

Influence by Serving, Matthew 20:20-28

Let's look together at our Master-Teacher, Jesus to describe leadership influence as serving others. When we struggle spiritually and spiral down, most likely we have become self-focused in some way. The simple (but not easy!) solution is to refocus on Jesus then choose to serve others.

*Who among you image-bearers of the Triune God is unable to **serve** others?*

First, we need to take a detour...which is not really a detour.

How do you view Jesus in the Gospels?

As the *impossible* ideal because He is God and we are not? Or as the *best possible* model for our lives because Jesus walked fully as the Model man while on earth (while never ceasing to be God)?

Jesus' revolutionary style to lead by life-on-life influence is not an *impossible* ideal today. It's the *best possible* model to relate to each other and to influence the world in a way the world can never imitate. He showed us how to walk out this life and it's within the reach of each of us.

In the last weeks of His earthly life, Jesus' Aunt Salome comes to Him with her two sons, cousins James and John. Auntie Salome and her two boys unabashedly ask for the top posts in His Kingdom, right next to Jesus Himself (see parallel in Mark 10:35-45).

"Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom" (Matthew 20:21).

I would have been spitting mad, too, just like the ten, as they elbowed in on my space.

But not Jesus!

Jesus sees the heart's desire behind their misconceptions about leadership and influence. At least they verbalized their distorted belief system about leadership influence. Now Jesus could bring clarity and correction to sharpen their spiritual vision...and ours today. Most of us are chained by similar myths about leadership and influence, yet we are unwilling to bring our private thoughts into public scrutiny.

Jesus does not give an inch in their campaign to grasp position-based authority. He does use this situation though. Jesus challenges His followers to reorient in three significant ways in this fascinating exchange toward the end of His earthly ministry. I call His revolutionary teaching in Matthew 20:20-28, "*Jesus' 20/20 Vision on Spiritual Influence.*"

First Clarification/Correction: *Suffering/Sacrifice*

Jesus never dodges the hard realities. He exposes their false belief system on leadership, "*you don't know what you are asking.*"

"You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said to them. "Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?" "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will indeed drink from my cup..." (Matthew 20:22-23a).

Jesus points to one of His sharpest tools for dealing with false or incomplete beliefs...*suffering* (see #12, "A Healthy View of Trials"). Suffering, represented by the cup, points to the larger parallel response of sacrifice. A high cost goes hand in hand with authority to influence. What a tragic lack of perspective they had with their overconfident, "*we can.*"

But Jesus knew what lay ahead.

Jesus needs battle-toughened leaders who would stay the course to further His influence to the ends of the earth. *Suffering* can be a great teacher. Sacrifice is part and parcel of advancing the Kingdom and strengthening the **Family** and **Kingdom** of God. We must develop a healthy theology of pain and loss and suffering, or we will drop out when we get uncomfortable. God uses hard times for our good (Romans 8:28). “*Yes, you will drink my cup of suffering.*”

Leadership influence like Jesus demands sacrifice. The sooner we accept this Reality, the more benefit we receive from trials.

But is this really sacrifice?

Sacrifice focuses on the *present* cost; investment focuses on the *future* abundance. Investment seems to me like it better represents God-Reality, our choice to limit something today in view of a greater future gain.

Second Clarification/Correction: Sovereignty

Positions of responsibility and authority are not ours to grasp, but His Father’s to give. God is the ultimate Promoter.

Jesus said to them, “... to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father” (Matthew 20:23).

Today’s common leadership philosophy profiles potential candidates more on the outward than the deep inner work in our lives. Preparation according to society comes through schooling, past accomplishments, passing a battery of tests, and/or a special so-called leadership personality or giftedness. Society pulls us toward the outward.

If we mark leaders by their credentials, such influencers/leaders may lead on **their** terms, even while the Son of Man draws us to lead from what He has formed deeply within. God radically changed Samuel’s perspective just before anointing David as king. “*Man looks at the outward, but God looks at the heart.*”

Unfortunately, if we win office by campaigning, then we will have to work just as hard to hang on to it. When our Father in heaven calls, He sovereignly assumes ultimate responsibility for developing servants and appointing each person to their unique work.

Oh, we also play an important role in partnering with Him, for sure. It’s a *Both/And* partnership. Yet, it’s *never* about our sufficiency, strengths, preparation, heritage, schooling, gifting or personality. In fact, Paul said that when he recognized his true weakness, that’s when he is strongest (2 Corinthians 12:19). It’s about God’s sovereignty. There is only *one* Commander-in-Chief in the Kingdom army. That position is already filled...and not by us!

Influence means *our* sacrifice and *His* sovereignty. We confuse these at our own risk. We willingly embrace God’s plan and position for our lives without grasping and grabbing for more and bigger and better. And without disqualifying ourselves with the false “humility” of “*I’m not worthy!*” God makes us worthy with His life.

He is sovereign; not us. We cultivate our lives deeply in the “*garden plot*” He has placed us. In His timing God will widen our influence. “*Bloom where you are planted.*” Influence and equity with people, anointing and power for transformation, all flow from *His* favor through service, like with Jesus.¹ Only the power of the relational Trinity can do this. He is God and we are not.

Third Clarification/Correction: *Service*

Finally, Jesus radically redefines *true greatness*. He first exposes the ego-centered attitudes of the other ten disciples. They were outraged that James and John tried to get the edge. But no more ticked off than I would have been.

