

Profile of the Servant-Leader

The Bible is a book that tells it like it is. The God of perfection who planned, supervises and will one day consummate the plan of redemption employs flawed human vessels to accomplish his purposes. The biblical record applauds the successes of its greatest leaders without magnifying them, and censures their failures without excoriating them. Divine grace is at work and the human instruments are but servants whose vocation is to magnify a majestic Lord. One way we might construct a profile of the servant-leader in Holy Scripture would be to assemble the individual profiles into a composite whole, a sum of the parts. This method would produce an extensive list of virtues, a kind of profile that would rival the most idealized portrait found in romantic novels about super heroes. But God does not depend upon heroes, he uses smudged and unattractive “jars of clay” (2 Cor 4:7)—a betrayed brother, a reluctant desert herdsman, a fearful wheat thresher, an overlooked shepherd boy, a burdened cupbearer, and an ethnocentric Galilean fisherman. Rather than compile an extensive list of desirable attributes, this profile plots three trajectories that penetrate the fundamental identity of all servant leaders—character, motive and agenda. Who the leader is and is becoming in one’s essential being (character), why the leader undertakes a course of action (motive), and what the leader pursues as the defined mission (agenda) are, we believe, the core constituents and interrelated foci of the kind of leadership enjoined in Holy Scripture.

Proven Character

Character can be defined as a person’s moral constitution, in which is embedded a stable set of values. For the biblical leader these values are conditioned by revealed truth recorded in Holy Scripture. The apostle Paul establishes a set of criteria for elders and deacons that centers around moral virtues that spring from and evidence godly character (1 Tim 3:1-13; Tit 1:5-9). Paul’s philosophy of leadership is character-grounded rather than geared around personality, role, temperament, or gifting. This is because character possesses the staying power and impact potential necessary for a lasting legacy. Timothy and Titus will succeed in their pastoral ministries to the degree that they give careful attention to growing in godliness and setting an example for the believers in faith (Godward), love (manward) and integrity (selfward) (1 Tim 4:7-8, 12, 16; Tit 2:7-8, 15; 3:8). These three areas intersect in the character of the godly leader. Faith is steadfast confidence in the goodness and sovereignty of God, especially in difficult circumstances. Love is the daily choice to sacrifice one’s personal preferences for the welfare of others. Integrity is that congruity of claim, character and conduct that wins respect and provides the moral authority to lead others.

How does one develop the character that is the prerequisite for effective leadership? Paul refers to “proven character” as the refined product that emerges

from a process of testing (Rom 5:3-4).¹ Suffering endured from the perspective of faith is the soil in which perseverance grows, and from perseverance blooms character. Proven character is evidenced by a buoyant hope that has experienced the faithfulness of God to be more than adequate for the crisis (5:4b-5). The tested servant is more than a survivor, but is one who views future challenges as fresh opportunities to prove the sufficiency of God's grace. "Suffering" in the context of Paul's ministry is a broad term, one that encompasses all kinds of adversity, including physical hardship, emotional distress, and persecution encountered in obedience to God's mission.² These refining experiences are the marks of credibility that commend him as a servant of Christ (2 Cor 6:4-10; 11:23-29). Those individuals that Scripture honors as effective leaders were people whose characters were tested and refined in the crucible of hardship. It was in crisis that inherited values were personalized and internalized and that character was formed (cf. Jas 1:2-4; 1 Pet 1:6-7). Long years of soul-shaping in obscurity preceded their rise to prominence.

Joseph experienced betrayal, slavery, false accusation and imprisonment over a period of thirteen years before he was elevated as Vizier of Egypt. Moses felt he was ready to lead Israel at aged 40 (Ex 2:11; Acts 7:25), but God removed the pampered son of the Egyptian princess to the desert of Midian for forty years to tend the flocks of Jethro (Ex 3:1; 7:7). At aged 80 he was now prepared, even if reluctant, to confront Pharaoh. Joshua spent his youth as Moses' apprentice and then, in spite of his obedience, was consigned to watch his entire generation die off during the forty years of wilderness wandering (Ex 24:13; 33:11; Num 14:28-34). After his anointing by Samuel (1 Sam 16:13), David received not a crown, but fifteen years as a fugitive in desolate places trying to escape the murderous pursuit of Saul. A total of twenty-two years passed before David was crowned undisputed King of Israel (2 Sam 5:3). Upon his return to Jerusalem as governor,

