

The Leader as Steward: Reflections on Luke 12:42-48

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Abstract

Since the publication of Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership*, leadership studies, including Christian studies of leadership, have focused on the leader as servant. Some have suggested that Christian leadership studies replace the image of leader as servant with the image of leader as shepherd. However, the New Testament applies the shepherd image only to ecclesiastical leaders. Reflecting on Luke 12:42-48, this article develops the image of leader as steward as a complement to the images of leader as servant and as shepherd. The steward image, attending to the triad of God, leader, and followers, does justice to the authority of leaders, something that can be overlooked in the servant image of leadership. It has applicability beyond the ecclesiastical realm, and, this article argues, it is particularly relevant to the high power distance culture of sub-Saharan Africa. The article concludes that promotion of the steward image, particularly its emphasis on the leader's accountability, may do more than continued promotion of servant leadership in addressing the challenges of leadership in Africa today.

Keywords: leadership, authority, steward, servant, Luke 12

Introduction

Since the publication of Robert Greenleaf's *Servant Leadership* in 1977, leadership studies, including Christian leadership studies, have tended to focus on the leader as servant. In his classic treatise on African Christian Leadership, Osei-Mensah (1990) noted an acute shortage of trained leaders in Africa. He asked, "what kinds of leaders do we need?" The book's title, *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, provides the answer. Osei-Mensah (1990, p. 8-9) writes: "The model of leadership that the Scriptures consistently commend to the people of God is instead what we may call the 'servant-leader.' ... In both the Old and New Testaments those who are qualified for appointment as leader among the people of God are always appointed to serve." That Osei-Mensah's book remains in print and continues to be used as a textbook in numerous African seminaries attests to the enduring relevance of his argument. Jesus calls Christian leaders to be servants. "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them ... But you are not to be like that. Instead ... the one who rules [should be] like the one who serves" (Luke 22:25-26).¹ But it is not only those who rule that must serve. All Christians are called to "serve one another humbly in love" (Gal. 5:13). The biblical call to servanthood is not exclusive to those who lead.

In contrast, "the shepherd image is one of the few that is applied exclusively to leaders" in Scripture (Bennett, 2004, p. 129). Only leaders are described as shepherds in the Bible. Moses was a shepherd of Israel (Numb. 27:15-17; Isa. 63:11). God took David "from tending the sheep ... to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel his inheritance" (Ps. 78:71). Israel's leaders were "commanded to shepherd my people Israel" (2 Sam. 7:7; 1 Chr. 17:6). The prophets denounced disobedient leaders as bad or false shepherds (Jer. 23:1-4; Ezek. 34:1-5). Through Ezekiel, God promised to come himself to "tend my sheep," to "search for the lost and bring back the strays," and to "bind up the injured and strengthen the weak" (Ezek. 34:11-16) - a promise fulfilled in Jesus Christ, "the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11-18; see also Luke 19:10). The Apostles Peter and Paul admonished church leaders to "be shepherds of God's flock" (1 Peter 5:2; see also Acts 20:28).

Accordingly, some suggest that "shepherd leadership" should replace "servant leadership" as the primary Christian philosophy of leadership. Though Foster (2010) laments that there is "very little scholarly

¹ All Scripture quotations in this article are taken from the *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (2011).

research on the matter of shepherd leadership,” the matter has received popular treatment by Christian writers. Notable recent publications include McCormick & Davenport (2020), MacArthur (2016), and Witmer (2010). However, these treatments tend to focus on church leadership - note the subtitle of Witmer’s (2010) book: “Achieving Effective Shepherding *in Your Church* [emphasis added]” - perhaps because the New Testament applies the image of shepherd (pastor) specifically to ecclesiastical leaders. One wonders, then, about the image’s relevance for leadership in other areas of life such as politics and business, and, thus, about the image’s ability to serve as the basis for a comprehensive Christian philosophy of leadership.

This article proposes a third biblical image for leadership, the leader as steward, as a complement to the images of leader as servant and as shepherd. The image of leader as steward does justice to the authority of leaders, something that can be overlooked in the servant image of leadership, and it is applicable beyond the ecclesiastical realm, to which the image of leader as shepherd is limited in the New Testament. The image of leader as steward is particularly relevant to the high power distance culture of sub-Saharan Africa.

