

Family Legacy Institute

Tools For Families Building Godly Legacies

The Servant Leader

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This chapter will explore the contrast between being rich in earthly blessings, and being a servant-leader. Although it's not always true, there is an amazingly consistent correlation between earthly blessings, and pure self-focus. The call of Christ is for his followers to function in the role of servants. It's hard to see oneself as a servant when surrounded by the trappings of wealth, power and privilege. This chapter is not about getting rid of wealth, power and privilege, but it is about recognizing and controlling their seduction. The few pages may be difficult for some to read, especially those who are financially blessed. If this is you, keep reading until you're able to fully grasp the larger discussion of servant-leadership, and understand that financial wealth is just one small facet of a much greater issue.



We begin with a true story. Years ago a married couple taught first-grader Sunday School. One Sunday as parents drove home after church and asked their kids what they'd talked about in class that day, their children said they'd talked about prayer. The parents were pleased until they learned more about the actual example the teachers had used in teaching this lesson. The kids innocently shared how the man-teacher was making so much money, that he and his wife needed God to guide them whether in the next week they should buy a new Mercedes, or a new Lexus.

The children's parents were understandably unhappy with the teaching couple. The inappropriateness of this teaching moment unpeeled layers of spiritual issues:

- The lesson really wasn't about prayer, it was about the teachers' raging pride
- The children had been taught that prayer was appropriately linked to greed
- And that prayer was self-centered
- And that the more money one earned, the more they could spend on themselves

To their great surprise, the teachers were relieved of their teaching responsibilities. It came as a surprise to nobody that within the year they were divorcing and entrenched in a nasty battle regarding marital assets.

The Damning Potential Of Wealth In The Life Of Servant-Leaders

Wealth is a potentially damning blessing. That sounds awful, doesn't it? Let's unpack it. One of Christ's parables was about a wealthy guy with too much wheat. He had great land, it had

been a super year weather-wise, and he had bumper crops. What businessman wouldn't want this guy's problems. But Christ looked deeper (Lk. 12:16-21):

He told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.'

"Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I'll say to myself, 'You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'

"But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?" This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.

This parable isn't about a man who got too rich and so God took his life. If that were the case, 95% of Americans would all be dead, since the average Yank lives in the top 5% of world comfort and blessings. Even our poor are incredibly wealthy by Third World standards. Yet there are numerous biblical examples in which men were enormously wealthy, and God blessed them with even greater wealth. Names like Abraham, Job and Solomon come to mind.

By contrast, Christ's parable was about a guy who was so self-centered that he lost his usefulness to God. That's what greed does. It makes people useless to God. Christ prefaced this parable by saying, ***"Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions"*** (Mt. 12:15).

There is an inverse spiritual correlation between money and faith. *The more one has of the former, the less one generally has of the latter.* While this is not universal, the percentages of those who fail the test of wealth are apparently very high, at least according to Christ's perspective which we'll see in a moment.

Christians are often prone to saying, "God has really blessed John Doe ~ he's worth millions." In point of fact, the opposite may be more true ~ wealth often functions as a curse. Christ taught, ***"I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God"*** (Mt. 19:23-24). Is that verse unnerving to you? It is to me, and I'm far from being wealthy. But I am an American of middle class, and that means I'm wealthy as compared with 95% of the world's population.

Christ repeated the point again when a wealthy young man came and said he wished to follow Christ (Mt. 19:16-22). And it was the theme of Christ's parable about the rich man and the poor man Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31). From a biblical perspective, wealth and faith are more often than not inversely correlated. This is not an absolute principle ~ there are exceptions. But from a biblical perspective wealth appears to lead strongly toward self-focus ~ something to be struggled against and overcome. According to God's Word, one method of overcoming the self-focus of wealth, is becoming a servant to others.

