

**The Paradoxical Commandments
presentation on
SERVANT LEADERSHIP
by Dr. Kent M. Keith
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It is such a pleasure to be here at Manoa Valley Church—the church where my wife and I were married, the church where our children were baptized, the church where so many people have been so good to us for so many years! We're truly grateful.

I'm here today to talk about leadership. You know, when I was growing up, leadership always seemed to be about how to accumulate and wield power; how to make people do things; how to attack and win. It was about clever strategies, and applying pressure, and leading without worrying very much about the limitations of morality or ethics. It was the power model of leadership.

Unfortunately, there are some severe problems with the power model. First, it focuses on having power, not on using it wisely. Second, it glorifies and even promotes conflict between power groups. Third, it defines victory in terms of who gains more power, not in terms of who accomplishes more for society.

Other problems with power relate to the leader herself or himself. People who seek power often become irrelevant as leaders. They focus on what they want, instead of what other people want, and they lose touch with the people they are supposed to be serving. Even worse, people who seek power can never get enough of it. They can never, ever get enough. It becomes a kind of addiction, a kind of disease. They always want more, and more, and more. This easily results in spiritual corruption and an unhappy life of self-torment.

Fortunately, there is another model of leadership, and it is thousands of years old. It is the service model, and people who use it are often called servant leaders.

Defining the Servant Leader

Who, exactly, is a servant leader? A servant leader is simply a leader who is focused on serving others. A servant leader loves people, and wants to help them.

The servant leader does not ask, "How can I get power? How can I make people do things?" The servant leader asks, "What do people need? How can I help them to get it? What does my organization need to do? How can I help my organization to do it?" Thus, rather than embarking on a quest for personal power, the servant leader embarks on a quest to identify and meet the needs of others. That's the mission of a servant leader: To identify and meet the needs of others.

There are big differences between the power model and the service model of leadership. One way to contrast a power-oriented leader and a service-oriented leader is this: Power-oriented leaders want to *make* people do things. Servant leaders want to *help* people do things. That's why servant leaders are usually facilitators, coordinators, healers, partners, and coalition-builders.

There is another big difference between the power model and the service model. The power model assumes a hierarchy, a pyramid with the president or prime minister at the top, and then vice presidents, on down to the bottom. The power model assumes that only a few people have power—those at the top of the hierarchy. The service model assumes no hierarchy. It assumes that *anybody* in a family, organization, or community can be of service. *Anybody* can identify and meet the needs of others. *Anybody* can be a servant leader.

Servant leaders can be many different types of leader, depending on their personalities and the specific circumstances. The servant leader surveys the needs of a group and looks for what is missing. Is there a gap, a missing link, a blockage of some kind that is preventing the group from achieving its goals? The servant leader asks: What type of leadership, what kind of service, will provide the missing link or fill the gap or remove the blockage, so that action will be possible for this group? The missing link or gap or blockage will not always be the same, so the servant leader does not always perform the same role or service in each case.

We live in a real world. We know that power abhors a vacuum. Somebody is going to exercise power, and it makes a difference who that somebody is. Certainly, a servant leader can accumulate and exercise power. A servant leader can even become angry and enter the fray to do battle. What is important is that the servant leader accumulates power or becomes angry *on behalf of others*. A servant leader acts in response to the way *others* are treated, not in response to the way he or she is treated.

Christian and Taoist Texts

Servant leadership is not a new idea. It can be found in the Gospels, in Mark and Matthew. In the *Book of Matthew*, chapter 20, verses 25-28, Jesus gathered his disciples together and said this:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant...

Jesus went on to say that He came to serve, not to be served.

In this passage, Jesus very clearly distinguished between leadership characterized by power and authority, and leadership characterized by service. He made it clear that for his followers, leadership should be characterized by service. That is what he taught, and that is what he demonstrated during his own ministry. He fed the hungry, he healed the sick, and he reached out to the outcast.

