

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

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[0 : 00] George Armstrong Custer was a United States Army officer and cavalry leader in the American Civil Wars and the Indian Wars. Today he is most remembered for his disastrous military campaign at the Little Bighorn, known as the Battle of Little Bighorn, the 25th of June 1876, where he died with 260 other soldiers.

He had humble origins, both in life and in fact in his military career. But during the American Civil War, he was regarded among soldiers as a great leader, always willing to do the toughest of jobs. And his reputation spread. And at the age of 23, he became the youngest major general in American military history. And it was during this rise to fame, because of his leadership skills, that he fell in love with publicity, and especially publicity about himself.

He in fact started to believe his own fame. And for those who knew him and served under him and with him in the latter years, he became known for his vanity and his desire for personal glory.

In fact, some historians go as far as to say that it was because of his pride and his vanity and his desire for personal glory that 261 people died at the Little Bighorn in that June in 1876.

[1 : 39] Custer's leadership, the character behind Custer's leadership is pretty much the exact opposite of the sort of leadership that's described here in St. Paul's in our core value of servant leadership.

The right leadership amongst God's people is essential for God's people to thrive and grow. In an age of individualism, which we exist in now, we often don't often think about leadership and the crucial nature of a leadership.

But as far as the Bible is concerned, God's people either thrive or not, depending on the kind of leadership. Leadership is essential.

Difficulty. You see, for 70 years, God's people have been exiled in Babylon for repeated disobedience. And now they are under a new empire with a new king named King Cyrus. And just a remnant of God's people had returned back into Israel.

And they discovered that while they'd been in Babylon for 70 years, some of the neighbors that came in and sort of moved in house like squatters, they kind of taken over their home. And so circumstances were really hard.

[3 : 18] They were under the rule of Persia. Numbers of them were pretty small. Resources were pretty limited. People had moved into their land. And all their neighbors viewed them with a whole heap of suspicion.

Now, granted, things were not as bad as they used to be back in Babylon, but they were nowhere near of what they expected God to give them when they came back.

What their future, their expectation, what their future would be. And this community lived in the tension, if you like, between the now, but the not yet. It's the tension between the beginnings of what God had promised them and the waiting for the complete fulfillment of what God had promised them.

The situation here in Isaiah 56 and 57 is very similar to the situations that Christians face between the first coming of Jesus and the second coming of Jesus, where we have the promises of God. And yet we wait for the complete fulfillment of those promises when Jesus comes back again. Now, waiting in the between time, it tests our patience and our faith.

[4 : 25] And for some people, that tension is just too much and they just fall away. They just give up on trusting in Jesus. Those who do remain faithful, unsure what it is to wait for the purposes of God to be fulfilled.

And what is absolutely crucial for the community of believers, for the people of God, in living within that tension, is the quality of its leadership.

I want to suggest to you that an awful lot of our faithfulness as the people of God depend upon the quality of leadership. In chapter 56, Isaiah describes the corruption of Israel.

In particular, what he does here is he slams the leadership for utterly failing the people. For example, in verse 11, Isaiah 56, they are dogs with mighty appetites.

They never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding. They all turn to their own way. Each seeks his own gain. And so the leaders of God's people here are described as those who pursue their own gain.

[5 : 41] And that's the issue here in a nutshell. They're leading out of self-interest. And so leadership for them is more about being served.

People propping them up and congratulating them and getting their drinks for them and whatever it is. Rather than them serving. They fed on the people of God.

They preyed on the people of Israel. And they are described here in verse 10 as blind watchmen and mute dogs. You see, one of their key jobs was as watchmen was to stand on the city wall.

That's what a watchman did. They stood on the city wall and they kept an eye out for any danger. Any danger comes and they basically bark like a dog. You know, when you're intruding into their backyard. They let you know that there's a problem there.

And here they are described as blind. They can't see the danger. And even if they could sense some danger, they are mute dogs who can't warn anyone.

