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To Lead Like Jesus – An Awesome Responsibility

C. William Pollard

It has been a special privilege for me to be with you today and now share some thoughts with you tonight. Thank you Ken, Phil, and Phyllis for your vision and leadership in establishing, developing and advancing the message of “Lead Like Jesus”. God has been honored in what you have taught and accomplished. And thank you members of the Board for your faithful support and oversight.

The title for my remarks tonight is Lead Like Jesus – An Awesome Responsibility.

Jesus is the author and finisher of our faith. What better teacher could we have on the subject of leadership? His words and the example of His life provide a great lesson plan.

The wonderful thing about how God works with us is that He teaches us by working in us and through us so our learning of His way often comes

in the “application” of truth more than just in the knowing of it. Tonight I would like to share with you some of the lessons I have learned in seeking to apply the “way of Jesus” in my leadership of a Fortune 500 company.

Jesus had a mission before him that set a focus and purpose for His leadership and for those who would follow. He came “not to be served but to serve”, “not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him”.

As I joined ServiceMaster I was faced with the question of how the “mission” of a Christian leader could embrace the diversity and complexity of the marketplace. Which by the way is part of that world that God so loves. It was a challenge that my predecessors had faced as they were committed to integrate the claims of their faith with the demands of their work. As a result we developed our four company objectives: To Honor God in all we do; To help people develop; To pursue excellence; and To grow profitably. Those first two objectives were end goals; the second two were means goals.

We did not use that first objective as a basis for exclusion. It was, in fact, the reason for our promotion of diversity as we recognized that different people with different beliefs were all part of God’s world.

As a business firm, we wanted to excel at generating profits and creating value for our shareholders. If we didn't want to play by these rules, we didn't belong in the ballgame. But also, we tried to encourage an environment where the work place could be an open community where the question of a person's moral and spiritual development and the existence of God and how one related the claims of his or her faith with their work, were issues of discussion, debate, and yes, even learning and understanding. We considered the people of our firm as, in fact, the soul of the firm.

It did not mean that everything was done right. We experienced our share of mistakes. We sometimes failed and did things wrong. But because of a stated standard and a reason for that standard, we typically could not hide our mistakes. Mistakes were regularly flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness, and leaders could not protect themselves at the expense of those they were leading.

The process of seeking understanding and application of these objectives as the mission of our organization was a never-ending task. It involved matters of the heart as well as the head and it was not susceptible to standard management techniques of implementation or measurement.

While at times it was discouraging, it also was energizing as one realized the continuing potential for creativity, innovation, and growth as there was a focus on the development of the whole person. And a recognition that every person regardless of title or position was created in the image and likeness of God with dignity and worth and their own fingerprint of potential.

This is the reason why the teachings of Jesus on leadership also included the application of a towel and a basin of water. Picture the scene. It was Thursday night, Jesus' last time to be alone with His disciples. Later that evening He would be betrayed, arrested, and the next day crucified. For the message of the Gospel to go forth – for His Church to be established, His disciples would no longer be learning from the physical presence of His teaching. They needed to assume the responsibility to spread the good news of the Gospel across the then-known world and to establish His Church in many different locations and cultures. The time would soon come when they would no longer be called disciples but, instead, apostles. They would be assuming positions of title and authority over others.

As He began washing their feet, the first and most important thing for them to learn was that their calling to lead started with the Caller. Although in the future, Jesus would not be physically present, their leadership was to be about a continuing relationship with Him, that should reflect His example in serving others. It would require their willingness to serve each other and those who would follow.

There was no room for self-gratification or positions of power over others. Jesus was, in effect, telling them that their leadership was just a means, the end of their leadership was to be all about the people who would follow, the direction they were headed and who they were becoming. Leadership was a position of responsibility and service, not a position of privilege. He was teaching them in a very practical and poignant way that to be effective as leaders of His Church, it would not be about them or their titles, position of authority, or platform that they would assume. Instead, it was about the people who would follow and the nurturing and growth of those people in their faith and example of life so that they would be able to multiply themselves in the lives of others.

Does this teaching of Jesus with a towel and basin of water fit in today's world more than 2,000 years later? There is certainly no scarcity of

feet to wash and towels are always available. I suggest that the only limitation, if there is one, is the ability of people in leadership to exercise the spirit of being humble, to subordinate self, and to become engaged with compassion and love for those they lead. A leader with a servant's heart assumes an obligation to be an example in both their public and private life for others to follow, to be an initiator for change and growth, and to be willing to do whatever they ask others to do.

