

Life is filled with contradictions. We put things together that don't really belong together. As a figure of speech when we stick opposite words together, it's called an oxymoron. Here are some examples of contradictory words we put together.

1. Virtual reality
2. Exact estimate
3. Pretty ugly
4. Jumbo shrimp
5. Original copy
6. Living dead
7. Old news
8. Act Natural
9. Rolling stop
10. Only choice

We also have some oxymorons in the church. No, I'm not talking about the person in the car next to you. Here are some examples of church oxymorons:

1. Short meeting
2. Junior high leader
3. Men's fellowship
4. Simple request
5. My final point

We're going to talk about something today that at first, sounds like an oxymoron— we're sticking two things together that don't belong together. That is servant-leadership. Wait a minute. A servant and a leader at the same time? Aren't those opposite ends of the spectrum? One is the top rung of the ladder and the other is the bottom rung?

The way the world often views greatness and exercises leadership, these two things do seem to be opposites, a contradiction in terms. But Jesus, in what He teaches us and in what he models for us, shows us that servant leadership, is not just a reality. It is to be a defining characteristic of our lives. Christians are to lead differently. We aren't to follow the same path to greatness as everyone else.

In Mark 10, Jesus and his disciples are heading to Jerusalem for the last time. In fact, in verses 33 through 34, Jesus plainly tells them what is about to happen:

"See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. 34 And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

James and John obviously came to the wrong conclusion about what this means. You see the disciples have been working with this mistaken assumption about the Messiah. They had been taught and they believed the Messiah would kick Rome out of Israel, and would restore Israel to a place of greatness on the world stage. So, if Jesus is going to be arrested and handed over to the Gentiles to be killed, then this must be it. This must be the big showdown, and when Jesus rises on the third day, it's going to be this huge superhero moment where Jesus turns on his Messiah superpowers and shows everyone who's boss. This would be the beginning of the kingdom, and James and John wanted to have a front row seat. So, they come to Jesus with a simple request.

A Favor from a Friend

So, you properly picture this in your minds, there's one detail Mark doesn't tell us, but Matthew does. James and John don't come to Jesus by themselves, they bring their mom with them. We don't know whose idea this was, the boys or their mother, but it's not a good look either way. Here's how Mark tells the story in Mark 10:35-36:

³⁵ *And James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came up to him and said to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you." 36 And he said to them, "What do you want me to do for you?" 37 And they said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory."*

What James and John are asking for here is no small favor. They are asking for the primo seats in Jesus' kingdom. These are center stage, front row seats, with backstage passes. This is field level, 50 yard line, full-staff bringing you not beer and hot dogs, but the finest import craft brews and lobster rolls.

To sit to the right or to the left of the throne was itself a seat of power. You had the king's ear and he listened to what you had to say. You had the power to implement the king's orders. People had to go through you to get to the king. This is a political power play of the highest order.

Jesus says to them, "*You do not know what you are asking.*" Can I translate for you? "You silly, silly boys, you have no idea what you're talking about." Jesus has been teaching them about the nature of his kingdom for three years, but they still don't get it.

Paying the Price

Then Jesus asks them this question in verse 38, "*Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?*" James and John think Jesus is asking them if they are willing to pay the price to achieve greatness. But the greatness Jesus has in mind is very different from what they're asking. Let's be very clear what Jesus is asking them.

He's asking them if they can drink from the cup of suffering, if they will receive the baptism of sacrifice. Remember, Jesus just got done telling them he's going to be arrested, mocked, beaten, and executed.

Talk about fools rushing in where angels fear to tread, James and John boldly answer Jesus, *"We are able."* And so Jesus agrees that they will drink this cup and share in this baptism.

And the two brothers would share in this baptism. They would drink deeply from this cup, each in their own way. James was the first of Jesus' disciples to die for his faith. He was beheaded by Herod in Acts 12. Talk about a front row seat.

John, however, would live until a ripe old age, well into his nineties. He would experience a lifetime of trials and tribulations. He became the elder statesman of the church. He would write letters in which he would refer to those in the church as, "My little children." He would live out his life as a prisoner of Rome, living as an exile on the prison island of Patmos, where He would receive the most dramatic of visions and would give us the book of Revelation.