¹ The Greek term is δοκιμη and all seven of its NT occurrences are in Paul's writings. This noun can mean one of three things: (1) a "test" or "trial," the outcome of which is uncertain (2 Cor 2:9; 8:2); (2) the demonstrable "proof" that what one claims is in fact true (2 Cor 9:13; 13:3); and (3) "proven character" that has been refined through hardship (Rom 5:4 [twice]; Php 2:22). These same three meanings can be plotted across the set of terms that are cognate with δοκιμη. The verb δοκιμαζω has the following meanings: (1) to "test" or "examine" something (or someone) in order to determine its quality (Lk 14:19; 1 Cor 3:13; 1 Thess 2:4b; 5:21; 1 Tim 3:10; 1 Pet 1:7; 1 Jn 4:1), which includes self-examination (1 Cor 11:28; 2 Cor 13:5; Gal 6:4); (2) to "prove" the genuineness of a claim to a given attribute (2 Cor 8:8, 22); and (3) to "approve," that is, to accept as trustworthy and to embrace its worth (Rom 1:28; 2:18; 12:2; 14:22; 1 Cor 16:3; Eph 5:10; Php 1:10). The adjective δοκιμος signifies the verdict of "approved," having passed the examination of its quality or worth (Rom 14:18; 16:10; 1 Cor 11:19; 2 Cor 10:18; 13:7; 2 Tim 2:15; Jas 1:12). The one who fails the test is rendered the verdict of "disapproved" or "rejected," signified by ἀδοκιμος (Rom 1:28; 1 Cor 9:27; 2 Cor 13:5, 6, 7; 2 Tim 3:8; Tit 1:16; Heb 6:8). The noun δοκιμιον in its two NT uses signifies a test (or refinement)—in each case through suffering—designed to prove the genuineness of one's faith (Jas 1:3; 1 Pet 1:7). Finally, the noun δοκιμασια refers to the "testing" of Israel's faith in the wilderness (Heb 3:9).

² Paul employs the term θλιψις in Rom 5:3 (twice), which is a frequent term of his to refer to the hardships, pressures, tribulations, persecutions that accompany his apostolic witness to Jesus (Acts 20:23; 2 Cor 1:4, 8; 2:4; 4:17; 6:4; 7:4; Eph 3:13; Php 4:14; Col 1:24; 1 Thess 3:7) and is the lot of all true disciples (Acts 14:22; Rom 8:35; 12:12; 2 Cor 8:2, 13; 1 Thess 1:6; 3:3; 2 Thess 1:4, 6; cf. Jn 16:33; Heb 10:33). The endurance of affliction makes one an imitator of the Lord Jesus who endured great affliction in his obedience to the Father's will (Col 1:24; 1 Thess 1:6; cf. Rev 1:9).

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Nehemiah was greeted by broken down walls, burned gates (Neh 2:13) and determined enemies (2:10). His pursuit of God's will brought with it threats of physical force (4:8), a demoralized work force (4:10), exploitation and internal dissension (5:1-5), and grave personal danger (6:2). Daniel's faithfulness landed him in a den of hungry lions; for their integrity his three friends were cast into a blazing furnace (Dan 3; 6). The apostles, including Peter and John, came to the end of their three years of leadership training by being "sifted as wheat" by the enemy of their souls (Lk 22:31). When Paul praises Timothy to the Philippians for his "proven character," he is commending one who has served for twelve years in the rough and tumble of missionary work as his most trusted associate (Php 2:22). Paul himself spent nearly a decade studying the Scriptures and developing his evangelistic gifts, first in Arabia then in Tarsus, before being rescued from obscurity by Barnabas and assuming a position of prominence in the church in Antioch (Acts 9:30; 11:25-26). Years of preparation preceded the elevation of these leaders to positions of influence. Adversity was God's refining tool to shape them into vessels of usefulness.³ Those who are looking for a person of character to fill a leadership role in the church or parachurch organization would do well to examine when and how the candidate has handled adversity. Leaders with "proven character" are those who have learned to trust God in the hard experiences of life (Ps 119:71).

Doxological Motive

A passion for God's honor and a deep concern for the spiritual welfare of Israel drove forward the great leaders in the preparatory stage of the history of redemption. In the two watershed crises, the golden calf and report of the spies, Moses intercedes for the Lord to relent from his threat to destroy Israel. The basis of his plea is God's honor: to destroy the people you have redeemed and established a covenant with would damage your reputation among the nations (Ex 32:11-13; Num 14:13-16). Moses is zealous that God's abounding love and tender compassion be magnified in his granting of forgiveness to a repentant people (Num 14:17-19). When Achan's sin leads to a demoralizing defeat at Ai, Joshua imitates his mentor with a desperate plea for Israel's deliverance. If the Canaanites now mobilize and wipe out your people, Joshua prays, "what then will you do for your own great name" (Josh 7:9b)? More than a warrior, Joshua is the shepherd of Israel (Num 27:17) who reaffirms the nation's covenantal identity before, during, and after the military campaign (Josh 5; 8; 24). Samuel reminds the people, after granting their request for an earthly monarch, that the Lord whose good pleasure was to make them his own will abide with them "for the sake of his great name" (1 Sam 12:22). Samuel pledges to intercede for them and to teach them to fear the Lord and to serve him out of recognition of "what great things he has done for you" (12:23-24). David's dramatic arrival on the scene is as a shepherd boy who

