

## Episode 030

# Upside-Down Leadership (Serving In Leading)

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## Introduction

Most people have ideas or at least impressions about how a leader should lead. Perhaps they caught this from observing or being impacted by leaders around them, such as their parents, or from school, or work, etc. Perhaps they saw this in some books, TV or movies. Yet should those be the standard and inspiration for us? The key is to return to the Bible and look at how God and His godly people led and learn from them. Jesus of course is the ultimate example of godly leadership. Yet the way Jesus led, often throws conventional worldly leadership wisdom out of the window.

Mark 10:42–45 (NIV) 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.”

On their way to Jerusalem, James and John the sons of Zebedee wanted position and authority, so they asked Jesus to be able to sit at His right and left! These guys were being a bit sneaky. They cut out Peter who was essentially functioning as Jesus' right-hand man. They did not give the other disciples any consideration. No wonder the other disciples were upset with them.

Jesus had to correct their attitude. The disciples were arguing about being the greatest. However, Jesus reframed what it meant to rule. Authority is to be used to serve. Ruling is to serve those they oversee. Greatness is about serving, not being served. Greatness is measured by not by how many serve you but how many people you serve and how well we serve. Jesus turned everything they understood about leadership upside-down.



You would have thought that it would now be clear to them how Jesus viewed greatness. Yet a few days later they were at it again, arguing about who was greatest at the Last Supper. Luke 22:24–27 (NIV) 24 A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. 25 Jesus said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. 26 But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. 27 For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves.

In other words, it reveals that while they heard, there were yet to build it into their hearts. That is a lesson there for us personally. Let’s now examine some qualities of effective servant leaders and seek to build it into our lives.

### **SERVES BEYOND PERSONAL AGENDA**

We all have our agendas, including personal agendas. Having agendas is not a good or bad thing. It is whether it is noble or ignoble agendas. Whether it is godly or ungodly agendas. We can have noble, godly agendas. We can become overly focussed on our personal agenda and neglect God’s agenda.

True serving means making selfless, even sacrificial decisions that goes beyond what our personal agenda would dictate. Sometimes it even means putting parts of our agenda on the shelf. It means putting aside our personal preferences for the sake of others at times. Perhaps even sacrificing our personal agendas. Because we see their desires and needs as important enough. I am certain, for example, that Jesus would have preferred not to die in such a painful gruesome way at the cross (Luke 22:42). But He put it aside for the sake of the multitudes. Jesus is King and He served by dying for all.

In one of our regions there was a leadership crisis at the national levels. To help the situation, one of our Global Elders Ps. Simon Eng and I stepped in as Interim Elders in that nation. It was not part of our personal agenda to do so. It takes a lot of our time which we would prefer to put into global matters of our family of churches. But because we saw the need to help our churches and people there, we stepped into that role for a season of time.



I did something similar many years ago with another Australian church. There was a conflict between 2 senior leaders, and I had to stand between them to avoid a bigger fallout within the church. I became its senior pastor while still senior pastor of the church we founded in Brisbane. So I had to fly regularly there and lead the church. In those days digital communications such as Skype or Whatsapp did not exist and we mainly relied on emails and phone call in-between those times. I did this for 5 years! It was a cost to my young family and the Brisbane church.

In various different areas of our personal lives, we chose not to pursue our personal agenda to free us up so that we can serve God's agenda more effectively. Serving does not mean denying our personal agenda. It does not mean letting go of our leadership responsibilities and giving in to other's agenda. It does not mean being pulled aside to agendas of others all the time. Wisdom is needed to find the right balance. Ultimately, the highest agenda is God's agenda which we should honour first.

### **SERVES OUT OF LOVE**

Galatians 5:13–14 (NIV) 13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

True serving is best motivated by love. Where our perspective is that we give, not take. We seek to bless and empower. Our heart should be to bless and help others mature and rise up. A leader's role is to help those we lead to succeed. We exist to serve them not use them. My attitude is always that I love to see members in our church be more blessed in receiving than in giving out. I want to know that as a result of being part of our church they benefited more than we benefited from them. Especially if we provide godly leadership that offers a great vision and great opportunities to serve together which benefits them and the Kingdom.

We serve people because we genuinely care for them. When leaders serve out of love, we will not manipulate or take advantage of people. We don't lord it over others. Instead, we empathise with them.

We sit down beside them to listen to them, hold their hands at times and cry with them. We put our arms around their burdened shoulders and speak life into their hearts.



One of our life group leaders, a couple, lovingly serve their life group members. They take the time to visit and call up their members faithfully. They often hold special dinners and cook up a great meal to invite people into their home. There was one person who had been part of our church for many years but refused to be part of a life group. They persistently connect with this person for years, inviting him to participate in any life group activities because they did not wish for him to remain disconnected from fellowship. After more than 5 years of trying, the person finally started coming to their life group. They do all of this simply because they love people.