The concept of servant leadership can also be found in Taoism. The Tao Te Ching consists of ancient writings attributed to Lao-Tzu, a sage who lived in China about 500 B. C. He is known as the founder of Taoism. In one passage, Lao-Tzu describes a leader who is so effective that he is almost invisible. When the great deeds are done, the people say: "We did this of our free will. We did this ourselves."

The modern servant leadership movement in America was launched by Robert Greenleaf in the 1970s. Greenleaf distinguished between leaders who are "leader first," and those who are a "servant first." Those who are a servant first, are servant leaders. Greenleaf said:

The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types... The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people's highest priority needs are being served. The best test, and difficult to administer is: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, *while being served*, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?

Examples of Servant Leaders

When you become aware of the idea of servant leadership, you start to notice servant leaders everywhere. I am sure there are thousands of examples of servant leadership in history, literature, the movies, and daily life today. I think of historical figures like Washington and Lincoln, Father Damien, Harriet Tubman, Clara Barton, Albert Schweitzer, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mother Teresa. While there are a lot of famous servant leaders, my guess is that most servant leaders have *not* been known outside the group or community they have served. Like Lao Tzu's servant leader, they have been so effective they have been almost invisible.

An especially good example of servant leadership in literature is *Watership Down* by Richard Adams. This is a wonderful fable about a group of rabbits who set out to find a new home. Hazel-rah, who becomes the Chief Rabbit, is not the biggest rabbit in the group, nor the cleverest, nor the most clairvoyant. But he becomes the leader for a number of reasons. He is willing to listen, often asking for advice from others. He knows the different strengths of the other rabbits, and draws out those strengths for the good of the group. He is able to identify the needs of the group, and make decisions and take action in a way that unites the rabbits in seeking to achieve their common goals. And he is willing to pitch in, and take personal risks on behalf of the group. Hazel-rah is a servant leader in a participatory community. The rabbits face hard times, and are severely tested, but they work together as a team, and they succeed in finding a new home.

One of the many powerful movies made by Kurosawa Akira is *Ikiru*, the story of Kanji Watanabe, a Japanese government bureaucrat who discovers that he is dying of cancer and has only six months to live. After wandering around the city feeling sorry for himself, he decides to make a difference before he dies. He sets out to establish a playground for a neighborhood whose children have no place to play. The mothers of the neighborhood have been referred from government agency to government agency, each bureaucrat passing the buck to the other, nobody willing to take responsibility and help them. Watanabe, a branch chief in the Citizen's Section, takes up their cause. While enduring great physical pain, he patiently and courageously confronts each obstacle until he gets the playground built. He dies late one night, sitting in one of the swings in the playground, singing softly, at peace with himself. At last his life meant something. He had helped somebody. He had become a servant leader, and he had made a difference.

I am impressed with historical servant leaders like Florence Nightingale, an

English woman who lived from 1820 to 1910. Born into a wealthy family, her parents were horrified at her interest in nursing, because nurses in those days had a very poor image. But Florence pursued her interest, gaining experience in Germany and assuming the management of a small hospital in London in 1853. When the Crimean War broke out the next year, she was asked by the British government to take a group of nurses to Russian Crimea. She arrived with 38 nurses, and found 5,000 wounded and sick men in bare buildings with no equipment. Often working 20 hours per day, she got the hospitals equipped and made them sanitary, dramatically improving the treatment of the soldiers. After the war she published a huge book on army hospitals, and then opened a training school for nurses. Florence Nightingale is often considered the founder of modern nursing. She was a servant leader who saved thousands of lives.

Focus and Motivation

Servant leaders can be political leaders, business leaders, non-profit leaders, coaches, friends, or neighbors. Servant leaders do most of the things that other leaders do—they provide a vision, they motivate, they manage, they communicate, and so forth. What sets servant leaders apart from other leaders is that they are focused on others, not just themselves, and they are motivated to make life better for others, not just for themselves. This difference in focus and motivation is what really distinguishes servant leaders, regardless of their titles, roles, or positions.

The difference in focus and motivation shows itself in the questions that people ask themselves when they make decisions in their daily life and work. For example, a power-oriented individual may make decisions after asking: Will this make me look good? Will this enhance my power? Will this give me the visibility I want? Will this be an incredibly effective way to get ahead of my chief rival? Will this improve my relationship with my boss? Will this position me better for my promotion?