[6 : 45] What good is a dog that can't bark? And so it says they would rather daydream. They would rather sleep.

Verse 12 says they'd rather drink wine and beer in comfort that we're going to do it all again tomorrow. In other words, leadership for them is all about comfort and people serving them.

And everyone else doing the work and then just telling people what to do. They're meant to be watchmen, alert to the dangers that threaten from outside and shepherds, nurturing and strengthening the inner life of the community.

Instead, they are lazy. They are self-indulgent and they fail to exercise their duty of oversight of the people. They fail as leaders. And then what you see in chapter 57, verses 1 onwards, is describes what becomes of the people when the leaders fail.

Verses 1 and 2, the righteous perish and no one comes to their defense. Verses 3 and 4, adultery and sorcery and cruelty abound.

[7 : 51] Superstition and false religions flourish. It becomes the cover for all kinds of wickedness. The first half of verse 5 says you burn with lust among the oaks and under every spreading tree.

That's referring to sexual fertility rites that Israel had sort of grabbed hold of from the Canaanite religions, their neighbors. In the second half of verse 5, we see child sacrifices practiced as well as practicing sorcery and divination and consulting medium and spiritualists.

Verses 6 to 13 consists a long description of idolatry as the people of God turn away from God and worship other things. Verse 6, the idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion.

Verse 7, you have made your bed on a high and lofty hill. There you went up to offer your sacrifices. Verse 8, behind your doors and your doorposts, you have put in pagan symbols.

Verse 9, you went to Moloch with olive oil. Verse 11 says the fear of the Lord is lost. And other unhealthy fears have taken over.

[8 : 57] It's a consistent theme right throughout the prophets in the Old Testament. The failure of leadership results in the people turning their backs on God.

The second half of chapter 57 reveals what God is looking for in both his leaders and his people. And he says this in verse 15, for this is what the high and lofty one says.

He who lives forever, whose name is holy. I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.

That is, God gets on with those whose hearts are humble. You see, what gets God's attention, as it says in chapter 66 of Isaiah, and as I said last week, is humility.

God's attention is not drawn to strength and self-confidence. And so at the heart of our core value of servant leadership is humble authenticity.

[10 : 13] Humble authenticity is what underlies, undergirds, is the foundation of servant leadership. Mind you, this issue of self-indulgence, self-glorifying, self-centered leadership was not just an issue for Israel's leadership.

In Isaiah's time, ultimately, it's an issue for all of God's people in all the time. And the first disciples were not immune from proud hearts either and self-glory. Their pursuit of personal greatness and recognition wasn't subtle in any sense.

For example, Jesus' interaction with them in Mark chapter 9, it's a little bit before it was read out to us. It says this, they came to Capernaum, and when he was in the house, he asked them, what were you arguing about on the road?

They're walking along with Jesus, they're having this discussion, arguing about something. He says, what are you arguing about? And they all went, oh, I forgot. They kept quiet because on the way, they had argued about who was the greatest.

What a discussion. It's like they're wandering along with Jesus, the greatest, the ultimate example of humility, and they're having a full-scale dispute on who is the greatest.

[11 : 40] It should have been pretty obvious. Jesus is. And in Mark 10, just read out to us, verse 35, the dispute seems to have been settled in the minds of James and John.

That is, they've finally worked out who's the greatest. And they approached Jesus with a special question. Let one of us sit at your right hand and the other one sit at your left hand in your glory. Now, let's be frank here. Their hearts are on full display. And there's nothing subtle, nothing nice, nothing acceptable about it. They want to be famous.

James and John have, if you like, seen Jesus' greatness and power and influence and position, and they want to be right there at the center of it.

They want the respect, the acclaim, the importance. Of course, they recognize Jesus' glory. They recognize that Jesus is the greatest. It is his glory. They acknowledge that. But they want to be right there in the spotlight with him.