### **SERVES WITH HUMILITY**

Philippians 2:3–4 (NIV) 3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, 4 not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

When leaders lack humility, they will tend to value themselves above others. They will place their own perspectives, their own judgment above others. They will struggle to genuinely serve others because deep inside they believe that they should be served. When they serve others, they have the expectation that they should be compensated adequately. Since to them, it is tough serving others.

Humble leaders deeply value and appreciate the people around them whom they serve. They are grateful for the team whom they serve with. It is a joy for them to serve people. Ps. Denis Lu is one of our Global Elders and one whom I appreciate deeply. Even though he leads a large church and his ministry has a significant impact in the community, he serves with such a genuine humility it touches people's hearts. Nothing is too small for him to serve others in. Whether it be peeling garlic, taking out the garbage or taking the stage to affirm others – it comes from a humble heart to serve.

### **SERVES FROM A PLACE OF SECURITY**

It is important that leaders serve not out of insecurity, but security. Some serve out of a need to please or conform or oblige. That is not a healthy place to serve from. Because if we are not careful it can lead to a compromising of personal personhood.



Rather, true servant leaders serve out of meekness, out of strength. We serve because we can. Because we want to. Because we value so. Not because we are pressured into it. Not because we were cornered into it. When we serve from strength, we have much greater clarity in choosing who we serve, how we serve and when we serve. Jesus was never pressured in His serving. He did not serve what people want. When the masses wanted to pressure Him to be a king for them, He walked away.

Other churches, other movements have asked me to serve with them. But I did not even though it may have brought additional benefits to me. Because that is not what God instructed me to do. When we serve from a place of security, we are not pressured!

### **SERVES OUT OF DISCERNING NEEDS**

Jesus served out of discerning the true needs of the people. He discerned when the masses needed teaching. He discerned when they needed healing. He discerned when they needed food. He discerned when it was time to move on.

True servant leaders tend to be aware of the people's needs around them because they are observant of the people they serve. It is from this discernment that they are able to make choices about how they may best serve. Thus, they often are able to take the initiative to serve without being requested.

My wife and I founded our church in Brisbane and we have led it for the past 30 years. Over all those years, we found it crucial to discern the evolving needs in our congregations. So that we may continually prioritise and adapt how we lead, how we meet needs, both spiritual and natural amongst our people. By doing so, we are able to build a healthier and thriving church together with our leadership team.

Great leaders are able to work out the best way that they can serve for the greater good of many.

### **SERVES WITH GOD'S MISSION**

Jesus did not just serve. He served with a clear mission. It is crucial for us to realise that serving does not make one a leader. A true leader serves, but with a mission. Godly leaders not only want to serve but to further God's mission. Further, serving with a clear mission helps us determine why we serve, how we serve and who we serve.





Mission clarity provides the answers to why we serve and is crucial because it helps us determine priorities. For we cannot possibly serve any cause that comes our way. For example, in community work the needs are always endless. We can serve until we are bled dry and still the needs will not be met. In our church, we have a community arm. I require that the community work we do should not duplicate what is already available and adequately provided for by others nearby. The criteria we use is, "How does this bless the community in a sustainable way and also build a bridge to the church?"

Then we are able to work out what community projects we can be involved in, based on our available resources and strategic goals. In other words, how we serve. Since we do not have many highly skilled social workers in our midst, we focussed instead on low skill, higher touch projects. Hence, we have a food pantry project to provide food for needy families weekly in our surrounding community and we seek to build relationships with them. We also partnered with a Christian organisation to start a financial mentoring project to help financially struggling families to improve their approach to finance. In the hope that we can help them break the poverty cycle. We offer this to the needy families in our food pantry database as first priority. We also hope that it will help build a bridge to the church.

So clear mission helped us determine why we serve, how we serve and who we serve, because we also want to be effective in our serving.

## CONCLUSION

Jesus is the greatest servant leader. We should seek to emulate His example and the heart behind it all. Hence, in following Jesus, we should also grow in having the heart of a servant leader, not just emulate His example alone. When we further examine how Jesus served, we discover principles for effective serving leadership. Thus, if we are to be effective servant leaders we should serve beyond our personal agenda, out of love and humility. We should also serve from a place of security, out of discerning the real needs and with God's mission. Having such qualities will lift the effectiveness of our serving, as leaders faithful unto God.



## Discussion Questions

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These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. How did Jesus reframe the way we exercise authority? What significance is that to you and the way you currently exercise authority?
2. What are your thoughts about this statement “True serving means making selfless, even sacrificial decisions that goes beyond what our personal agenda would dictate.” How does that help you work out the manner in which you juggle your personal agenda and serving? Discuss.
3. Why do you think that love is such a crucial motivation for true serving? Discuss.



## Actionable Steps

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Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. Consider your motivations to serve. Identify if any of those motivations contradict the principles explained here. What are some steps you can take to change those motivation?
2. Define and clarify your mission for serving in your ministry. Then work out the manner in which it should impact the why you serve, how you serve and who we serve.







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