Jealous Friends

You get the impression that James and John wanted this discussion to stay private between them and Jesus and their mother of course. But you know how it is amongst a group of friends. There are no secrets, right? *Word gets back to the other guys, and it doesn't go over well. "Who do you guys think you are? What makes you so special? You're just a couple of momma's boys. Have to send mommy in to do your dirty work."*

Let's be clear. Their anger at James and John isn't a righteous anger. They aren't upset because of how inappropriate their request is. The truth is they wanted that position for themselves. Did you ever have a good friend that got the spot on the team you wanted, that got the promotion that should have been yours? That's what's going on here. That's why they're mad. They were all angling for the same spot, and they were peeved when they thought James and John may have gotten the jump on them.

The Worldly Model of Leadership

Jesus sees this as a teaching opportunity on leadership and greatness. And so in verse 42 we read:

And Jesus called them to him

Don't miss this part. The disciples are all fighting and finger-pointing and mad at each other, and what does Jesus do? He calls them to him. The answer to everything that divides us is to

draw closer to Jesus. The more we fight the further from Jesus we are. The closer to Jesus we are, the closer to each other we are.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them.”

Jesus is telling them, You guys need to rethink everything you think you know about what greatness and leadership are.

“You are used to things working a certain way in the world. You know how power and authority and organization and responsibility work in the world. The wording Jesus uses here in the Greek has a real negative undertone to it. It’s as if Jesus is saying, “You know those who like to think of themselves as leaders, those who have the reputation of being powerful.” But there is a wink and nod with the unstated understanding that we all know these people have very little real influence. They can throw their weight around. They can issue threats. They can force people to comply, but nobody really follows them.

Has anything really changed? So much of what is called leadership is little more than the jockeying of position, power plays, and political maneuvering. Don’t we still tend to think of the leader as the person in charge? The big cheese. The head honcho. They are person with the authority to make the decisions and issue orders. In this power leadership model, people follow, not because they want to, but because they have to.

A New Definition of a Great Leader

But Jesus says this model doesn’t apply to His kingdom. That leadership style won’t work with me, Jesus says. He says, my kingdom operates on a different kind of power. Jesus continues in verses 43 and 44,

But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

Greatness is not to be found in putting other people down, but in lifting them up.

What Jesus is talking about here is servant leadership. If you study servant leadership, credit is often given to Robert Greenleaf for coining the term in a 1970 article entitled *The Servant as Leader*. However, the concept of servant leadership goes back much further than 1970.

This is what Jesus is talking about nearly 2,000 years ago. The way to lead is not by scratching and clawing and climbing your way to the top, but by serving those on the bottom. One day, during the American Revolution, General George Washington rode up to a group of soldiers trying to lift up a heavy wooden beam. Their corporal was shouting instructions and berating them for not getting the job done. After watching their repeated failure, Washington asked the Corporal why he didn’t join in and help. Washington was wearing civilian clothes, so he was

unrecognized by the Corporal, who replied, “Do you realize I am the corporal?” Washington dismounted from his horse and helped the soldiers until beam was in place. Wiping the sweat from his face, General Washington turned to the corporal, “If you should need help again, call on Washington, your commander in chief, and I will come.”

Servant leadership is more than a theory. It’s more than words printed on a corporate values statement. It is the ability to actually serve the people who serve us. Jesus didn’t just preach this to others. It was his mission statement.

Verse 45 is our Core Verse this week:

“For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Remember, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to die, to give up His life. If it was about power, if it was about position, if it was about authority, Jesus could have thrown his weight around at any moment. He is the Son of God, the Author of Life, one with the Father. He could have put the Pharisees in their place any time he wanted. With just a word he could have brought the whip and beatings to a standstill. He could have easily shown both Herod and Pilate how little power they truly had.

Jesus could have left Jerusalem completely vindicated, and have saved no one, humanity still in the clutches of sin and death. That’s why He came. He was a servant leader, and if we are going to follow Jesus, we have to follow down the path of servant leadership.

And here’s the great thing about servant leadership. Anyone can do it. Anyone can always lead by serving no matter their position. It doesn’t require a title. It doesn’t require authority. Anyone can inspire, encourage, and enable regardless of their rung on the ladder.