Servant leadership has been a continuing learning experience for me. One of those early lessons of learning occurred when I first came to ServiceMaster.

I had been recruited to join the company by Ken Hansen, who was then its Chairman, and Ken Wessner, who was then its President and CEO.

The two Kens wanted me to come to the firm and initially head up the legal and financial affairs of the Company, reporting directly to Ken Wessner. During the recruiting process, they had shared their vision for the future and inferred that someday I might have an opportunity to lead the Company. And so as I came to that final day of decision about whether I would join the ServiceMaster team and as I sat in Ken Hansen's office waiting to sign the final documents of employment, I decided I

needed to know more about exactly what I would have to do to be CEO of this Company.

So I started pressing Ken Hansen on what would be expected from me and my leadership to be considered for the CEO's position. After about five minutes of listening to me, Ken Hansen stood up, looked me in the eye, and said: "Bill, the interview is over."

As I was ushered to the front door and left ServiceMaster that morning, I concluded that I'd blown my opportunity and this was God's way of directing me back to the practice of law.

Two days later, Ken Hansen called me on the phone and asked me if I wanted to know what happened in his office that day. I said sure and we met for breakfast the next morning.

Ken's words to me that morning were simply put this way: Bill, if you want to come to ServiceMaster and contribute to others, you will have a great career. But if you are coming to the Company for a title or position or to promote yourself, you'd better forget it. Ken then proceeded to share with me his thoughts about the meaning and role of being a servant leader in a public company. He had learned to "never give a title or position to someone who can't live without it;" and to "determine at the front end

whether a leader's self-interest or the interest of others will come first; and whether a leader is willing to do what they ask others to do".

As I made the decision that day to join the ServiceMaster team, Ken would test my commitment and also take time to teach me what it was like to walk in the shoes of the people I would lead.

During the first eight weeks of my initial assignment as a senior vice president, I spent my days out working with our service workers doing the service tasks that we performed for our customers.

In so doing, I was learning the reality of my dependence upon and responsibility to the people I would lead. Little did I realize then that this would ultimately involve over 200,000 people as we grew to serve over 10 million customers in 45 different countries.

This early experience of walking in the shoes of the people I would lead often reminded me of my own imperfections, the need to admit my mistakes, ask for forgiveness, and seek guidance from above.

When I became CEO of the firm, the faces of our service workers would often flash across my mind as I was faced with those inevitable judgment calls between the rights and wrongs of running a business. The

integrity of my actions had to pass their scrutiny. Otherwise I was deceiving myself and those I was committed to serve and develop.

Unfortunately, there are often many trappings that go with a position of leadership, including the perks and prestige of the office and the arrogance of success that can tempt leaders to focus on self and think they have all the answers. It is the evil of hubris. It is often subtle and can have a cumulative effect on judgment and effectiveness unless it is nipped in the bud.

An example of my own experience may be helpful to illustrate this point. One of the benefits of my friendship with Peter Drucker was that he never hesitated to point out those areas where I could improve my leadership. One of those important moments of learning occurred when we were traveling together to conduct a management seminar in Tokyo for Japanese business leaders.

After the seminar, Peter and I had dinner together. I shared with him my disappointment, and yes, even anger, over the fact that no one from the leadership team of our Japanese business partner had come to the seminar. They had been invited and had promised to attend. Since some of our current and prospective customers were in attendance, it

would have provided an opportunity for them to learn and also to make important business connections.

I explained to Peter that we had recently decided to delay bringing one of our new service lines to Japan and that the leadership of our partner was no doubt upset with that decision. I explained that this was probably the reason they did not come.

I told Peter that I intended to cancel my trip to their headquarters in Osaka and take an earlier flight back to the States. Peter encouraged me to rethink my position and gave some advice, including his thoughts and understanding of Japanese culture. Although I listened to him, I made up my mind that I was not going to accept his advice and I would reschedule my flight the next morning.

When dinner was over, we returned to our respective hotel rooms. At about 10:30 that evening, I received a call from Peter asking me if I would come to his room. He was still concerned about my reactions and wanted a further discussion with me.

As Peter opened the door to his hotel room, I could tell by the look on his face that he was troubled. He told me to sit on the chair near his

bed. He then sat down on the edge of his bed and looked me straight in the eye.

Bill, he said, “you are suffering from hubris. It’s time for you to eat some humble pie.” He went on to explain how quickly leaders can lose touch with the reality of their responsibility and be consumed by pride and self. He pointed out that my job as a leader was to go to Osaka, meet with our business partners, resolve our differences, and rebuild the relationship. This result was needed for the continued growth of our business in Japan and for the opportunities it would provide to people in our business. It was my job to do this as a leader, and it was not something I could delegate.