This article develops the image of leader as steward by reflecting on Luke 12:42-46 in which Jesus himself commends this leadership image to us. First, the major characters in Jesus’ parable will be discussed. Second, the relationship between the manager and the other servants will be explored. Third, the nature and exercise of authority will be addressed. Finally, attention will be given to the manager’s accountability to the master.

The Major Characters in Luke 12:42-48

Jeremias’ (1972) argument that Jesus’ parables only make one main point has become the modern scholarly consensus. However, Blomberg (1990, p. 14) argues that this consensus is “misguided and requires rethinking.” Instead, Blomberg (1990, p. 21) suggests that “many parables probably make more than one point.” Generally, the number of points a parable makes corresponds to the number of main character it contains. Blomberg (1990, p. 190-93) includes Luke 12:42-46 among Jesus’ “simple three-point parables.” These parables usually “contain three main characters, one who function as a ruler or authority figure and two subordinates, one good and one bad, who illustrate contrasting patterns of responses to their master” (Blomberg, 1990, p. 24).

For Blomberg, the characters in Luke 12:42-46 are (1) the master, (2) the faithful servant, and (3) the unfaithful servant. Blomberg's "faithful servant" corresponds with the "wise and faithful manager" of whom Jesus speaks (Luke 12:42). But Blomberg's "unfaithful servant" is not another character in the story. Instead, he is the "wise and faithful manager" proving himself to be unwise and unfaithful in Jesus' hypothetical scenario, "But suppose the servant says to himself, 'My master is taking a long time in coming,' and then begins to beat the other servants, both men and women, and to eat and drink and get drunk" (Luke 12:45). Blomberg's analysis overlooks "the other servants" of whom the manager has been put in charge.

The analysis offered here considers these main characters: (1) the master, (2) the manager (or focal subordinate), and (3) the other servants (or peripheral subordinate) - a structure Blomberg (1990, p. 171) acknowledges, though he does not apply it to Luke 12:42-46. This is a monarchic parable, because its central or unifying character is a monarch - a master or king figure (Funk, 1982, pp. 29-54). As with most of Jesus' monarchic parables, the monarch (or master) represents God. The other two characters, the manager and the other servants, are both subordinate to the master. But the manager has been "put in charge" of the other servants. He is their leader.

This triad - God (master), leader (manager), and followers (other servants) - is often overlooked in theories of servant leadership and shepherd leadership, which tend to focus exclusively on the leader (shepherd) and followers (flock). Christian leadership theories will be strengthened when attention is given to all three members of this triad.

The Relationship between the Manager and the Other Servants

The relationship between the manager (leader) and the other servants (followers) is complex. On the one hand, the manager has been put in charge of the other servants. Thus, he possesses authority over them. But, on the other hand, the manager's claim on the other servants is limited. Verse 42 describes them as the master's servants. They belong to the master, not the manager. They are not the manager's servants. Indeed, in verse 43 and 45, the manager is also referred to as a "servant." He is also one of the master's servants.

The servants over whom he has been put in charge are other (or fellow) servants. Especially in relation to the master, the manager is one of them and one with them.

Okesson (2008, p. 109) noted the tendency, especially in African churches, to “view the pastor as some kind of ‘super human.’” Pastors are sacralised or deified. A similar thing happened to Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14. When they healed a crippled girl, the people of Lystra thought that the gods had come down to them in human form. But when the people attempted to worship Paul and Barnabas, the apostles tore their clothes. “Friends, why are you doing this?” they asked. “We too are only human, like you” (Acts 14:15). Leaders, too, are “only human” - fellow servants. This is why Jesus warned his disciples not to let anyone call them “father:” “You are all brothers [and sisters] ... you have [only] one Father, and he is in heaven” (Matt. 23:8-9).

In his *Address to the German Nobility* (1520), Martin Luther objected to the ontological distinction made by the medieval Roman church between clergy and laity. Luther argued that “all Christians truly belong to the spiritual estate, and there is no difference among them apart from their office.” That is, within the priesthood of all believers, Christians all have the same status, even if they serve different functions. As Okesson (2004, p. 39) rightly notes, a sameness in status applies not only to Christians, but to all human beings, because “it arises out of the image of God and is equally bestowed upon all humanity.” The manager is first and foremost also a servant. Yet, the master has put him in charge of the other servants. That is, he possesses genuine authority.

