

Good Leadership  
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Mark 10:35-45

What makes for a good leader?

There are all sorts of ideas out there about what makes a good leader, or a poor one. A Google search for the term "good leadership qualities" yielded hundreds of articles – and even an AI-generated answer! - promising to outline the "essentials." The one from the *Harvard Business Review* lists the top 8 as authenticity; curiosity; analytical prowess; adaptability; creativity; comfort with ambiguity; resilience; and empathy.<sup>1</sup> All of these qualities have in common an approach that relies on asking open-ended questions, rather than starting with a close-ended answer, and being willing to learn from others in the organization. As the Harvard professor interviewed for this article says, one needs to be willing and able to *learn* how to lead; it's not necessarily something that can be taught in a classroom so much as it is a process of learning how to step outside one's comfort zone.<sup>2</sup>

Learning how to lead is on the agenda for the disciples – and urgently so. It will not be long before they will have to take on the work Jesus is doing, and without his direct, in-the-flesh support. For his part, Jesus is using this time of transition to ensure that they are actually equipped to do it. He's already reminded them once that the true measure of greatness was found in service to others. Mark surrounds that reminder with the stark realities of what such servanthood actually looks like in practice. His

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<sup>1</sup> Rebecca Knight, "8 Essential Qualities of Successful Leaders." <https://hbr.org/2023/12/8-essential-qualities-of-successful-leaders> [accessed October 16, 2024].

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

statements that "The Son of Man is to be betrayed..." and "whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me" (Mark 9:31, 37, NRSV) are not all that well-received. At least, the disciples don't seem to really understand them... and have apparently decided not to ask too many questions about either to avoid being yelled at.

Today, he's reiterated that point: "whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mk 10:43-44). While the Hebrew Scriptures state clearly that a good leader is there to be of service to God and God's people, that image just isn't what comes to mind for James and John, and a whole lot of others, when it comes to what a great leader actually DOES. Mark draws a clear contrast between this sort of leadership – which Jesus is extending – and that practiced in the Greek and Roman worlds. Gentile leaders are tyrants. In antiquity, a tyrant was a leader who came to power unconstitutionally. Not all of them were "bad" leaders. Some did help usher in what we'd recognize as more democratic governance in places like Athens. Some of them were also patrons of artists and poets. Despite this, tyrants were generally not regarded favorably. Many of them essentially functioned extensions of Greece's Persian conquerors. By Jesus' day, they were viewed with a mixture of loathing and suspicion.<sup>3</sup>

Tyranny, in any era, stands in direct contrast to the way Jesus uses his authority. Instead of using it to bend others to do what he wants, he gives it away, by giving his life as a ransom for many. For Mark, this sacrifice is not about substitutionary atonement, the theological concept which insists the Crucifixion was mainly about Jesus sacrificing himself in place of humanity as a whole in order to appease God for humanity's

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<sup>3</sup> "Tyrant." <https://www.britannica.com/topic/tyrant> [accessed October 17, 2024].

shortcomings. There's nothing in the text to even suggest it. It's about how Jesus turns the social order upside down by what he does. A slave was at the very bottom of the societal ladder. Instead, Jesus puts that slave in a place of honor. This is an incredibly subversive take on the way power works. He is not telling James and John and the rest to simply leave it to him, because they are slaves and can't possibly know, or do, better than he will. To do so would only serve to reinforce the status quo, where there are powerful people, powerless people, and very little in between. Unfortunately, one of the limitations of the language of service to God "... is tainted with the imagery of servitude towards a ruler, as much of the imagery of worship derives from royal courts (and vice versa). Mark is not presenting Jesus as wanting subservience. In fact he has Jesus say so directly: 'The Son of Man did not come to be served' (10:45)!"<sup>4</sup>

Jesus doesn't ask James, John, or the rest, to be subservient to him. Rather, he invites them – invites us – to join him in serving others. It's that which defines "greatness" in God's kingdom. Jesus takes on that task of service for himself, and asks us to consider that, in his hands, "good leadership" is less about the exercise of raw power and more about the exercise of compassion and care for our neighbors.<sup>5</sup>

Service to others was not in Jesus' day, and largely still is not in ours, what most people think of when they hear the phrase "great leader." However, as Jesus' own example so clearly demonstrates, great leadership is not about using power to break others down. It builds them up. It makes the whole group or team or community stronger – and it is done in such a way as to put the welfare of the whole group ahead of the

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<sup>4</sup> William Loader, "First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Pentecost 22." <https://billloader.com/MkPentecost22Ord29.html> [accessed October 14, 2024].

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

leader's own. In the prologue of a recent history of NASA's Mission Control, former astronaut Chris Hadfield writes, "Ultimately, leadership is not about glorious crowning acts. It's about keeping your team focused on a goal and motivated to do their best to achieve it, especially when the stakes are high, and the consequences really matter. It is about laying the groundwork for others' success, and then standing back and letting them shine."<sup>6</sup>

In not-so-theological terms, this is what Jesus means when he tells James and John that the greatest must be servant of all. And it's what he does. Sure, the Resurrection is a glorious crowning act – but, if we look at it the way Mark wants us to, through the lens of "not coming to be served, but to serve..." it asks us to stop and think, even just for a moment, about how "greatness" means giving at least some part of ourselves on behalf of another. It's all about the team... and, it's about how we cannot thrive as individuals without it.

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<sup>6</sup> Chris Hadfield in *Tough And Competent: Leadership and Team Chemistry* by Eugene F. Kranz (Tampa, Florida: Gatekeeper Press, 2023), vii.