³ By contrast, one can observe the tragedy of those who grew up in privileged circumstances, without the character-forming experiences of hardship that had shaped their fathers, and who failed as leaders (or potential leaders): the sons of Eli (1 Sam 3:22-25); the sons of Samuel (1 Sam 8:1-4); and the sons of David—Solomon, Amnon, Absalom, and Adonijah. Saul's elevation was a meteoric rise from donkey wrangler (1 Sam 9:1-4) to anointed prince of Israel (10:1), with practically no period of preparation and no recorded instances of real adversity before his anointing.

dares to defend God's honor against the insults of the Philistine giant (1 Sam 17:45-47). The "man after God's own heart" (1 Sam 13:14), despite his colossal failures, is the shepherd-ruler (2 Sam 5:2) who brings the ark to Jerusalem, establishes the joyful worship of the Lord at the center of national life (2 Sam 6:12-22), and rules over the people with reverential fear (2 Sam 23:3). Daniel declares to Belshazzar, at the peril of his life, that the king has brazenly defied the true God by desecrating the sacred vessels of the Jerusalem temple. He announces that the sacred writing on the wall is a final declaration of judgment, for the king has failed to "honor the God who holds in his hand your life and all your ways" (5:23). Nehemiah works tirelessly for the physical and spiritual restoration of the exilic community "out of reverence for God" (Neh 5:15). He teams with Ezra to renew the covenant so that songs of thanksgiving and praise once again reverberate throughout the once desolate holy city (Neh 12:31, 40).

As redemption history reaches its intended goal and the ceremonies of the old covenant complete their course, there is an even more pronounced focus upon the interior life of God's servants. In his training of the twelve Jesus made a constant beeline to the matters of the heart, the center of the personality where motives and values mingle in the process of self-determination. It is not enough to do the right thing or even to have a stable and growing character. New covenant leaders must regularly assess *why* they are doing what they are doing. The inherent worth of "acts of righteousness" (Mt 6:1), such as giving to the poor, praying, or fasting, depends on the underlying motive behind them. Are they the expressions of a grateful heart that is attuned to the glory of God, or are they self-serving acts performed to attract the approbation of one's peers (Mt 6:2-4; 5-8; 16-18)? Jesus is warning his disciples to check their motives because even ministry can be carried out for the wrong reasons. It is the "pure in heart" who will have an undimmed vision of God's majesty.

Paul strains toward a day of judgment when hidden things will be uncovered and motives will be exposed (1 Cor 4:5). On that day the comparative assessments of others will mean nothing (4:3a). One's own self-appraisal will prove faulty (4:3b), for the heart has a remarkable capacity to deceive itself (Ps 19:12; Jer 17:9). Even the conscience, one's internal dialogue with oneself, can not be relied upon (4:4). The deep sense of accountability feeds his singular ambition to please the Lord in every facet of life and ministry (2 Cor 5:9-10). The doxological motive governs his holy ambition to seize the day of opportunity and to promote God's rule among the Gentiles (Rom 15:9-12, 16, 20-21). Peter commands the elders in the churches of Asia minor to test the driving forces behind their leadership, rooting out all manner of obligatory, self-aggrandizing and authoritarian inclinations (1 Pet 5:2-3).

How is a leader to act with initiative and boldness and not be paralyzed by a morbid introspection with constantly second-guessing one's elusive hidden motivations? The answer lies in the ruthless honesty to lay one's soul bare before the penetrating sword of Scripture, which has the power to penetrate, cut through, expose, and renew the "thoughts and intents of the heart" (Heb 4:12). Servant-leaders must undergo daily spiritual surgery under the Spirit-illuminated exposure to God's word, undergirded by earnest prayer for God to search one's thoughts and meditations (Ps 19:14; 51:6; 139:23-24). This is the area where Jesus and the

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Pharisees ended up on a collision course: they created a firewall between God and the soul with their traditions over the Sabbath, fasting, ritual washings, and tithing; he would remove these traditions and restore the direct interface between the heart and the Word. Jesus began his public ministry by modeling dependence on the word of God (Mt 4:4, 7, 10: "It is written"). He stripped away the layers of rabbinical casuistry and restored his disciples' direct exposure to the penetrating power of the Old Testament as fulfilled in his teaching (Mt 5:17-20). Paul commanded Timothy to study and to submit to the functional authority of Scripture with its ability to teach, rebuke, correct, and train in righteousness (2 Tim 3:16-17). This was a practice the young pastor was already accustomed to (3:14-15). The living word shaped the motives of the one singularly praised for his genuine concern for the Philippians' welfare and his pursuit of the things of Christ Jesus (Php 2:20-21).