The Bible teaches that leaders possess authority. “The authorities that exist have been established by God.” (Rom. 13:1) The Bible calls children to obey their parents (Eph. 6:1); citizens, their government (Rom. 13:1); and church members, ecclesiastical authority (Heb. 13:17). The question is not whether leaders possess authority, but how they should exercise their authority.

One weakness of the image of the leader as servant can be its inability to deal adequately with the reality of authority. A leader whose self-concept is reduced to being the followers’ servant easily becomes “a quivering mass of availability” (Willimon, 2002, p. 60). The leader becomes subordinate to the followers; he becomes their servant, one who must do their bidding. But the Bible is clear: Those who are only trying to

please people are not servants of Christ (Gal. 1:10). A leader must serve, but it is not the whims and wishes of the followers that leaders serve. Leaders should serve the wellbeing of those they lead. Leaders serve their followers, but that does not make them their followers' servant. Just as the other servants remain the master's servant, so too the manager is and remains the master's servant. The other servants do not become the manager's servant nor does the manager become the other servants' servant. The manager serves the master by serving the other servants, by giving them their food allowance at the proper time.

Hall's (1990) classic treatment of the biblical symbol of the steward provides helpful guidance in understanding the complex relationship between the manager and the other servants. Though Hall writes about the relationship of human beings and nature, his discussion is transferable to the relationship between leader and followers. Hall's triad of God, human beings, and nature corresponds to the triad of master, manager, and other servants in Luke 12:42-46. Hall names three possible ways of formulating the relationship between human beings and nature. These correspond to three possible ways of formulating the relationship between the manager and the other servants.

The first possible relationship between human beings and nature is that of human beings over nature. This way of formulating the relationship places human beings "on a very high rung of the ladder of being." It "insists that nature is simply there for human usage" (Hall, 1990, p. 191). White (1967) considered this way of formulating the relationship between human beings and nature the historical roots of our ecological crisis. Applied to leaders and followers, this view sees leaders as apart from their followers. The followers become the leader's servants.

Amofo (2013) argues that this is the typical African cultural understanding of leadership and power, upon which African Christian leadership has unfortunately been too often modelled and by which it has been too often shaped.

African Christian leadership frequently displays values that are self-serving, intolerant, nepotistic, autocratic, inefficient and inconsiderate to the real and felt needs of the people they lead. Leadership is perceived to be a means to personal aggrandisement and material wealth (p. 154).

In Jesus' parable, this is the unwise, unfaithful manager who beats the other servants, who eats and drinks and gets drunk. (Luke 12:45)

Zokoue (1990, p. 5) noted that "it is not rare to find in [African] churches the same structures as one finds in political life." Both pastors and government officials are called "ministers." But, Zokoue (1990, p. 5) writes, "a minister in government is not treated as a servant; he is first to be served." Sadly, too many pastors desire the same treatment. Some Christian leaders in Nigeria literally walk on their followers. Their followers lie down on the ground before them so that the "man of God" can walk on them and avoid touching the dirt. "Why does the pastor compare himself with a minister and ask to be given the same respect?" Zokoue (1990, p. 5) asks. "It is because the pastor himself is also hungry for power ... he is hungry to have authority and to be seen as important in society" (Zokoue, p. 5). This is the leader *over* the other servants.

A second possible way of formulating the relationship between human beings and nature (or between the manager and the other servants) is to see human beings as simply "one of the myriad of creatures. One species amongst others, mortal as they, dependent as they, having no more to offer than they, and no more right to life either." This, Hall (1990, p. 201) calls, "humanity *in* nature." Applied to leadership, this view emphasises the equality of status between the manager and the other servants, but neglects their difference in function. It emphasises that leader and followers "are all brothers [and sisters]" (Matt. 23:8) to such an extent that the distinction between leader and followers, manager and other servants, is lost. In this view, *contra* biblical teaching, the manager has not been put in charge of the other servants. This way of formulating the relationships does not allow for the biblical teachings about authority.