A service-oriented individual will make decisions after asking a different set of questions. For example, a servant leader may ask: Whose needs will this meet? Are there greater needs that should be addressed before this one? In meeting this need, who will suffer negative impacts? How can we mitigate those negative impacts? What decision would be most consistent with the values and goals of my organization?

The questions that are asked by people in the power model are different from the questions that people ask when they are in the service model. Different

questions lead to different answers, different decisions, and different results.

The Three Options

Now— why would anybody want to *be* a servant leader? I think that the decision to be a servant leader follows from a basic moral decision and a discovery about where to find the most meaning in life. Let's start with the basic moral decision.

When you understand that people have many needs, you have only three basic options:

- (1) do nothing, and ignore the needs of others— which is an option I consider a moral failure; or
- (2) take advantage of people's weaknesses, cynically exploit their needs, and seek personal gain at their expense— which is an option I consider an even worse moral failure; or
- (3) do the right thing and help people— try to meet people's needs.

The third option is the only moral one. It is still the right option, even if you fail to achieve what you hope to achieve. Servant leaders make the moral decision to stay with the third option— to do the right thing and try to meet people's needs, no matter how difficult it may be.

If you try to do what is right and good and true, and feel that you have failed, you may be tempted to shift to the cynical option of exploiting others or the indifferent option of doing nothing. But there is no justification for falling into the two *immoral* options, just because things are not going the way you had hoped, or people don't appreciate what you have done, or people even criticize you for the good you are trying to do.

Each of us likes to be appreciated. That's normal. But it is hard to be a servant leader if you crave applause. Focusing on applause means that you are focused on yourself, not others. You should focus instead on the meaning and satisfaction that you receive when you help others. That is something that nobody can take away from you. The meaning and satisfaction are yours, whether anybody else applauds or not.

The Paradoxical Commandments

I was fortunate to learn this early in life. One of the pivotal experiences of my life occurred as I walked to the stadium for the student awards ceremony at Roosevelt High School my senior year. It occurred to me that I was so happy about what I had done that year, and felt so good about what I had learned, and whom I had helped, that I didn't need any awards. *I had already been rewarded.* I already had the sense of meaning and satisfaction that came from doing a good job. That realization was a major breakthrough for me. I felt liberated. I felt an immense inner peace.

Two years later, in 1968, at the height of the student unrest on American college campuses, I urged high school student leaders to learn how to work through the system to get things done. I challenged them with what I called "The Paradoxical Commandments of Leadership." This is what I wrote:

1. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. Love them anyway.
2. If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives. Do good anyway.
3. If you are successful, you win false friends and true enemies. Succeed anyway.
4. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. Do good anyway.
5. Honesty and frankness make you vulnerable. Be honest and frank anyway.
6. The biggest men and women with the biggest ideas can be shot down by the smallest men and women with the smallest minds. Think big anyway.
7. People favor underdogs but follow only top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway.
8. What you spend years building may be destroyed overnight. Build anyway.
9. People really need help but may attack you if you do help them. Help people anyway.

10. Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth. Give the world the best you have anyway.

The Paradoxical Commandments are guidelines for finding personal meaning in the face of adversity. That's why the first phrase in each commandment is about adversity, or difficulty, or disappointment. People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. People really need help, but may attack you if you do help them.

Each statement about adversity is followed by a positive commandment: Love people anyway. Do good anyway. Help people anyway.

The paradox in each case is that even when the world out there is going badly, we can still find personal meaning and deep happiness. We can find happiness by facing the worst in the world with the best in ourselves. It's about how we respond to the world's challenges.

The fact is that, as individuals, we don't control the external world. We don't control the economy, and the rate of population growth. We don't control the weather, or natural disasters like fires and floods. We don't control when terrorists may strike or wars may break out. We don't control which companies will acquire which companies, and which jobs will be downsized and which jobs will open up. We can work hard, and prepare, and seize opportunities— and we should— but there are lots of things in our external world we just don't control.

