

SERMON SERIES

Sermon Series: Leading Like Jesus

4-week series on servant leadership and pastoral authority. Full outlines covering the upside-down Kingdom, relational leadership, courageous confrontation, and sustainable ministry.

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Equipping pastors and leaders to serve with excellence, integrity, and lasting Kingdom impact.

Leading Like Jesus -- Series Overview and Theological Foundation

Leadership is the most overcrowded section in the bookstore and the most underdeveloped area in the church. We have more leadership theory than any generation in history and arguably less genuine servant leadership than the early church. The reason is not that we lack models -- Jesus gave us the clearest and most radical model of leadership in human history. The reason is that his model is so completely contrary to every natural human instinct about power, recognition, and authority that we consistently domesticate it into something more comfortable and less transformational.

This four-week series takes Jesus's leadership teaching and practice seriously -- not as an inspiring model to admire but as an actual practice to embody. It is designed for leaders within the congregation, for the congregation's understanding of what kind of leaders they want and deserve, and for the culture of leadership that the entire community is building together.

Week 1: The Upside-Down Kingdom -- Servant Leadership

Text: Mark 10:35-45

The request of James and John -- "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mark 10:37) -- is the most nakedly honest disclosure of natural human leadership ambition in the Gospels. They want the seat at the top. They want the recognition, the proximity to power, the elevated position. And Jesus's response is not a rebuke of their ambition -- it is a redirection of it toward a completely different understanding of what greatness is and how it is achieved.

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:42-45). The Greek word translated "servant" is diakonos -- from which we get "deacon," but which in its original context referred to a table-waiter, someone who carried food and cleared plates. And the word translated "slave" is doulos -- the lowest possible social status in Roman society. Jesus is not suggesting metaphorical humility. He is describing a fundamental reorientation of what leadership means.

Sermon Key Points

1. The Gentile model vs. the Kingdom model: "Lording over" vs. "serving among." These are not merely different styles of leadership. They are different understandings of what power is for. The Gentile (worldly) model uses power for self-benefit. The Kingdom model uses power for the benefit of those being led.
2. Jesus's own servant leadership is not rhetorical -- it goes to the cross. The "ransom for many" in verse 45 is the ultimate expression of servant leadership: giving one's life for the people one leads. Every leader in the congregation must ask: What have I sacrificed for the people I lead?
3. The practical manifestations of servant leadership in congregational contexts: leaders who do unglamorous work without recognition, who make decisions based on what is best for the community rather than what is best for their position, who actively develop the people who might eventually surpass them.

Week 2: Knowing Your People -- The Relational Heart of Leadership

Text: John 10:1-18

(continued)

The Good Shepherd passage in John 10 contains one of the most important leadership principles in the New Testament: "He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out" (John 10:3). And again: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father" (John 10:14-15). Leadership that does not include genuine knowledge of the people being led is management, not shepherding. The leader who knows her team only by their roles and deliverables, who does not know their fears, their families, their specific struggles and strengths, is missing the relational foundation that makes genuine influence possible.

Knowledge in the biblical sense (*ginosko*) is not primarily informational -- it is relational. It is the knowledge that comes from sustained, mutual presence. The leader who has developed this kind of knowledge with the people they lead will find that their influence is qualitatively different from the leader who leads primarily through position, charisma, or expertise. They can speak to the specific person rather than to a generic role. They can inspire with a knowledge of what specifically motivates this individual. They can challenge with a grasp of where this specific person is tempted to give up.

Week 3: Courageous Leadership -- When Serving Requires Confrontation

Text: Matthew 21:12-17; Luke 4:28-30

Servant leadership is not passive leadership. Jesus's cleansing of the Temple -- overturning tables, driving out the money-changers, publicly condemning the exploitation of the poor that the religious establishment had normalized -- is one of the most confrontational acts in the Gospel narrative. And it is an act of servant leadership: the poor pilgrims who had been economically exploited by the Temple system were the people Jesus served by his confrontation. The servant leader sometimes serves by protecting the flock from predatory systems, corrupt leaders, and arrangements that benefit the powerful at the expense of the vulnerable.

The courage to confront -- whether a harmful organizational culture, a destructive personal pattern in someone you lead, or a theological error that is spreading in the community -- is not a failure of servant leadership. It is its most costly expression. The leader who cannot confront because they value approval more than the people's wellbeing has confused niceness with love.

Week 4: The Long Game -- Sustainable Leadership and Spiritual Health

Text: 1 Timothy 4:12-16; Nehemiah 6:1-9

The final week of the series addresses the most important leadership question that receives the least attention: How do I lead well for thirty years rather than burning bright for five? Nehemiah's response to Sanballat and Tobiah's repeated attempts to draw him away from the wall -- "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down" (Nehemiah 6:3) -- is the model. Sustainable leadership requires the capacity to identify and resist the distractions, the urgencies, and the attacks that pull leaders away from the primary work.

Paul's instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:12-16 provide the interior framework for sustainable leadership: "Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers" (v. 16). The order matters: yourself first, then the teaching, then those who hear. The leader who neglects their own spiritual health will eventually have nothing to give. The formation of the leader's inner life is not a self-indulgence -- it is the most important leadership investment available.

Small Group Discussion Guide

1. Where in your current leadership context do you feel the pull toward the Gentile model (using authority for self-benefit)? What specific circumstances trigger that pull?
2. Who are the people you lead most deeply? Who do you lead primarily by role rather than relationship? What would it take to move one person from the second category to the first?
3. What is the most difficult confrontation you have been avoiding in your leadership context? What would servant leadership require of you in that situation?

Jesus did not call leaders to be impressive. He called them to be faithful -- to the people entrusted to their care, to the mission for which they were given authority, and to the God who holds them accountable for both. Lead from the posture of the servant. Stay in the posture. And trust that the God who advanced through a cross rather than a throne knows what he is doing.

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