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## The Leading Servant

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GYEONGCHUN CHOI

## THE LEADING SERVANT

Servant leadership theory and practice emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s to become a global phenomenon. Since 1969, when Greenleaf (2002) penned “The Leader as Servant,” the first chapter of *Servant Leadership*, the conversations—both scholarly and common—have continued for nearly five decades as efforts have been made to apply the principles to various fields.

Greenleaf (2002) strongly argues that “leadership was bestowed upon a person who was by nature a servant” (p. 2). His view of a servant-leader is that the person must first be a servant. According to Greenleaf, someone’s ability to lead is demonstrated by his or her disposition to serve. It is well known that Greenleaf’s concepts of servant leadership (e.g., listening, acceptance, empathy, foresight, awareness, persuasion, conceptualizing, healing and serving) were inspired by Hermann Hesse’s *Journey to the East*. In that story, it was the servant Leo who did menial chores, but who was eventually revealed as the real leader.

The biblical narrative depicts many examples of those who embody the characteristics and principles of servant leadership as defined by Greenleaf (2002), characters such as Jesus, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Paul, and John. Also, there are Old and New Testament stories that contain accounts of servants in their socio-cultural background. God uses the slavery system devised by fallen human beings to describe His own character as He leads His people. It seems that whenever fallen human beings ignore the humble-serving characteristic of leadership, God deliberately inserts the stories of exemplary servants into the biblical narratives.

Remember the stories of the servant of Abraham (Gen. 24:1-67), the servant Joseph (Gen. 39:1-23), Abigail (1 Sam. 25:2-42), a maidservant of Naaman’s wife (2 Kings 5:1-3), the song of the suffering servant (Isa. 53),

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the story of Onesimus (Philemon), and the teaching of Jesus on servanthood (Matt. 20:25-28; 24:45-51; 25:14-30; Mark 10:42-45; 13:34-37; Luke 12; 22:24-27; and John 13:3-17).

Of the many biblical stories that demonstrate servant leadership, 1 Samuel 9 gives a profound case of the “leading servant” when Saul was selected as the king of Israel by the prophet Samuel. I suggest the phrase “leading servant” because it helps us to remember that Saul’s servant was first a servant, even though his actions were more like those typically attributed to leaders.

The story of 1 Samuel 9 relates the account of Samuel anointing Saul as “leader” (v. 16). Most commentators describe this story of Saul’s encounter with the prophet Samuel within the Lord’s providence. While generally the role and function of the servant in this event is treated as additional or ancillary information, Jacobs (2008) gives attention to the role of the secondary characters in this narrative (1 Sam. 9-10) by the chiasmic structure. His conclusion is that the story shows God’s guidance in selecting the king of Israel through the many secondary characters surrounding Saul. The whole story can be divided into four scenes in terms of the progress of the story encircling the servant of Saul.

## The First Scene

The first scene (vv. 1-4) is the background of the story, which contrasts Saul and his servant. God said to Samuel, “About this time tomorrow I will send you a man from the land of Benjamin. Anoint him *leader* (emphasis added) over my people Israel” (1 Sam. 9:16, NIV 1984). McCarter (1980) claims that the term “the leader” appears here for the first time in the Old Testament. It means, as a passive form, “the one proclaimed, designated” or “one who is made known, singled out, designated for office” (Tsumura, 2007). Evans (2004) sees the distinctive role of Saul as leader. She argues that Saul was primarily anointed as a *nagîd* (leader), which has military connotations and could have been applied to any of the earlier judges. The word *melek* (meaning “king”) is not used here (p. 66).

