about to be arrested and killed, but two of his disciples have another matter on their minds. Verses 35-38:

**Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. “Teacher,” they said, “we want you to do for us whatever we ask.”**

**“What do you want me to do for you?” he asked.**

**They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”**

**“You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?”**

This is their final trip to Jerusalem, and both the cup and the baptism are clear references to Jesus’ imminent execution. It is likely that James and John do not understand what Jesus is asking them, but they answer with bravado. Verses 39-40:

**“We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared.”**

So the twelve are gathered, and two of them step forward with a request for their own exaltation. On the surface, it might seem that these two are just asking to be near Jesus in his glory. But they are not asking to worship; they are asking for an elevated position above other people. Surprisingly, perhaps, Jesus doesn’t rebuke them. He simply tells them they don’t know what they are asking for.

Their first problem is that they weren’t listening. While Jesus was telling them he was about to die, they were clamoring for a place of honor. Rather than hearing what was important to Jesus, they approached with their own agenda. The inability to listen first, I think, is one of the great problems of the church community. We come to the Lord with a list of what we think is important rather than beginning with an ear that is attentive to him.

Most of us want to be exalted, but we don’t want to achieve honor through suffering. We foolishly imagine that we can accomplish anything we want to on our terms. But Jesus says that real significance only comes by suffering. It was true then, and it is true now.

Verse 41:

**When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.**

So two of the twelve are promoting themselves, and the other ten are indignant. They aren't indignant over the selfishness of the request, of course; they are indignant because they weren't first in line with the same request.

Verses 42-45:

**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. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 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."**

Rulers of the gentiles equate power with domination. Those who have power lord it over those who don't and take advantage for their own sakes. That is the way of the world, but Jesus said, "Not so with you." It is not to be true of this community, not among followers of Christ. Those who exercise authority should be those who are most committed to service. Those who lead must learn to give up their own rights and desires in order to bless others. Jesus, Son of Man, the Lord himself, born of heaven, ruler of all, adored by legions of angels—he gave his life for others and thus becomes the model of relationship and leadership in our community.

Now, it is quite clear from this passage that leadership is based on service. What the text does *not* say, however, is that leadership and prominence in the church cannot coexist. A servant leader can have great gifts and be highly regarded. Jesus' instruction here concerns motives. A servant leader, following the example of Christ, crucifies self-interest and becomes a slave to all. So Christian leadership does not describe a place in human ranking; it describes an attitude by which we interact with others.

I want to mention five principles that I think have guided our formation as a congregation here at PBC. We may not always live them out perfectly, but we believe them and they have shaped us throughout our 60 years as a congregation.

**1. Invisible realities are greater than things we can measure.** Therefore, faithfulness is more important than short-term accomplishment. The most important question is not "How can we get something done quickly and with fanfare?" but rather "How can we be faithful to what God has called us to?" That must be the starting point because what he is doing very often is invisible to us. We cannot be sure what he intends, so we ask for his direction and ask to be faithful to our calling. Moses spent 40 years in the wilderness before he spent 40 years as the leader of the exodus. Both were important in God's plan, the seemingly

insignificant years as well as the prominent ones.

**2. Organizational hierarchies are problematic.** That is, divisions between clergy and laity, between senior and associate, or even between one type of spiritual gift and another create circumstances in which rivalry is likely. If a certain title in the organization confers power and status, then everyone will want the title. We will seek to become significant by gaining the name, by competing with others to move up the ladder. It is very hard to declare that all the gifts are important and that everyone's contribution is important if an organization's structure rewards selfish competition.

**3. God's power is made perfect in weakness.** Our inadequacies make us depend on the Lord. New life for which Jesus gets the credit most often occurs when those who serve him don't have big budgets or political pull. When we lack the resources to "make something happen," God gets the credit for the good that is done.

**4. Incarnation is central to Christian formation.** We can learn information from books, and we can be quipped intellectually in seminars, but the only way our lives are changed is when we are in relationship with other believers, wrestling with truth, praying for one another, and struggling together. Incarnation is central to Christian formation. Information can be learned other ways, but life is changed in relationships.

**5. The truth of scripture is always relevant.** The point is not to ask what is on the cutting edge for the moment but to ask what is true from the Word of God. The Word of God remains fascinating and useful. It speaks truth in every time and every culture, and we need to hold on to a passion to know and engage and apply and hear the Word of God in the real world we live in.

Let me close with one final observation. Jesus never rebuked his followers for wanting to be great. God created us for greatness, for significance. He intends for us to have an impact on the world we live in. So Jesus didn't rebuke his disciples; instead, he told them they were going about it the wrong way, that the way to greatness is the cross. We become great when we lose our enthusiasm for gaining the world, give ourselves away, and let God raise us up.

Let's pray. *Lord, thank you that even though there is hypocrisy and failure, you have never given up on*

*your Church and never will. And the day will come when the light will put out the darkness, and we look forward to that day. Thanks that we are participating in it. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

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