[12 : 51] It's sort of like there's a famous person being interviewed on TV and you sort of photobomb them, you know, sort of hoping that you get your sort of couple of minutes of fame there, you know, in the back of the... It's sort of like that. We know it's Jesus' glory, but we want to be there and get a bit of it.

I've got to tell you, that speaks to my heart. It is so much easier to take up your cross and follow Jesus when other people are seeing it and recognizing it and even applauding it.

Does it resonate with your heart? How often do we serve and we just want to let people know that we've served?

How often do we go just a little bit beyond and just make sure people know that I've gone just a little bit beyond? Yesterday afternoon, grabbed a hammer drill, put the bollards in at the end of this driveway.

It's not in my job description to do DIY stuff. Stuck the bollards in in the driveway. I spoke to one of the staff members yesterday afternoon about some building stuff and it would have been twice in that conversation, which went for about 10 minutes, that I mentioned that I put the bollards in.

[14 : 29] Didn't even think about it. It just sort of happened. It just sort of happened. My friends, if we define greatness as this world does, then we end up with individuals motivated by self-interest, self-indulgence and a false sense of self-sufficiency, pursuing self-ambition for the purpose of self-glorification.

That is, to summarize all of that, it's all about me. Thankfully, Jesus is merciful and gentle with our pride-driven hearts.

Jesus calls in the disciples and what he does is he turns their values on their head in Mark 10. 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.

[15 : 48] Those words are the reversal of all human ideas of rank and greatness.

It is the profound reversal that must occur in each of our lives if we have any possibility whatsoever of being great in God's eyes.

But to learn true humility and servant-heartedness, we need much more than just a redefinition of greatness. And frankly, we even need more than Jesus' personal example of humble service.

To learn true humility, what we need is Jesus' death. Hear again his words. For even the Son of Man didn't come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

And so right there is the difference between the example of the disciples and Jesus' example.
[17 : 09] True greatness is not possible without his unique sacrifice. Jesus is the only one who gives his life as a ransom for the sins of many.

And this is what separates him from every other form of sacrificial service. Jesus' sacrifice alone makes it possible for us to achieve and experience true greatness in God's eyes.

And to bring clarity to that, what that means is no sacrificial service that I render in and of itself without the death of Jesus will ever make me truly great in God's eyes.

At the source of all Christian service in the world is the crucified and risen Lord who died to liberate us into such service.

He's liberated us into service. Ultimately, our Christian service exists to draw attention to its source, the Lord Jesus.

[18 : 30] And when I, in the name of serving Jesus, draw the attention to myself, I rob God of something that should be his alone.

And I think the Bible calls that idolatry. As you encounter those who humbly serve, know that they're truly great in God's eyes, but more importantly, understand the source of their serving.

Their humble service, whoever it is, should remind us of Jesus' death, of Jesus' ransom, the price Jesus paid to liberate that person into a life of service.

So in a nutshell, all Christian service is meant to put Jesus on display, not the person serving.

A little later in the New Testament, the Apostle Peter helps us understand what humble servant leadership looks like.

[19 : 47] 1 Peter 5 verses 1 to 4 says this, Now I'm mindful that those verses were written especially to elders and overseas in the local church, people like myself.

But the principles of Christian leadership apply across the board. Peter gives three charges to these elders, and each of the charges is given as both a negative and a positive.

Firstly, second half of verse 2, he says, Serve as overseers, not because you must, but because you are willing. Now there's a threat here in these verses that these elders would rather be doing something else with their time.

It's very simple. Leaders have less desire for leadership if it's really hard and it's really difficult, and particularly if it's dangerous.

It's dangerous to be a leader when the church is under persecution. And chapter 4 of 1 Peter tells us that this church is going through a fiery ordeal.

[21 : 35] And so it's understandable that the leaders of these churches that Peter is writing to are kind of wanting to think, Is there anyone else who wants to be a leader? And the leaders are also vulnerable to God's judgment in a peculiar kind of way.

Chapter 4 of 1 Peter, verse 17 says that God's judgment had begun with the house of God. And there is a really scary reference here to Ezekiel chapter 9 for the elders.