From a human point of view, Saul had enough qualities to be Israel’s leader. Despite Saul’s reaction—“But am I not a Benjamite, from the smallest tribe of Israel, and is not my clan the least of all the clans of the tribe of Benjamin?” (1 Sam. 9:21, NIV 1984)—his genealogy shows that he could get strong assistance and protection from his family. His father, Kish, is introduced as “a man of standing” (1 Sam. 9:1, NIV 1984) who owned slaves, donkeys, and oxen (cf. 11:5). Also, Saul was

“an impressive young man without equal among the Israelites—a  $\alpha$  (tôb) means that he was noticeably handsome and attractive in his physical appearance (McCarter, 1980).

In contrast, Saul’s servant had no name, no family background, no career or accomplishment, but was just “one of the servants” (1 Sam. 9:3) of Kish’s family. From the beginning of the story, the servant’s position seems to be hidden and passive. There is no evidence of other accounts of this servant outside this story. In fact, the rest of the chapters are filled only with accounts of King Saul’s life, his victories, and his defeats.

This story thus gives a paradoxical comparison between Saul and his servant. One is a well-equipped leader; the other is a fully subordinated servant. Nevertheless, the story of this anonymous servant has an inseparable linkage to Saul’s selection as the first king of Israel.

## The Second Scene

The second scene (vv. 5-10) describes the purpose of their journey, to search for Kish’s lost donkeys. In God’s providence, Kish asked his son, Saul, to go with one of the servants and find the donkeys (v. 3). Saul and his servant searched for the donkeys for a while but they could not find them. Finally, “Saul said to the servant who was with him, ‘Come, let’s go back, or my father will stop thinking about the donkeys and start worrying about us’” (v. 5, NIV 1984). Here, the servant plays a pivotal role in what happens next: “[He] replied, ‘Look, in this town there is a man of God; he is highly respected, and everything he says comes true. Let’s go there now. Perhaps he will tell us what way to take’” (v. 6, NIV 1984).

While Saul was considering returning to his father, his servant suggested they meet with the prophet Samuel. The servant was proposing a spiritual solution to their problem. Bodner (2008) points out that the servant was “remarkably well informed, knowing the minute specificities of the ‘man of God’” (p. 82).

Bergen (1996) identifies three features in the brief interchange between Saul and his servant in verses 6-10:

First is Saul’s profound ignorance of Samuel. Though Samuel lived nearby and was known to “all Israel” (3:20; 4:1), even Saul’s young slave (Hb. na`ar), he was unknown to Saul. Second is Saul’s failure to consider seeking divine help in the trials of life. It was Saul’s slave, not Saul himself, who recognized the need for spiritual help in coping with their problems. The future king’s life at this point was devoid of a spiritual sensitivity that looked to the Lord for help. Third is Saul’s assumption that spiritual favors had

to be bought; though some unscrupulous prophets might have demanded this (cf. Mic 3:11; Acts 8:20), no true servant of the Lord would. (p. 121-122)

Saul demonstrates his limited perspective with the recognition of his empty hands. He said, "If we go, what can we give the man? The food in our sacks is gone. We have no gift to take to the man of God. What do we have?" (v. 7, NIV 1984). Gifts were an integral part of social intercourse in the ancient world. They were given to friends, guests, and almost anyone whom one wished to treat honorably or have good relations with (McCarter, 1980). His observation was correct, but not constructive. Without giving up, "the servant answered him again. 'Look,' he said, 'I have a quarter of a shekel of silver. I will give it to the man of God so that he will tell us what way to take'" (v. 8, NIV 1984). The Hebrew suggests that "the money seems to have turned up adventitiously" (McCarter, 1980). Evans (2004) suggests that "the servant's willingness to contribute what appears to have been his own money to aid their search indicates a close relationship to Saul and his family" (pp. 63-64). Although we do not know how the servant found the money, what is clear is that the servant was prepared to use it. This scene reflects the servant's future-oriented attitude. While Saul was about to quit, his servant unwittingly found a way to keep them within God's providence.

