

Servant Leadership Versus Secular Leadership

By Dale Johnson

Pre-Session Assignments

One week before the session, participants will take the following assignments.

Assignment One

Read the story of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 3–4. Contrast the leadership of Nebuchadnezzar as king from beginning to end. Note what God was willing to do in order to make Nebuchadnezzar great. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: From God's perspective, what was the greatest hindrance to Nebuchadnezzar's leadership?

Assignment Two

Read 1 Peter 5:1–11. Prepare to share your answers to the following questions: What are several characteristics of a true servant of God? What is the reason God entrusts such responsibility to those who lead others?

Assignment Three

Read Philippians 2:1–11 and Micah 6:6–8. Prepare to share your answer to the following question: What does the Lord require of those who are to lead like Christ?

Scripture to Memorize

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.
Philippians 2:3–4

Session Goal

Consistent with God's Word and in the power of the Holy Spirit—by the end of this session, disciples will be able to identify the difference between the style of leadership modeled by Christ and the style most prevalent in the secular world.

Dale Johnson is assistant professor of Biblical Counseling at Southwestern Seminary. He became a disciple of Christ at age eleven. He received his BS in psychology from Jacksonville University. After college and a brief baseball career, he received his MDiv from Southeastern Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina. Dale served as the associate pastor of Family Life at Raiford Road Church for nearly eight years before coming to Southwestern Seminary, where he earned his PhD in 2014. He is a frequent speaker in churches on issues related to marriage, family, and biblical counseling. He is the proud husband of Summer, and the father of six children, Easton, Titus, Will, Ellie, Annadale, and Caroline.

It's in the Book

30 minutes

Real-Life Scenario

One of your friends approached you about serving in leadership at the church. Serving means being elected by the congregation, and you are a bit apprehensive about such a commitment. The person running against you is popular, but your friend knows a few things about them that could ruin their reputation and give you that position.

Are you willing to exploit another person to have the position? If you win the position fairly, how would you lead all of those who would look up to you?

Read Matthew 20:20–28 out loud.

Studying the Passage

Verse 22. You do not know what you are asking. Ambition had blinded the eyes of James and John—the two disciples known as the Sons of Thunder. Their request was selfish and only concerned with their own future, without consideration of others. The core of their request was proud conceit and a selfish desire for honor and entitlement. Pride is a sin that frequently tempts us. With James and John, the temptation was sinful ambition to exceed others in pomp and position. **Are you able to drink the cup?** Jesus, as the Good Shepherd, became flesh to dwell among us in order to redeem us and lead us safely home to our Father in heaven. Our effectiveness as a leader is often forged in our willingness to suffering and sacrifice for those we are to lead.

In the garden of Gethsemane, Christ willingly drank the cup of the wrath of God as an act of obedience to Him and also as an act of love for the world. This is in stark contrast to Adam, who passively sat by as his bride was deceived by the serpent, bringing harm and condemnation to her and all humanity to follow (see Genesis 3:6; Romans 5:12).

We are able. James and John stood firm in their own ability to drink the cup they believed would give them a throne. The overconfidence of their statement is compelling evidence of their ignorance of servant leadership. The brothers' confidence in their own ability was shattered at Jesus' arrest when they fled and forsook Him.

James and John were blinded by their fascination with having thrones in the kingdom. They replaced any sense of fear, awe and respect for God with selfish ambition (see Psalms 14; 36; Romans 3:10). Disciples face the same temptation today.

Assignment One Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment One** during the week can now share an answer to the following question: From God's perspective, what was the greatest hindrance to Nebuchadnezzar's leadership?

Studying the Passage

Verses 24–25. I will give it over to them. Jesus unveiled the goal of their selfish request. The disciples wanted to exercise authority and viewed Jesus and His kingdom as a means to their own desires. In their minds Jesus' rule would end Roman tyranny. The Jews would no longer be oppressed and the disciples would rule in honor with Him. Jesus revealed that the motive and hope of the disciples was worldly.

This secular style of leadership was in distinction to that which Jesus came to establish as a serving Shepherd. Jesus, in His teaching and His example on the cross, reversed the secular pattern of leadership and honor the disciples hoped for. Greatness in the Lord's kingdom does not come through tyrannical authority but through sacrificial service. Those most highly esteemed are those who serve and are humble.

Assignment Two Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Two** during the week can now share answers to the following questions: What are several characteristics of a true servant of God? What is the reason God entrusts such responsibility to those who lead others?

Studying the Passage

Verse 26. whoever would be great among you must be your servant. Jesus said the way to be first is to be a servant. This seems like a complete reversal of the path to greatness.