Ezekiel 9 verses 4 to 6 is a description of the way God has brought judgment upon his people, beginning with the leadership.

And so the fiery ordeal that chapter 4 verse 12 refers to is a refining fire of God's discipline. The trials are designed by God to purge us of all sinful self-reliance.

That's what the fiery ordeal does. And so the role of leadership in 1 Peter 5 is to lead God's people into the furnace.

[22 : 57] That's the role of leadership. They walk into the furnace of God's purifying trials and they call the disciples of the Lord Jesus to follow them as they follow Christ.

They call the flock to join them and assist them. Not only do they call the flock to join them, but they actually, not only are they going through the refining fires, but they assist the flock to endure the refining fires by teaching them and modelling patient endurance in the refining fires.

They call the flock to endure it, to rejoice in it, and in fact even to seek it from the hand of a gracious, merciful and sovereign God.

That is a pretty tough gig. My friends, as I've said several times a day already, you do not want weak leadership.

You don't want leadership that goes, oh my goodness, hard times over there, too much risk. Let's try this one instead. It'd be the easier option. You, as the people of God, need leadership with a backbone of steel and a deep, deep confidence in God who is sovereign and who is gracious and merciful.

[24 : 27] So Peter warns that there are also a couple of strong motives for being a leader. Even if your heart's not in it, there's a couple of reasons why you might want to do it.

And the first is verse 2. Not greedy for money, but eager to serve. That is, greedy for money means making ministry a means to getting rich. And this is particularly for people like myself.

It means making, constantly thinking about things like vacations and days off and retirement benefits. And instead of thinking about the value of the human soul and the preciousness of truth and radical generosity and the power of the Holy Spirit and the coming glory of the chief shepherd. And then there's verse 3. Peter warns against the other worldly motive for exercising leadership where he says, Not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. Lording it over here implies that there might be a leader who is driven by a love of power. They just love telling people what to do. Just like Isaiah 56.

[25 : 35] The picture there of the leaders telling everyone what to do while they sit back and drink beer and wine and just relax and everyone else is doing the work. This kind of leader gets an ego high from flaunting their authority and their prestige and their dominance and their titles.

They need to be up front. They need to be addressed with titles. They crave the praise of people. They crave the dependence of people on them. And what Peter says here is far from being a lord and master, the leader is an example.

Far from being someone who says, Oi, you go and do that job. They are, come follow me as I follow Christ. They are to lead others in humble obedience to God by themselves being humbly obedient to God as they put into practice the word of God in their lives.

And Peter, I think, says that the test of such leadership is their whole life. It's not just because they've got a certain skill set. Are they examples?

Do people want to follow them as they follow Christ? Is their public oversight a show or is there a whole of life to prove that they are authentic disciples of Jesus?

[26 : 50] Is their public leader and a different private disciple? What about their family and their finances and their hospitality and their discernment and their reputation with those in the church and those beyond the church?

My friends, the scripture set a very high standard for leaders. Very high standards. They pour out their life for God's people in service of and for the glory of God.

Let me just add that the high calling of the vocation of Christian service makes leaders vulnerable to the judgment and assessment of those they lead.

There are few things, I believe, that will reveal to you the full range of your weakness, your sinfulness, your immaturity, your ineptitude, your failure like Christian leadership.

There are few endeavors that will put you under more public expectancy and scrutiny than Christian leadership. There are few things as personally humbling as Christian leadership.

[28 : 09] There are few endeavors that have such power to produce deep feelings of inadequacy as Christian leadership.

There is no such thing as a perfect performance. And after 20 years of ministry, I've discovered that there are plenty of people who are prepared to remind you of that.

Let me tell you, on a personal note, it's not hard to second guess yourself in Christian leadership.

It's not hard to do that. What's particularly hard is when people join you in second guessing yourself in Christian leadership.