But everyone here is a leader in some capacity. You lead a ministry here at church. You’re a project lead at work. You lead in your home. You lead in your marriage. You lead your children. You lead your grandchildren. You can lead your ball team. You can lead your neighborhood. Whether you realize it or not, what you say and what you do, and what you don’t say, and what you don’t do, either raises the bar or lowers it wherever you go.

Servant leadership is for everyone, whether you’re 16 or 65, and if we all would be servant leaders wherever we go and whatever we’re doing, it would transform our church, it would transform your school, it would transform our community.

As a servant you aren’t pursuing power, plaudits, or position. A servant leader enriches, enables, empowers, and encourages others. Another who might rise further than you isn’t seen as a threat, but as a success. I’m mentoring a couple of young people right now. If Zach was to become a better preacher and leader than I ever was, that would be a great thing. If I served on his staff someday, it would be an accomplishment.

I want to compare and contrast real quick the difference in greatness between the traditional leadership model, and Jesus' servant leadership. **First, they seek different positions.** In the traditional model, higher is better, but in servant leadership, lower is better. This is what is encapsulated in Jesus words in his teaching on the sheep and the goats in Mt. 25, "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Worldly leadership and the servant leadership utilized different motivations. Traditional leadership operates out of fear. It uses intimidation and the threat of negative consequences to get people to do what the leader wants them to do. They might lose position. They might lose money. They might face punishment, and it is that fear that keeps them in line.

Servant leaders operate on the motivation of love. People follow because they want to. They know they are loved and they love in return. 1 John 4:18 says, "There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.

With the traditional power leadership model titles mean everything. I remember a pastor who had to resign because of a leadership scandal involving the abuse of power. Before all the skeletons fell out of his closet, he had earned his doctorate. He insisted everyone call him Doctor so and so. He referred to himself as doctor. He insisted his wife called him doctor. He had the big nameplate on the desk. He had all the trappings of his status.

The servant leader doesn't care about titles. Her only concern is how she can help. In the Bible, the church in Corinth got caught up in a fight over status. They were arguing about who was greater based on who baptized them. They argued about who led them to Christ, or who their favorite church leader was. Paul writes this in 1 Corinthians 1

¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

Paul goes on to remind them of their status before they followed Jesus:

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards,[c] not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being[d] might boast in the presence of God.

The **two styles of leadership use different tools**. Power leadership uses intimidation, demands, manipulations, and berating criticism. Servant leadership uses inspiration, encouragement, listening and teaching.

They have different foundations. One is built on power. The other is built on responsibility.

They have different structures. Power leadership is vertical with a clear chain of command. Authority flows in a downward direction. Servant leadership is much more horizontal in design. There is shared leadership. We see this in that churches are to be led by a plurality of elders who work as brothers. Christ is our authority and we are all one body. Jesus warns his disciples about the so-called leadership of the Pharisees in Matthew 23:6-8,

They love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues 7 and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. 8 But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

Everyone here this morning is a leader. Even as a kid just playing with your brother or sister, you are a leader in that room, in that moment. You are either using them to gain position for yourself, or you are serving them to lift them higher. Everything you say and do is an act of leadership.

You are either helping things move in the right direction or the wrong direction. Which direction is your life pointing to?

I want to invite you this morning to be a leader, not a boss, not a manager, not the one in charge, be a leader. A real leader. A servant leader. You might think you're not in a position to make a difference. Your leadership won't matter.

In 1972, NASA launched the space probe Pioneer 10. The probe's original mission was to reach Jupiter, photograph the planet and its moons, and beam data to earth about Jupiter's magnetic field, radiation belts, and atmosphere. It was a bold plan in 1972 for no earth satellite had ever gone beyond Mars. But Pioneer 10 accomplished its mission and much, much more.

In November of 1973 Pioneer 10 swung past Jupiter, who's immense gravity hurled the craft at a much higher rate of speed toward the edge of the solar system. At one billion miles from the sun, Pioneer 10 passed Saturn. At some two billion miles, it hurtled past Uranus; Neptune at nearly three billion miles; Pluto at nearly four billion miles. By 1997, twenty-five years after its launch, Pioneer 10 was more than six billion miles from the sun.

Despite that immense distance, Pioneer 10 continued to beam back radio signals to scientists on Earth. The most remarkable thing is that those signals all emanate from a small 8-watt transmitter which has about as much power as the night light in your bathroom. Never underestimate what your 8 watts of serving might do.