Servant-Leadership And The Ownership Of Money

The most obvious reason for the inverse correlation between wealth and faith is that wealth correlates with security and power. Again, it's not an absolute principle but Christ stated clearly that it's a statistically high probability. The more money one has, the more secure they are and the more power they have. While this is not *necessarily* a bad thing, it is *more often than not* a bad thing. Put into the format of an axiom, it might sound something like this: *Wealth is a barometer measuring self-reliance upon one's own security and power, versus reliance upon their security in Christ and God's power.*

Wealth has been compared to the moon's gravity on the Earth's oceans ~ the larger the mass, the greater the gravitational pull. Here are four examples of individuals with great wealth. Notice the effect of the gravitational pull of their wealth:

- 1) "W" married into enormous wealth. Before marrying, W was known by friends to be soft-hearted and generous to a fault. W gave freely of what she had if it could be of help to others. After marrying into scores of millions of dollars, W's generosity dried up.
- 2) "X" earned two-to-four million dollars per year for decades, and lived in the largest most lavish home in an upscale suburb, surrounded by trappings of extreme wealth. Although X occasionally gave small amounts to charitable causes, he was artful in letting as many people as possible know about each gift.
- 3) Couple "Y" inherited money into *ten* figures. They did little but travel the world, living in highest luxury wherever they went. When they did give to charitable causes, their sum contributions represented a tiny fraction of their net worth.
- 4) "Z" bragged of making \$17 million during the first quarter of one year. He enjoyed driving his Rolls Royce to church. When his pastor encouraged him to tithe, he responded that if he tithed it would be too much money for the church and would mess up the church's budget.

Can you see the gravitational pull in each story? Research has repeatedly shown that the more money a person makes, the smaller the percentage they give to God. By contrast, **servants of Christ understand who owns the money.** Personal assets of any kind are merely on loan for a short period of years until the Temporary Manager (you, me) dies. Then the assets revert to heirs, charities, or in some cases the State. Solomon understood this and grieved about the fact that after he died, others would control and possibly squander his wealth. *"I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun, because I must leave them to the one who comes after me. And who knows whether he will be a wise man or a fool? Yet he will have control over all the work into which I have poured my effort and skill under the sun" (Eccl. 2:17-19).*

After death, all Temporary Managers will face the King of Kings and will be asked, "How did you invest the assets I lent you?" (See Christ's parable in Mt. 25:15 ff). This is a critical lesson of servant-leadership in the home: **All assets belong to Christ, and the Christian's objective on earth is to use Christ's assets to build Christ's Kingdom.** Servant-leaders understand it's

not about how much money one can accumulate in a lifetime ~ it's about how one invests Christ's assets.

God's purpose for human wealth is not that a few lucky people may travel the world, live in luxury, and die with millions in the bank. His purpose for human wealth is that those who have wealth, use it to build the Kingdom of Jesus Christ. That statement is so broad as to allow for a lifetime of Kingdom investment without much need for guidance, except as provided within scripture (e.g., see Christ's parable in Matthew 25:14ff).

At the most basic level, Christian asset management means tithing. There are some who believe the tithe was strictly an Old Testament thing, but Christ taught tithing as he chastised the Pharisees for their spiritual duplicity: ***"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices-mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law ~ justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (Mt. 23:23-24).*** That is, Christ-followers are to be champions in promoting justice, mercy and faithfulness, while not neglecting to tithe.

God makes an astounding promise regarding tithing. It's found in the Old Testament book of Malachi:

"Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"

"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'"

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse ~ the whole nation of you ~ because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it" (Mal 3:6-11).

Let's now insert that text into today's American culture. Here's a statement taken from research by George Barna. Barna's research organization is the Christian equivalent of Pew Research or Heritage Foundation Research:

"Just 6% of born again households tithed to their church in 2002. Tithing, when it occurs, is generally among Protestants: 5% of adults who attend Protestant churches tithed last year, compared to less than one-tenth of 1% among Catholics. Among the groups most likely to tithe are people over 55, college graduates, evangelicals, Republicans, conservatives, and residents of the South - but there was no segment among which at least 10% tithed."

Servant-Leadership And Kingdom Building

Being a Christian isn't primarily about going to church on Sundays. It's primarily about being obedient to Christ in all things, and using the sum totality of one's life to build Christ's

Kingdom. In this moment we're pondering the servant-leader's recognition of being a Temporary Manager of Christ's assets.

