

Jesus, the greatest leader the world has ever known, picked up whips and drove the moneychangers out of the temple. Then he sat down with his disciples, took a towel and washbasin to show them a picture of servant leadership. How could the hands of Jesus wield a whip, and then humbly wash feet?

This is a paradox I have struggled with, and I wonder if you and other Christian leaders grapple with it also. On the one hand, we hear the voices calling for “servant” leadership which too often implies leadership by consensus. On the other hand, other voices cry urgently for “bold visionary” leadership. What are we to do with the conflicting voices and the example of Jesus?

I think the answer lies partly in this: the whips were an *act* of leadership; the teaching on servant leadership deals with the *heart* of leadership. What do I mean by that?

Jesus’ action with the whip looks radical, totally off the wall, and the opposite of everything we associate with servant leadership. We erroneously assume that servant leaders are not strong leaders and therefore any display of strength is out of line. This thinking produces weak leaders who are afraid to use their God-given authority.

But what was the heart of Jesus? He was not on a self-righteous rampage. He had no selfish agenda. He was not looking for publicity or trying to make a name for himself. Rather, He was boldly confronting an obvious wrong and using His authority to serve others, not Himself. His act must be understood in light of His heart.

Servant leadership does not mean that I am not willing to be bold and action oriented. It does mean that my focus is on the needs of others instead of my own. I readily acknowledge that most of the times when I want to use the whip, it is because my own agenda has been attacked, my own insecurities have surfaced, or I want to demonstrate my authority. The focus is on me, not others and I am serving myself not others. At this point, no act of mine will be an act of servant leadership.

Sorting out my motives with a heart that is desperately wicked is no easy task. But Jesus was fully human and knows my weaknesses. He still calls me to follow his example of leading with the heart of a servant...even when it means picking up the whip.

Until next time, yours on the journey,
Jon Byler

For further reflection and discussion:

- In what ways have I or others confused strong leadership and servant leadership?
- What keeps me from leading with boldness?
- Do I allow other’s expectations of leadership to shape my obedience to the example of Jesus?
- What other biblical examples can you think of where leaders used ‘whips’? Was the result positive or negative?