

Ignite the Flame of Servanthood

A Heart of Servanthood Glorifies God by Helping Others



...But the greatest among you shall be your servant (Matthew 23:11).

Max DePree, former CEO of a global leader in office furnishings, once said, “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between the two, the leader must become a servant and a debtor.”¹ Learning this concept has proven a powerful lesson for me. During the 1990s, our company experienced exponential growth, an accomplishment for which I took much of the credit. During those high-growth years, I climbed from salesman to sales manager to general manager and eventually to owner.

My success came with an unhealthy dose of pride. As the son of the company founder, I felt the added pressure to prove myself to those around me, including my dad. One day, soon after I had been appointed sales manager, I closed the biggest deal in the history of our company. It was a multi-million-dollar deal to a customer who, up to that point, had bought almost exclusively from our competitor. Upon finalizing the order, I waltzed into my dad’s office, filled with self-delight, and proclaimed, “I got the deal!”

He reached out to congratulate me. Instead of saying thank you, I grabbed his hand and said, “What’s the biggest deal you ever closed, Dad?”

My father sat down in his chair and frowned. I knew he could not come up with a deal to top mine because there had never been one. Eventually his answer came, but it was not what I expected. “You know,” he said, as he gave me one of those looks only a father can give his son,

“I can’t say that any particular transaction stands out in my mind. But I guess I take the most pride in knowing that this company has provided for so many families for so many years and that God has allowed me to be part it.”

How could I respond to that? I made no comment as I, ashamedly enlightened about my own arrogance, slithered back to my office. My dad had clearly defined leadership for me. My focus had been on applauding myself in the mirror when it should have been on looking out the window, encouraging others and praising God.

At that point, I began to comprehend the responsibility of serving our people. Success had been all about me; significance would be all about them. For the first time, the correlation between greatness and serving began to resonate within me. True significance is never found in serving self, but only in serving others.

Serve Passionately

Service. The meaning of this word has various connotations. We use it to identify those who serve on committees, wait on tables, or fix things when they break. Service may be defined as work done as a job, duty, punishment, or favor for somebody else. Typically, the word *service* implies an action, usually temporary, that is done in a sense of obligation and carries limited reward for the server.

This is a common perspective in the workplace where we serve our time earning a wage. But why is this? The typical workplace commonly fosters a “me first” environment. In that setting, work can become a place of exhaustive self-service, of climbing the corporate ladder, and of looking out for number one. We serve to get ahead, to make more money, to be credited for our contributions. Work becomes all about us and what we want. When our service is all

about us, we labor to make a living. Self-focused service performed out of obligation can leave us—like slaves to our work—empty and downtrodden. However, we can change that.

Servanthood suggests that we put the needs of others before our own, regardless of circumstances. Our service is not controlled by our environment. Rather, it is a choice made in the heart. God places us in the workplace to serve others. He calls us to genuinely care about the needs, the dreams, the hopes, and the hurts of those around us. He wants us to see others as He sees them: people in need.

Servanthood has as its mission to glorify God by helping others. Our service, then, is no longer viewed as duty or an obligation. Rather, it is an opportunity to do the good works God has planned for us. Our ultimate service is to God, who uses us to do good works which glorify Him. This provides us with a fresh way of looking at our work.

Servanthood stimulates our hearts while it adjusts our focus. A heart of servanthood is clearly committed to caring for the welfare and serving for the benefit of others. Through fostering a heart of servanthood, we begin to understand that our acts of service become a blessing that we pass on to others. We no longer serve out of obligation, but we serve out of love as we reflect the heart of Christ to those we encounter. “If anyone serves, he should do it with the strength God provides, so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ...” (1 Peter 4:11b).

Serve Professionally

Our work provides countless opportunities to serve needs and to reveal the heart of servanthood. Business essentially is all about serving others. For a business to survive it must consistently accomplish two things:

1. Serve a need.
2. Make a profit.

It is important to note the order of these two critical elements. For a business to exist, it must first serve a need. For continued existence it must then make a profit. For enduring success, a business must continue to do both.

