

The Way Of The Servant Leader

Craig C. Hill joined SMU's Perkins School of Theology as dean and professor of New Testament in July 2016 from Duke University Divinity School. Although his latest book, *Servant of All: Status, Ambition, and the Way of Jesus* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2016), is aimed at church leaders, its lessons can be readily employed by people leading institutions, corporations and even nations – and, he told *SMU Magazine* with a hint of irony, by him as well.

Q. What is a servant leader?

The term “servant leader” can seem like an oxymoron because we tend to view leaders as persons who dominate and command. By contrast, servants are typically located far down on the ladder of social status and influence. Parents don't dream of raising their children to be servants. Nevertheless, choosing to engage in a lifetime of service requires a strong sense of personal identity. Ironically, egocentrism is a position of great weakness. If we constantly look to others for affirmation – in effect, to tell us who we are – we place ourselves in a chronically servile position. True service doesn't come from a place of weakness but rather a place of strength.

Q. Why did you use the foot-washing story found in John 13 to reflect Jesus' thoughts about status and serving?

Throughout the Gospels, the disciples were the egocentric ones, always worrying about their relative position, competing with each other for status. In this story, Jesus is the only one in the room who truly knows who he is, who isn't constrained by the opinions of others and, therefore, the only one free to serve. Jesus voluntarily assumed what was then considered the lowest task – that of washing the feet of others – to set an example of true leadership and true standing. Elsewhere when the disciples bickered over rank, Jesus said to them, “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark 9:35).

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He didn't say they must empty themselves of meaning or value, or that it is wrong to want to have a life of significance. Instead, he turned on its head the conventional understanding of where significance was to be found: through service, not supremacy. Those who lose themselves in something greater than themselves are the very ones who find themselves.

Q. How does this correlate to positions of authority and power in today's world?

Researcher and author Jim Collins observed that companies that have transitioned from “good to great” shared a common factor: their leaders didn't have “larger than life” personalities, as one would expect, but were instead remarkably humble. Their CEOs weren't focused on drawing attention to themselves but were laser-focused on the mission of the

institution. They were unselfconsciously “self-forgetful,” putting their passion for the mission of the company ahead of themselves.

Q. How do you apply this philosophy to your leadership of Perkins Theology?

I often reflect on the story of the “widow's mite,” about a woman who gave a gift to the temple that everyone but Jesus regarded as insignificant. Jesus saw a person invisible to others and recognized the quality and depth of her sacrifice. It reminds me that the more prominent a position you're in, the more people will likely recognize you, but also the more tempted you might be to overlook those less noticed whom God would honor ahead of you. Universities are typically hierarchical places, where staff can feel unseen and disregarded. I don't want Perkins to be guilty of that. Everyone here is a partner in the mission of the school; everyone has a contribution to make.

Q. How did you handle the irony of being named dean of Perkins Theology only months before your book on status and ambition was published?

That put me in an awkward and rather humorous position. It was somewhat safer tackling this topic as a professor. Moreover, the book made a few explicit references to theological school deans. Rather than expunge these, I retained them as an inside joke at my own expense. On a more serious note, it made me all more conscious of the fact that the book contains essential lessons that I myself need to remember and to heed.

*Learn more about Hill and watch an interview about *Servant of All* at smu.edu/mag17hill.*