Some who tithe give all their tithe to a local church. Others spread it around among Christian ministries. Some keep a portion set aside to be used specifically for helping those in need, even though no tax advantage may accrue to their giving. The point is that servant-leaders use their assets to build the Kingdom of Christ.

Scripture makes a distinction between tithes and offerings. The tithe represents 10% of our net income. Offerings represent over-and-above giving.

It's always dangerous to use stories from one's own life as material for teaching. In this chapter I'm going to share three personal stories, and hope they are not perceived as being in any way self-promoting. I share them only because I'm most familiar with the facets of my own history.

Here's the first. My father was killed in an airplane crash when I was a kid. From then on, we were dirt poor ~ a single mom with little marketable education, and four kids to feed and clothe. Mom's one marketable skill was her voice ~ she had the soprano voice of an angel, and would sing at church functions now and then. Five dollars here; ten dollars there. Poverty was a way of life for us, yet mother tithed from our meager income, giving a full 10% to our church.

One Sunday, our pastor made an appeal to the congregation for increased giving so that the church could purchase a new organ. Mother felt God's urging, and pledged a substantial additional amount beyond the tithe she was already giving. Her pledge frightened her, and that week she went to the pastor to prayerfully discuss the wisdom of her pledge. The pastor suggested that if she'd felt God's Spirit leading her to make the pledge, then God would help her accomplish it.

Months passed, and each month she gave money to the church, money that her family could ill afford to give. Yet God was faithful: We never missed a meal, we were well clothed, and He provided money for all the bills.

Finally, the church was able to purchase the new organ. On the first day it was played in the sanctuary, the pastor provided a bulletin insert containing the names and actual amounts given by each donor. To her great surprise, mother's name was at the top of the donor list. From her almost desperate poverty, she'd given more than company owners, corporate executives, school principals, and other well compensated church members.

The lesson tattooed to my soul in that moment was that God provides for His children when we trust Him. Decades later, after that organ grew old, was donated to another church, and then finally discarded as obsolete, the tattoo is still fresh upon my soul. Tithes belong to God; offerings are over-and-above. Both forms of obedience teach critical faith lessons, and both bring God's blessing.

All one need do to build Christ's Kingdom, is open their eyes and see needs that are immediately there. One church really caught on to this idea and built their DNA around serving others in the

name of Christ. They organized teams who would go out once a month and hunt for opportunities to serve Christ by serving others. Their story's found in the book, *"Conspiracy of Kindness,"* written by Steve Sjogren. In story after story one sees God showing up and "blowing the doors off," to coin a phrase. One line is frequently repeated throughout the book. When asked why they're serving others, these servant-leaders would respond, "It's so that you may learn how it feels to be loved by God." That's the purpose of servant-leadership ~ it points toward God; it leads others' hearts to God.

Another church took the servant-leader concept to a higher level and formed new 501c3 organizations, some of which actually changed the culture of their city. Their story's found in the book, *"The Church of Irresistible Influence,"* by Dr. Robert Lewis.

For a moment, stop and reflect on what you've read. Here are some thoughts to ponder.

Thoughts To Ponder

- *Do I tithe (give 10% of my income to Christ)?
- *Given my income level, should I be giving more than 10%?
- *How am I using my income and assets to teach my children about serving Christ?
- *What legacy will I leave when I die, as respects monetary assets?
- *What joy am I missing through withholding assets from Kingdom use?

Servant-Leadership And Our Families

Here's another personal story to help flesh out the principle of servant-leadership as accomplished within families. It was a cold winter's night in St. Louis. Through our church, our family had "adopted" an inner-city single-parent family. Our church had installed wood-burning stoves into the homes of poor inner-city families so they could have heat during winter months when they had no money for gas or electric heating bills.

One cold evening the phone rang. It was "Gladys" (name changed to protect her identity). "We ain't got no heat an' it's cold in the house." It was ten below zero outside so I knew that without a furnace, it was indeed cold in her house. I said, "We'll be there in 45 minutes with wood for your stove."