It was great advice. The next morning I was on the train to Osaka and my meeting there with the president of our business partner and his team accomplished the right result for our business and for our people as we renewed our relationship with them. The leadership lesson was clear. My leadership responsibility was not about me or my feelings. It was about what should be done for our business and for our people.

There is another chapter to this story. Six months after this meeting, the president of our business partner in Japan suddenly died of a heart

attack. Soon after I heard the news, his wife contacted me and asked me if I would come to Japan and participate in this funeral ceremony.

I was honored to do so but frankly I was somewhat perplexed about how I could do so in a way that would reflect the sincerity of our friendship and also to share the great hope of my faith and the truth of God's redeeming love. I knew it would be a traditional Japanese funeral ceremony led by both a Buddhist monk and a Shinto priest. I wanted to speak the truth of my faith but I did not want my words to disrupt or offend.

I decided to share some of what we discussed when we had our last meeting, including the importance of forgiveness in building relationships of trust. I then closed with a word of what God's forgiveness had meant in my life and His offer of forgiveness for all who would receive it. My message was well received. And once again God, in His wisdom, used the doing of business to cross the lines of culture and faith to honor the truth of His Word.

Actions often speak louder than words. If I had not made that trip to Osaka six months earlier and eaten some humble pie, there would not

have been the opportunity for me to speak and share my faith six months later.

As we seek to follow the words of Jesus as we seek to lead and serve people in their work, we should recognize that this includes the obligation to develop people not only in what they are doing in their work but also who they are becoming -- to treat people as the subject of work not just the object of work.

Max DePree, in his book *Leadership is an Art*, has referred to this obligation as the posture of indebtedness of a leader to the people being led.

As people grow and develop in their work environment they can also grow in their spiritual understanding.

Listen to this letter I received from one of our Chinese employees who had supported me in the development of our business in China:

When I grew up in China, religions were forbidden and Mao's book became our bible. When I was five or six years old, I could recite Mao's quotations and even use them to judge and lecture the kids in the neighborhood. Mao said, "Serve the people. Leaders should be public servants." This coincides with some of

ServiceMaster's moral standards. When I think deeply, I see the difference that makes one work so successfully and the other collapse fatally. It must be the starting point of ServiceMaster to honor God and that every individual has been created in His image with dignity and worth.

ServiceMaster is designed to be a big, tall tree with strong roots, which penetrate extensively to almost every corner of a person's daily life. It is still growing in mine. And I am still learning."

Shu Zhang is a thinking person. She has been confronted with life choices that go beyond doing a job or earning a living; choices about who she is becoming and whether she would respond to God's offer of love and forgiveness – a choice that only she could make.

For me, the world of business has become a channel for fulfilling and living my faith; a channel that has reached from a janitor's closet in Saudi Arabia to the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, China – from sweeping streets in Osaka, Japan to ringing the bell of the New York Stock Exchange. It has provided the opportunity for me to embrace and engage those who

do not believe the way I do, but whom God loves and who, by my words and actions, should see the reality of His love.

There always is a level playing field at the foot of the Cross. As the Apostle Paul reminded us, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female. The often too-human distinctions, labels, and titles we place upon people are never a basis for preference when we serve as ambassadors of Jesus Christ and His redemptive love. The people we lead and work with are all part of the world that God so loves.

A world that is looking for answers. Answers that we as leaders who are followers of Jesus should be prepared to give. Answers that, in my view, only the grace and work of atonement at the Cross can ultimately provide. Answers that relate to the unmet needs of people – people who are experiencing the pain of poverty – poverty of the mind and of the soul. Answers and guidance that will help people to know and understand their faith, not only in terms of truth claims, but also to grasp the need to live and share those truths in a way that will engage, not alienate, those who do not believe the same way they do. To affirm their faith but not impose it.

To be both salt and light in the world of our work.

As Joshua came to the closing days of his leadership of the nation of Israel, he challenged the people to fear God and serve Him with faithfulness.

It was a challenge, not a command, for God does not compel anyone to follow or worship Him. In Joshua's conclusion, he emphasized this point when he said, "But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve . . . but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

Now, the Hebrew word that is translated "serve" is Avodah, and can also mean worship or work. Yes, that's right – our work, whatever it is, can also be a worship to the God we love as we serve and live our faith. Our work can become a center of our worship as we bring alive the reality that Jesus lived and died for the purpose that those He created and loved may know Him as God and Savior.

It is our awesome responsibility as we seek to Lead Like Jesus.

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