The Gentile world, much like our secular world today, measured greatness by the number of people one controlled. Jesus turned that thinking upside down through His servant leadership and His death on the cross.

Verse 28. to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many. Jesus did not come as the CEO of a corporation or a well-known celebrity driven by fame and greed. Instead, He came to be "obedient to the point of death" (Philippians 2:8) for all the peoples of the world. This is what Jesus meant by saying He was giving His life as a ransom. Jesus gave His life to serve others so that He could take them to places they were not able to reach on their own.

Genuine biblical leadership imitates Jesus by crucifying selfish gain to take those who follow to heights they could not achieve on their own. The Son of Man is the outstanding illustration of this principle of self-denial in direct contrast to the self-seeking of James and John.

Jesus was concerned with being a good steward with His life to the Father. His leadership was for the purpose of proclaiming the glory of the Father as opposed to using His influence for personal gain. Jesus was not manipulative, persuasive in speech, coercive, domineering, demanding, or greedy for gain; nor did He deal unjustly with others but humbled Himself so that at the proper time He would be exalted by the Father (see 1 Peter 5:6; Philippians 2:1–11).

The true essence of leadership is the heart of the gospel for which Jesus died. The call to leadership is a call to die to ourselves and to put aside our pride and desire for selfish gain. We do this so we may give our life for the benefit of others to the glory of God. Disciples lead by laying down their lives.

Assignment Three Feedback

The person who completed **Assignment Three** during the week can now share an answer to the following question: What does the Lord require of those who are to lead like Christ?

Discussion Question

Who should be the focus of your leadership?

On Your Own

In the space below, list those God has entrusted to your leadership. Then write a few thoughts about what God expects from you as a steward of that leadership opportunity.

Heart and Hands

8 minutes

Read again the **Real-Life Scenario** near the beginning of the lesson. Consider whether your answers have changed during the session.

Be silent for two or three minutes. Thank Jesus for His sacrifice and for the gospel. Adore Him for His glorious reign on the throne of heaven. Then ask the Holy Spirit to reveal to you:

1. A way the Scriptures you studied today will change your heart for the glory of Christ.
2. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to stop doing something for the glory of Christ.
3. Or a way those Scriptures will lead you to do something for the glory of Christ.

Write what the Spirit reveals to you below and then be ready to share what you have written with the group.

Since Last Week

5 minutes

Give the group this update: "In our last session I made a commitment to. . . . I want to let you know how that turned out. On that same issue I think the Holy Spirit now is leading me to . . ."

Grace-Filled Accountability

5 minutes

Disciples can agree on a way to hold one another accountable. Confessing faults with other disciples allows them to offer grace, insights, and encouragement. Even more important is confession to Christ, the source of true forgiveness and cleansing.

Planning for Evangelism, Missions, and Service

5 minutes

Groups of disciples always are making preparations for evangelism, missions, and service. Use these minutes to work on the next plan.

Prayer

7 minutes

Every disciple will pray aloud, offering praise to Jesus, thanking Him specifically for His gracious acts, making heartfelt confession, committing to actions flowing from the Bible study, praying toward evangelism locally and globally, and interceding for others as prompted by the Holy Spirit.

At Home: Nail It Down

Matthew 20:20–28 contrasts a secular and a biblical view of leadership principles. The passage focused on James and John requesting to rule on a throne in the kingdom to come. Their request was selfish, one that was only concerned with their own future without consideration of others.

Jesus reversed the path to greatness by saying that those who desire to be first must be a bond servant. In the kingdom of heaven, those who lead by serving will be great. Jesus demonstrated the principles of leadership by His death on the cross. He emptied Himself, not acting with conceit but in humility counted others as more important. We are called to have the mind of Christ and thus to look out for the interests of others before our own.

Leadership is truly a stewardship of our time, position and authority. We are either being good stewards for ourselves or good stewards for the glory of God. The true essence of leadership is the true essence of the gospel for which Jesus died. The call to leadership is a call to die to ourselves, to put aside our pride and desire for selfish gain so we may give our life for the benefit of others to the glory of God.

You lead by laying down your life. Take advantage of any opportunity you have this week to lead like Christ. Turn to Scripture to see the types of leaders you want to follow and the type of leader you want to become for the glory of the Father.

Follow up Question

What type of leader do you want to become for the glory of God?

The Making Disciples curriculum is a gift from Southwestern Seminary to those who, for the glory of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, will spend a lifetime embracing the full supremacy of the Son, responding to His kingly reign in all of life, inviting Christ to live His life through them, and joining Him in making disciples among all peoples.