The heart, the "wellspring of life" (Prov 4:23), is the place of decision and destiny. Careful and regular attention to one's heart motivation will prevent the servant-leader from the pitfalls that commonly attend positions of influence: concern for personal reputation, status, image, popularity, recognition, vocational "success" as defined by the prevailing culture, and the assessment of others based on external, extrabiblical criteria. A heart in pursuit of God's glory and the spiritual welfare of God's people nurtures resilience because it releases one from being inflated by triumphs or dismayed by setbacks. One who seeks to please God above all else possesses a kingdom perspective that facilitates partnerships with others of like faith, sublimating egocentric agendas and the need "to be someone" for a greater legacy—the building up of individuals into communities of worship and witness. Such a person shares the servant posture of the forerunner of the Messiah: "He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). This kind of leader yearns not for a place in history or a visible monument to one's accomplishments, but for the divine benediction on a stewardship fulfilled: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Mt 25:21, 23).

Divine Agenda

The God of creation moves to graciously reconcile the fallen human race to himself (2 Cor 5:19). He separates a man, Abraham, from his idolatrous clan and establishes a covenant with him and his family designed to reverberate into salvific blessing to all the peoples of the earth (Gen 12:1-3). The covenant family grows into a nation, Israel, whose calling is to testify to the holiness and majesty of the one true Lord of the nations (Ex 19:5-6; Deut 6:4-5; Isa 49:6b). This carefully planned and superintended history of redemption moves inexorably forward, despite the waywardness of the "stiff-necked" covenant people, toward its intended climax. In the fullness of time the one adumbrated by kings, sages and prophets is born to a Jewish girl in the town of Bethlehem, Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham (Mt 1:1; Gal 4:4). His three brief years of public ministry are devoted to proclaiming the dawning of the kingdom of God (Mt 4:17). He commits his legacy to twelve men, one whose betrayal will lead to his death. As the only person ever born whose central purpose in life is to die, Jesus is rejected by the very covenant nation from which he sprang and is delivered to a shameful death (Jn 1:11). Vindicated by God, he is raised from the dead and

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exalted to the right hand of the Father as Lord and King (Acts 2:32-36). The "good news" of salvation through the vicarious death and victorious resurrection of Jesus Messiah is proclaimed by the apostles, who go forth in obedience to his final commission (Acts 1:8). Until the Lord returns to consummate the inaugurated kingdom, his church, the new Israel, moves forth in obedience to the Spirit and the Word to extend God's dynamic rule over all who will respond in faith and repentance. The mandate is to teach all Jesus commanded, to all the nations, to the end of the age (Mt 28:19-20).

Servant-leaders are not visionaries who devise a brilliant plan, then by dint of personal charisma draw others to fulfill those ambitions. Rather they are faithful stewards of the divine mandate—to fish and to feed, to evangelize and to teach, to pioneer and to pastor. Biblical leadership maintains a laser-like concentration on God's clearly stated agenda, that is, the evangelization of the lost, the edification of the saved, and the establishment of vital churches. Servant leaders take the initiative to bring others to a passionate commitment to what is on the heart of God, the extension of his saving rule over individuals and communities both qualitatively (holiness of character) and quantitatively (expansion to the unreached frontiers). The apostle Paul stands before us as the premier example of the missional leader driven by the divine agenda. A clearly defined mission (1 Cor 1:17), a regular reaffirmation of its core values and message (1 Cor 11:23-26), and the ability to contextualize the message to different audiences (1 Cor 9:19-23) preserves Paul from three respective common pitfalls: (1) **Mission ambiguity**: failure to clarify from the outset one's purpose for existence; (2) **Mission drift**: subtle and gradual erosion of the sharp edges of the defining purpose; (3) **Mission confusion**: failure to adapt one's methodology and orient one's message to fit changing circumstances because the mission and its method for accomplishment are not clearly distinguished.

We conclude with a set of questions that can be used in regular self-assessment to determine whether one's ongoing practice of leadership is biblical or secular, that is, grounded in the principles and precepts of Holy Scripture or conditioned by the prevailing models of one's culture.

1. Do I take the **initiative** and actively seek opportunities to impact others for the sake of the kingdom of God?
2. Does my character evidence in increasing measure the virtues of **godliness** so that I impact others toward a life of holiness?
3. Has there been a posture of faith in God's sufficiency when facing hardship and adversity so that my **character** exhibits a refined solidarity and resiliency?
4. In the innermost core of my being do I sense a passion for God's glory and the welfare of others? Or do I detect self-aggrandizing **motives** that have not yet been honestly faced and staked to the cross? Am I conscious of exercising leadership of others before the Audience of one or the audience of many?
5. Do my activities point toward a singular focus on God's **mandate**—the discipling of the nations—or are other competing agendas displacing a kingdom perspective with an organizational or programmatic one?