“Drat! They thought to ask first!”

When the ten heard about his, they were indignant with the two brothers
(Matthew 20:24).

Jesus then calls His community of emerging leaders together. *“Let’s huddle up together!”* Trinitarian leadership is *always* about *T-E-A-M* (**T**ogether **E**veryone **A**ccomplishes **M**ore), community, togetherness, collaboration, connectedness, relationship. “Team” is God’s original design since He *is* the original Team, the Father, Son and Spirit. If it takes a Team of Servants to rule the universe (Father, Son and Spirit), how much more is team needed to foster growth in a local faith-community?

Team and *koinonia*-based leadership are not some new, 21st century add-on. We have been designed in the image of community, *T-E-A-M*, the Triune God Himself. Together in community Jesus exposes the faulty, position-based leadership emphasis of many who are in charge in this world. He knows how seductive power and position are (not wrong; dangerous). His 21st century apprentices must grasp the nuances of authentic leadership defined as service to safeguard God’s people.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it **over** them, and their high officials exercise authority **over** them”
(Matthew 20:25, **emphasis**).

Jesus uses few words in verse 25, but who needs more?

We have all personally experienced powerbrokers whose authority rests in position and visibility. Jesus seems to imply that leadership that primarily seeks positional-authority will in time normally lead to harsh, controlling attitudes. He points to these religious rulers of the day and their resulting self-referenced actions that follow (see Matthew 23:1-12 for a description of how they lead).

The repeated word “*over*” exposes the dominating pull and shove of the top-down system. Controlling, prevailing on others to serve *their* vision, plan or program, demanding loyalty (not wrong, just limited). Attitudes of control and competition grip these leaders in business, home and society (and unfortunately also in some churches or church movements).

Do you remember the original request of James and John for position and power? Their words expose their mental model on leadership (that is, “*leadership equals positional authority*”). First-century society looked at positional-based leadership and said, “*It’s good! Give me more!*”² This subtle, prevailing attitude of control reasserts itself with every generation since this virus flooded the world through the Fall in Genesis 3.

Jesus, however, is not seduced. He reveals their false views on leadership as the common misconception of the 1st century...and also of the 21st century. Primarily position-based or top-down leadership naturally seeks a rank *above* others. “*Lord it over.*” “*Exercise authority over.*”

Power. Position. Place. Control. Visionary. Calling the shots. Buck stops here. Make it happen. Up front. Expert. Visibility. Answer Man (of course, with Christian leaders, “*for the good of*

others”). Some leaders today are uncomfortable in any position without control...and mistakenly call it strong leadership.

God never intended power and authority to be for the self-preservation of the leader. Leadership authority is to protect and provide for *others*.

Jesus does not criticize the drive of His cousins for *greatness*. Striving to do something that has long-range impact on people is a reflection of God’s unblemished image. God designed us for significant purpose. Jesus simply proposes an alternative, a revolutionary way to lead through relational influence. This way aligns consistently with God’s nature and His original design of humanity.

With a sharp contrast to the leadership style of His day (“*Instead*” = “*not so with you*”), Jesus sketches out His simple, revolutionary style of leadership. What does it take to be authentically great?

“Instead, whoever wants to become **great** among you must be your **servant**, and whoever wants to be **first** must be your **slave**” (Matthew 20:26-27, **emphasis**).

Jesus describes true leadership influence as upside down compared to the world-philosophy. Jesus turns society’s value-system on its head (so it’s right side up!) He calls His people to another kind of leadership, an approach in which leaders arise out of the pool of servants since they exist in order to *serve* others regardless of cost.

We move towards true greatness when we serve others without expecting any return!

“Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— 28 just as the **Son of Man** did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Jesus in Matthew 20:26-28, **emphasis**).

The greatest influencer is actually the greatest servant. **Everyone** can become an effective *community* leader/influencer in their “*garden plot*.” Such leadership flows out of serving, *relational authority* first, rather than on *positional authority*. For instance in the 1st century church, a slave may pastor a church where his master attended. Such leadership influence is well within the grasp of each of God’s people, when we give up the illusion that we can run our own life or control others.

Let me take a quick run through a few verses to let the Spirit of God convince you even more deeply about our call as *servants*. You and I, with every other believer are:

- created for serving (Ephesians 2:10).
- saved for serving (2 Timothy 1:9).
- called to serving (1 Peter 2:9-10.)
- pointed toward serving (Matthew 20:26-29)
- authorized for serving (Matthew 28:18-20)
- gifted for serving (1 Peter 4:10-22, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11)
- provided with more through serving (Luke 6:38),
- needed for serving (1 Corinthians 12:27).
- to be equipped for serving (Ephesians 4:11-12). and
- will be rewarded for serving (Colossians 3:23-24).

Since we are never more like Jesus then when we serve and serving ***IS*** its own reward, serving with Jesus releases fresh life to the weary.

*What part is God calling you to **now** in your “garden plot”?*

So, what does it look like to walk out life as a servant like Jesus in a sustainable way?

¹ “You know...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him” (Acts 10:37-38).

² Often power is looked at as a “zero sum” quantity. A limited amount is assumed, so if you have more, I must have less. Often this is true in the world because of limited resources, which foster competition. It’s *never* true in God’s Trinitarian economy because what is essential and valued is unlimited, God’s love, grace, peace, contentment. We can *all* have life abundantly.