Because he was a servant, he could have merely followed his master's instruction without question or argument. However, his attitude was active rather than passive, participative, and even stubborn or argumentative (Jacobs, 2008). Gordon (1986) refers to the servant's attitude as "a critical intervention," and points out that the servant was "able to offer just the right information and requisite item (v. 8) to keep his master in business" (p. 113). Although the servant's status was that of a follower, he was not merely a follower. According to Evans (2004), "the servant, who appears, at this stage, to have rather more initiative than Saul, suggests that while they are here they might as well look up the man of God" (p. 63). Consequently, if the servant had not shown the stubborn determination and had not carried a quarter-shekel of silver, the journey would have been a failure. Magonet (1992), seeing the characteristics of a leader in the servant's attitude, argues that "this young man had imagination and resourcefulness, two valuable qualities in a leader. But he remains anonymous, literally hidden by the large shadow cast by Saul—an unknown youth who might just conceivably have become king" (p. 53).

## The Third Scene

In the third scene (vv. 11-24), Saul and his servant set out to find Samuel. They meet some women coming out to draw water. When they ask the women where the “seer” is, they are told that Samuel will be in the “high place” to sacrifice that very day (v. 11). White (1958) explains what the “high places” were, but not before setting some background. She says that “when the call of God first came to [Samuel] the services of the sanctuary were held in contempt,” but that a “great change had taken place under Samuel’s administration” (p. 609). Then she clarifies the high places:

But the worship of God was now maintained throughout the land, and the people manifested an interest in religious services. There being no ministration in the tabernacle, sacrifices were for the time offered elsewhere; and the cities of the priests and Levites, where the people resorted for instruction, were chosen for this purpose. The highest points in these cities were usually selected as the place of sacrifice, and hence were called “the high places.” (White, 1958, p. 609)

While it appears that Israel was turning toward God, Saul was somewhat oblivious to this. He did not even know who Samuel was and asked, “Would you please tell me where the seer’s house is?” (v. 18). God had been speaking to Samuel and informing him as to who Saul was and that he should be anointed leader over Israel. So Samuel identified himself as “the seer” and invited Saul and his servant to eat with him in the high place. He also told them that the donkeys had been found.

“Then Samuel brought Saul and his servant into the hall and seated them at the head of those who were invited—about thirty in number” (v. 22, NIV 1984). The servant was seated beside his master at the head of the table. Interestingly, both Saul and his servant—not only Saul—were seated at the head of table. The undeniable fact is that the servant was also honored by the prophet.

In spite of their difference in social status, the writer of this story uses the third person plural pronoun “they” to denote a close relationship between Saul and the servant. “*They* reached” (v. 5), “they set out” (v. 10), “they were going up” (v. 11), and “they went up” (v. 14). In this scene God teaches us that the servant was not inferior, but highly valued.

## The Fourth Scene

In the fourth scene (vv. 25-27), although the servant had great honor

and opportunity to meet the prophet, the next morning he was sent ahead of Saul. The prophet said, “Tell the servant to go on ahead of us” (v. 27). The servant continued to carry out his duties as a servant. After he attended the feast, he returned to his anonymous status.

## Implications for Christian Leadership

As we read this story, we come face to face with several questions in terms of the role of the servant. Why was this story written? Who is the real the hero of the story? Why was the servant honored with his master? If the servant was important in this story, why was he not mentioned afterward? What is the intention of the writer in describing the servant’s role in this story? Is there any connection to servant leadership principles?

My opinion is that God is using this story to help people (Saul in particular) become aware of the role and attitudes of leaders. The background of the story is the event of choosing the first king of Israel. As God reluctantly accepted the Israelites’ request for a king (1 Sam. 8), He certainly faced the urgent need to show appropriate attitudes for leaders. In contrast to the kings of the other countries, the leaders of Israel would need to show God’s character through their leadership. Because God himself was to be marginalized due to the stubborn request of His people, it seems that He had to teach leadership principles in an indirect way. Furthermore, through the story of Saul’s servant, it seems that God is teaching the attitudes and behaviors of spiritual leaders. Here we can grasp what God expects each of His servants to be.