What we do control is our inner lives. We get to decide who we are going to be, and how we are going to live. We can live our most cherished values, and we can stay close to our families and friends, and we can do what is right and good and true-- no matter what. *No matter what*. The good news is that this is where people find the most personal meaning. The even better news is that personal meaning is a key to being deeply happy.

When I refer to deep happiness, I mean the kind of happiness that touches your spirit, and connects with your soul. Some people call it self-actualization. Others would call it self-fulfillment, or being centered. For people of faith, it is part of finding God's will for their lives. Whatever it is called, personal meaning is the key. And finding personal meaning is something that we can always do—it's about the part of life that we do control, our inner lives.

One way to look at the Paradoxical Commandments is as a personal declaration of independence. It's a declaration of independence from all the external factors that we don't control. Whatever the world does to us, we can still find meaning and be happy.

You could also call the Paradoxical Commandments a "no excuses" policy. Sure, some people are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered. So what? That's no excuse. You have to love them anyway. And maybe the good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow. So what? That's no excuse. You have to do good anyway.

Some people have told me that when they first read the Paradoxical Commandments, they thought I must have been having a very, very bad year when I wrote them. Actually, I have always been very optimistic. I think that if you do what is right, and good, and true, things will usually work out for you, and you will often receive praise.

The question is: What if things don't work out, and you don't receive praise? The answer is that you still have to be who you are, you still have to live your most cherished values, and do what's right and good and true. That's where you will find the personal meaning and deep happiness.

Meaning Maximizers

This brings me to the second reason that I think people become servant leaders. They discover where to find the most meaning in life. And that discovery leads them to a life of servant leadership.

We all want to be successful. But the search for success and the search for meaning are not the same search. They may overlap, but they are not the same.

Our secular, commercial culture pushes us heavily toward symbols of success like power, wealth, and fame. Our culture pushes us in that direction, even though the symbols of success provide relatively little personal meaning. Power is a symbol of success, but people learn that there is more meaning in service. Wealth is a symbol of success, but people find more meaning in the richness of daily life—friends, family, hobbies, sunsets. Fame is a symbol of success, but there is more meaning in being known intimately by a few than in being known superficially by millions.

The symbols of success aren't necessarily bad, they're just not enough.

They're not enough if you want to find personal meaning and be deeply happy. To find personal meaning, we have to focus on the things that have given people meaning for thousands of years—loving people, helping people, and doing what is right and good and true.

I believe that in most countries, cultures, and centuries, people have discovered that love gives them the greatest meaning in life. Happy people are people who know how to give and receive love.

When you love people, you want to help them. You don't help them with a reluctant sense of duty, you help them with a sense of excitement about what you can share and contribute. The happiest people I know are busy loving and helping others.

Because of the deep happiness that comes from loving and helping others, servant leadership is not about self-sacrifice. Servant leadership is not about self-denial. Servant leadership is about self-fulfillment. People are happier and healthier and more fulfilled when they are busy loving and helping others.

If you are not already a servant leader, I urge you to be one. A life of servant leadership will draw upon all that you are, and stimulate you to grow and become all that you can be. A life of servant leadership will draw upon your wisdom, compassion, strength, and skill. A life of servant leadership is exciting, meaningful, and satisfying.

Conclusion

Let me conclude with a short summary. Society teaches us the power model of leadership, but you will find greater meaning and be more effective if you use the service model. You can be a servant leader. As a servant leader you won't *make* people do things, you'll *help* people do things. You will focus on identifying and meeting the needs of others.

When you live the life of a servant leader, you will know that you are living the only moral option—not ignoring others, or exploiting them, but helping them. You will understand the Paradoxical Commandments, and you will do what is right and good and true—no matter what. By loving and helping others, you will find personal meaning and deep happiness—the kind of happiness that touches your spirit and connects with your soul.

There is no doubt in my mind that to be an effective and relevant leader who finds personal meaning and deep happiness, one must be a servant leader, dedicated to making life better for others.

Thank you!