Servanthood requires the proper order of priorities: people before profit. I have heard it said that profit is a lot like oxygen. You need it to survive. However, oxygen is not life itself. Likewise, contrary to popular belief, profit is not what business is all about. A company that shines realizes that serving others is the life of the company and that profit, like oxygen, sustains the company and allows it to continue serving.

We need to serve the needs of employees and fellow workers. Individuals give their best effort in an environment where they are served, appreciated, and cared for. When we put our employees first and serve them with sincerity, they generally respond with inner motivation, which insures the company's profit.

We need to serve the needs of customers. In business, the concept of serving customers is of great importance. Most companies realize that if they serve the customer, then they'll get more business. Consequently, most businesses serve for profit rather than profiting from serving. They serve the customer strictly to sell more stuff.

Servanthood requires more than that. True servants are motivated wholly by helping others. They don't serve for what it could do for them but for what it will do for those they serve. Servants choose to focus on how they can positively impact their organization by helping others meet challenges and improve their professional and personal lives.

Professional servants put no limits on who they will serve. A servant-hearted professional willingly serves customers, subordinates, leaders, fellow associates, suppliers, and anyone else with whom they come into contact.

Serve Unselfishly

Unfortunately, the workplace is flooded with those whose sole intent lies in serving themselves. Consequently, the concept of servanthood seems almost foreign in today's business world. Can you imagine a company where the CEO or owner would believe that their greatest responsibility was not to the bottom line but to serving the employees of the company? What if employees, instead of focusing on their own personal needs and desires, began to look first at serving others? What if we all stopped focusing on how valuable we think we are to the cause and in turn started focusing on bringing the most value to everyone we encounter at work? Think of the difference that could make.

Scripture provides us with the great paradox of serving: "...Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Matt. 20:26-27). Jesus made it very clear that the way to greatness in God's Kingdom is not found in serving ourselves but in serving others. This servanthood concept is not just suggested for future reward, but it is to be whole heartedly embraced and exemplified right now as our service represents His kingdom on earth.

God sees and records all of our acts of service. He knows and understands the motives of our hearts. He promises to exalt those who reveal the true heart of servanthood. In essence, the most effective way to serve ourselves is by unselfishly serving others. The more we serve, the more valuable we become to others and the more we increase our own value. Interestingly, truly selfless service tends to return truly significant rewards. Albert Schweitzer said, “I don’t know what your destiny will be. But one thing I know: The only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve.”

Serve Faithfully

God has equipped each of us to serve. By serving others, we simultaneously serve Him. One of the easiest ways to prepare our hearts for serving others is through prayer. Praying for others inexplicably transports their needs directly to the heart level. If you find yourself dealing with a difficult customer or colleague, try praying for them by name. Ask God to use your interaction with them as a blessing to their life. It’s amazing how much easier it is to serve someone for whom you’re praying. As an employee, what greater display of servanthood could you show your employer than to pray for the company, its leaders, and your fellow employees?

If you are in leadership, how often do you lift the names of those you lead in prayer? My company has over 200 employees spread over fifteen locations. Although I don’t have a close personal relationship with every employee, I can still pray for them by name. An interesting thing happens when I lift each employee’s name in prayer. My depth of caring grows as I pray for each of them. Prayer is such a simple act of service, yet so often a forgotten one, especially in the workplace.

To understand service that shines, we need only look at the example of Jesus, who willingly stepped down from His heavenly throne, taking the role of a servant on earth (see Phil. 2:5-9). Through His readiness to serve the needs of others, Jesus revealed the true heart of God in servanthood. In order to serve others like Christ, we too must be willing to reveal the heart of servanthood. It is only through the purity of a servant's heart that Christ's light can shine in us. Inside each of us is a heart equipped for serving others—we just need to let it show.

A servant heart radiates *humility* to reach beyond ourselves, *compassion* to care for others, and *generosity* to help others find success. We, therefore, simply should do as Scripture directs: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms” (1 Peter 4:10).



Endnote

1. Max DePree, *Leadership Is an Art* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1989), 11.

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