And that is when discouragement can be a killer for leadership. And in that vulnerability and possible discouragement, it is comforting to know that the Peter who calls the elders here to be flocks and set such a high standard for leadership is the same Peter who denied Jesus three times and himself ended up having an unforgettable breakfast with Jesus on the shores of Lake Galilee. The risen Lord Jesus restored the failed Peter to his apostolic office. And he himself charges Peter to be a shepherd of Christ's people.

[29 : 48] And when calling the elders here in 1 Peter to shepherd the flock, Peter is fully aware of his own failings, of his own shortcomings.

And the Lord Jesus has promised to raise up faithful leaders amongst his people. Faithful leaders who can stand and lead because the Lord Jesus is their love.

He is their hope. He is their forgiveness. He is their enabling. He is their comfort. He is their comfort. Even when they don't feel worthy.

Even when all of their weaknesses and vulnerability is staring them in the face. Even when they dismally fail.

In the end, faithful leaders don't look to the affirmation of others. Faithful leaders look to the good shepherd.

[30 : 55] The Lord Jesus Christ himself for their affirmation and for their rebuke. So what then can sustain the sort of shepherding expressed in these sorts of words?

Where you might want to do it even in great danger and personal cost to do it willingly and do it eager to serve others. That is, what motivates you to want to lead God's people?

In fact, even to love to lead God's people and sacrifice for them. To delight to do it. Even when you feel weak and vulnerable and inadequate. Verse 4.

And when the chief shepherd appears, you'll receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

You see, what keeps true leaders going is that when the chief shepherd comes, with him comes his everlasting reward.

The unfading crown of glory. And that in itself is enough. That's the goal. So my friends, Christian leadership is a high calling.

[32 : 07] And the quality that we must look for in our leaders more than anything else is humble authenticity. Humble authenticity.

Which is not the opposite of having a backbone of steel. Our leadership must lead us.

And not just me. Not just parish council. I'm talking about everyone. Children's ministry, youth ministry, the whole lot. They must lead us in Christ-centered Bible saturation, devotion to prayer and humble authenticity.

In fact, I want to be frank here. I make no apology whatsoever for saying that our leadership must be clearly pursuing core membership at St. Paul's.

Make no apology for that whatsoever. Core membership is a practical outworking of our heart. Core membership is a practical outworking of our core values.

[33 : 09] Core membership is a practical outworking of our core values. And as we've seen earlier, the people of God go the way the leaders go, positively or negatively.

And so it is essential for us to have leaders who are practically living out our heart and leading us in that direction. Leadership doesn't come about because of skill.

Leadership doesn't come about because of popularity. Doesn't come about because of longevity.

You've been here longer than anyone else. It doesn't come about because you're the last one standing.

One of my main responsibilities here at St. Paul's is to appoint leadership who comply to biblical standards.

I've got a letter from the Archbishop with that mandate. And leaders who will lead our church in our corporate mission to know, treasure, to represent the Lord Jesus for God's glory and the joy of all people.

[34 : 22] And it's a responsibility that I take seriously. Christian leadership is ironically a high calling to be a servant of others in service of Christ.

Can I encourage you? I want to encourage you to do two things tonight. First of all, pray for your leadership right now. I believe we're in one of those refining fire times where you look around and frankly, everything seems hard.

There's so many good things happening and I'm rejoicing in that. And yet, everything seems hard.

Parish councils meeting tomorrow night and they've got some really hard stuff to work through.

I believe in spiritual warfare. I believe that whenever the church is healthy, Satan hates it and he throws whatever he can at you.

And as I said, you need, not just me, you need leaders, parish council with backbones of steel who are prepared to keep walking, trusting in Christ through that refining fire.

[35 : 35] It is for our health and for our good. And secondly, I would call upon you to pursue leadership in this church by pursuing core membership in this church.

By living out what we say we value. Prove yourself worthy of leadership rather than demanding your spot or expecting your turn.

As Jesus said, 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 give his life as a ransom for many.

Amen. Amen.