My family and I heated part of our home with a wood-burning stove, so I'd cut and stacked three cords of wood in the back yard. Our daughters were 9, 11, and 13 years old. We slapped on our winter togs, loaded up the cavernous Chevy van with wood and took it into the dangerous night-time heart of north-city St. Louis. Once we arrived at Gladys' home, my wife and daughters started offloading the wood and I took a few chunks into her basement to fire up the stove.

The neighborhood was dangerous, especially to white people, and especially in dark back-alleys like the one in which we had parked to unload wood into Gladys' back yard. But that night it was so cold that literally nobody was outside. God protected us.

As I worked to get a fire going in the wood-burning stove, Gladys' little 5-year-old boy stood nearby watching, each breath clearly visible in the cold night air. He said, "That dog gonna git you," referring to their German Shepherd mix, "Bullet." The dog had been raised in an all-black neighborhood, so white folk provided special cause for him to practice his guard-dog drill.

Cautiously ignoring Bullet's snarling muzzle, there was soon a fire in the stove and warmth began radiating into the basement. Within a half hour the home would be 35 degrees warmer, and in an hour they'd all be warm. By this time my wife and daughters had unloaded the wood from our van and we headed home.

Twenty-five years passed when I asked my oldest daughter if she remembered that evening. She did, and it was apparent that the message had taken root in her life, because now she was teaching her two children the art of servant-leadership by taking them to a tough part of the city and together with her husband, serving food to hungry single moms and their children. Her thirteen-year-old daughter had caught onto servant-leadership and was raising money for heart research.

The difference between being a "do-gooder" versus being a servant-leader, is that servant-leaders' purpose is to use their actions to help people learn what it feels like to be loved by God. God didn't give the gift of children so that parents could raise them to be momentary stars on some athletic field or academic platform. He gave children so that we could teach them how to know and serve Him. All other platforms pass away, but what's done for Kingdom building has eternal value. As Moses taught Israel about God's parenting plan, he said this:

These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (Deut. 6:6-9).

Thoughts To Ponder

- *What does faith in Christ mean to my children?
- *What am I teaching them regarding the meaning of life?
- *How am I teaching them the art of servant-leadership?
- *Upon what "stages" am I encouraging my children to excel?
- *How am I preparing them for their lifetimes of Kingdom building?

Servant-Leadership And Our Time

Time has become the commodity of highest value in today's American culture. In most cases we'd rather give money, than time. However, time does one thing money can't do: It puts us physically next to people in need, and it allows us to demonstrate how it feels to be loved by God.

In Matthew 25, Christ didn't tell his followers to send money to those in prison, or to give cash to a sick person. His instruction was that Christ-followers were to personally take care of those needs; and when Christ-followers did so, they were doing it for Christ. ***“Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me” (Mt. 25:40).*** That's what “Body ministry” is all about ~ being Jesus with skin on for people in need.

When the Iron Curtain finally came down, there was a moment during which Americans were welcomed into the former “Soviet Union.” That moment lasted perhaps 15 years, and then it was gone. During that time our church formed a working relationship with a church in Zaporozhye, Ukraine. We took short-term missions teams to Ukraine and hosted children's camps, in order to tell young people about Christ. As the children responded to Christ's love, it set up opportunities for the local church to follow up with their parents, and many came to Christ through those years of work.

Having never met Americans before, Ukrainian parents would ask questions about Americans and our motivation for coming to Ukraine. One common question was, “Who paid you to come to Ukraine?” We'd respond, “We paid our own way, and we took personal vacation from our jobs to do this.” The Ukrainian's would then ask, “Why would you do this?” That question provided opportunity to talk about how Christ motivates people to show God's love to others, and how life's meaning changes through knowing and serving Christ. It was an open door, and many Ukrainian parents came to faith through our initial contact with their kids.