This story has many implications for Christian leaders. First, every Christian is fundamentally a servant; therefore, every Christian leader is fundamentally a servant. There is no difference between leaders and followers in that regard. Saul’s servant was a servant in status, and so every Christian is a servant first and always. Jesus reminded us of this when he said, “So you also, when you have done everything you were told to do, should say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done our duty’” (Luke 17:10, NIV 1984). In order to help us remember that we are servants, we’ve reversed the emphasis on “leader,” placing it instead on the “servant”—the leading servant.

Second, Christians are not only leading servants but leading servants *who have a spiritual focus*. They seek and expect to find the solution to life’s challenges in the providence of God—even mundane challenges. They will be quick to remind others that God knows the way and will

constantly and prayerfully seek God's will, even while others may be seeking after and trusting other gods or themselves.

Third, leading servants are the ones who find fulfillment in meeting the needs of people. They are not passive followers; rather, they are proactive participants. Saul's servant was ready to serve and to meet his master's need, even using his own resources. He wasn't self-centered and selfish. He was ready to share. At the moment he offered his own quarter-shekel of silver, he was being used by God to fulfill His purpose. The purpose of leading servants is to lead people to be victorious over their trials. Their satisfaction and reward are the souls who are saved by their sacrificial ministries.

Fourth, although Christian organizations can functionally categorize leader and follower, both have existentially the same value because both are servants of God who are seeking to obey their Master's voice. The author of Hebrews knew this principle, saying of Jesus that "although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb. 5:8-9, NIV 1984). If Christian leadership is Christ-like leadership, our main attitude will be obedience. And we will acknowledge that others are seeking to obey God also. Can we have confidence that God is enlightening all of His people and that each one is seeking to obey God's will? We must wonder if Saul in this story learned that his servant had something of value to offer. After he became king, did Saul ever reflect on the moment when he was anointed and how his servant was critical to the fulfillment of his anointing?

Fifth, leading servants are honored by God. Their service is valuable in His sight. In fact, the contribution of the leading servant may not even be noticed until a time of risk. In this story, Saul and his servant were both invited to sit at the head of the table together. How do we acknowledge the contributions of those who have lesser positions in our culture? Or are we following a worldly way by primarily affirming those in power positions?

Sixth, the ministry of leading servants is an ongoing task. Many leaders want to ascend because of their achievement. Leading servants, however, are content to remain in their original position or to go back to their original position after times of unique contribution. Just as Jesus keeps his ministry after his ascension, leading servants continue their ministries until the end of their lives.

Seventh, in reality, leading servants derive their behaviors from the

character of God. We must never underestimate the power of a biblical worldview—what happens when we place our confidence in biblical concepts and embrace biblical narratives. We should anticipate that people’s worldviews will influence how they experience and interpret ideas—even ideas like servant leadership. Flaniken (2006), for example, demonstrates his biblical worldview by selecting seven characteristics of the servant-leader in Greenleaf’s book and comparing them to biblical references. In contrast, Rigaud (2012) indicates the compatibility of servant leadership theory with the New Age/New Spirituality leadership movement. This article has attempted to show compatibility of servant leadership with a biblical narrative by emphasizing the role of the servant in Saul’s anointing as king. Is this helpful? Which comes first, our confidence in the biblical narrative or our confidence in a widely accepted leadership model?

In summary, if Saul had followed these principles, he would have been a great leader of the Israelites. Likewise, if we follow these principles, the kingdom of God on earth will expand. The biblical principles of leading servants are so clear that we do not need to be confused in choosing our attitudes and behaviors as leaders. Obedience to God’s teaching secures our leadership. Fundamentally, Christian leadership is exemplified in the leading servant. All the success and failure of the church depends on the understanding and practice of leading servants at every level of the church. Although leading servants’ humble attitude makes them seem inferior, they are leaders who draw people to God. Christian leaders are leading servants.

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