Servant-leadership is the golden key that opens opportunity for sharing Christ. People today are resistant to “evangelism” techniques, whether one uses the “Roman Road,” the “Four Spiritual Laws,” “Evangelism Explosion,” or any other technique. The reason for this resistance is simple: People don't want to be manipulated into anything, whether it's into purchasing a new car or going to heaven. We live in an age of incredible manipulation called “marketing.”

Regardless of one's motivation, traditional “evangelism” techniques have had much in common with marketing techniques, and normal people in Western culture today have built up resistance to it. However, it's more difficult to turn away from someone who gives their time and money in order to do nothing but serve. And that's what servant-leaders do. They serve others in the name of Christ ~ and in so doing, they demonstrate what it feels like to be loved by God.

But time is a precious commodity, and so many things valiantly compete for it in our culture. Just a few “time-competitors” include:

- A plethora of TV programming, with hundreds of potential channels
- Thousands of movies available through Netflix, Blockbuster, TV, etc.
- Computers and the Internet
- Sports ~ whether at the professional level on TV, or on school athletic fields
- Clubs ~ Scouts, school clubs, adult clubs ~ lunch, afternoon, evening, weekend
- Working out ~ keeping in shape through running, health clubs, etc.

Research finds that average Americans spend approximately 40 hours per week on two activities: TV and the Internet. Yes, you read it right. Studies vary, but a conservative estimate

of time spent watching TV would be 25 hours per week, with another 15 hours per week on the Internet.

Servant-leadership requires personal time. It means turning off TV and computer, and putting one's head into activity aimed at helping some other person understand what it feels like to be loved by God.

Thoughts To Ponder

- *What emotions do I feel when being challenged to change my weekly use of time?
- *What spiritual lessons am I teaching my family through my weekly expenditure of time?
- *In the last 6 months how many actual hours have I invested in servant-leadership? TV? Net?
- *Am I willing to set a weekly goal of hours I will intentionally invest in servant-leadership?

Wrap

This chapter began with thoughts regarding wealth, power and privilege. The subject of wealth is easy to identify – it usually has to do with money. Power and privilege are a little more difficult to articulate. This chapter attempted to capture some of their essence through discussing the uses of family and time in servant-leadership.

Like money, both families and time reflect power and privilege, and unless we resist the lure of both by building servant-leadership into our personal and family DNA, in our broken humanity we tend to drift toward self-focus. We may not theologically believe in our near worship of personal comfort and pleasure, but we live the life and thereby reflect our defacto existential commitment to ourselves. (Too bad about those folks in inner-cities or rural ghettos whose lives are such wrecks. Oops! Gosh, just look at the time ~ almost 7:00 and time for “Survivor!”)

American culture has much in common with the church in Laodicea (see Rev. 3:14-19). Laodicea was an industrial and mercantile city, rich in corporate productivity, land and culture. The church was refined in Greek acculturation. They were the religious upper-middle class moderates of the early church. Yet Christ's words to them were severe:

“Because you are lukewarm ~ neither cold nor hot ~ I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich, and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness, and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.”

Phew! Not nice, Jesus.

One facet that makes servant-leadership so powerful in the life of the one practicing it, is that there is little earthly reason to do it. The only reason a person would practice servant-leadership is to bring glory to God, by serving others in the name of Jesus Christ. True, it does have powerful and positive impact on organizations when practiced by leaders, but the primary reason a person would be a servant-leader is to serve God by being Jesus with skin on, to others.

It's a lifestyle, and lasts a lifetime. The good news of servant-leadership is the legacy it creates. Lives changed. Wounds healed. Hungry people fed. Prisoners freed in the name of Jesus. Strangers welcomed into loving fellowship. Personal resources invested The Bank of Heaven. Lives used to the highest possible purposes. Existence jam-packed with meaning and purpose.

I have come to cherish the word "legacy." It's rich with hope, powered by grace, and chiseled onto eternal monuments by the hand of Jesus Christ, as he welcomes servant-leaders at the end of their dusty journeys with the words, ***"Well done, good and faithful servant!"***

***"I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the
least of these brothers of mine,
you did for
me."***

Mt. 25:40