A third way of formulating the relationship, which Hall (1990, p. 206) says is "without doubt the approach that belongs to our religious [Christian] tradition," is humanity *with* nature. "Here humanity is neither superior to the rest of creation (above) nor simply identical with it (in), but the human creature exists alongside the others, in solidarity with them, yet also distinct" (Hall, 1990, p. 206) The manager is both a fellow servant, but also the servant who has been put in charge. Hall (1990) writes:

On the one hand, the steward [manager] is singled out for special responsibility. The steward is different. Unlike the other servants, the steward is truly answerable for what happens in the household. All the same, the steward is one of the others, by no means superior to them, having no absolute rights over them, but liable to judgment because of his treatment of them (p. 213).

The next section considers the manager's treatment of the other servants (the nature and exercise of authority); the following section will consider the manager's liability to judgment.

The Nature and Exercise of Authority

The manager is a servant, but a servant singled out for special responsibility. The manager has been put in charge of the other servants for a specific purposes: "to give them their food allowance at the proper time" (Luke 12:42). The phrase, which echoes God's care for creation (Ps. 104:27; 145:15), teaches that authority is always to be used to serve the well-being of the other servants. It is never to be used by leaders for their own benefit, as a means of personal aggrandisement. Terrible judgement awaits the servant who mistreats the other servants and who eats and drinks and gets drunk.

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God chastised leaders who "only take care of themselves. Should not shepherds take care of the flock?" Yes, they should! They have been given authority, not to enrich themselves - not to "eat the curds, clothe [themselves] with the wool and slaughter the choice animals" - but to care and provide for the other servants - to "strengthen the weak, heal the sick, and bind up the injured" (Ezek. 34:2-4). As Bell (2019) explains, this is the epitome of healthy leadership:

Healthy leadership is possibly best described as being more concerned with the well-being of followers and organisations than of the leadership themselves. Healthy leadership is describing the process of leadership behaviours, attributes, and activities which seek to promote the health of followers and organisation (p. 66).

The manager has been put in charge. He possesses genuine authority, but it is not for his own good; it is for the good of others. The Apostle Paul acknowledged that the Lord had given him authority, but that it was given "for building you up, not for tearing you down" (2 Cor. 13:10). The measure of a leader's success is the well-being of his followers and the community he leads.

The human tendency is to misuse authority. Lord Acton was right: “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” This may account for servant leadership’s reluctance to discuss the leader’s authority. But the Bible teaches that leaders possess authority, and the Bible calls people to submit to their leaders. (Heb. 13:17) However, as Land (2005, p. 76) notes, it is only “when the Bible speaks to the flock, as in Hebrews 13, [that] the under-shepherd’s [leader’s] authority is underscored.” When the Bible addresses the leader, “the servant’s heart is emphasised.” The Bible calls people to submit to their leaders, but it never allows leaders to demand submission from their followers. Rather, when it addresses leaders, the Bible emphasises the need for a servant’s heart and the leader’s accountability to God, to which the final section attends.

The Steward’s Accountability

The master (God) has put the manager (leader/steward) in charge. The manager’s authority is delegated to him by God and, as the conclusion to Jesus’ parable reveals, the manager is ultimately accountable to the master for how he exercises the authority entrusted to him. The standard by which the master judges the manager is the well-being of the other servants. The manager is judged by how well he provides and cares for the other servants. “It will be good for that servant whom the master finds doing so when he returns” (Luke 12:43). But the manager who cares only about himself, who begins to beat the other servants, who eats and drinks and gets drunk - “the master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the unbelievers” (Luke 12:46).

Thomas (2018, p. 68) notes that power distance is “one cultural attribute that may cause people and cultural groups to resist servant leadership.” Power distance is “the degree to which members of an organisation and society encourage and reward unequal distribution of power with greater power at higher levels.” (Thomas, 2018, p. 69) Sub-Saharan African cultures have the world’s highest power distance ranking, and, as Thomas (2018, p. 70) notes, “high power distance cultures will not naturally gravitate toward servant leadership.” Zokoue (1990, p. 4) observed: “Certain aspects of African culture tend toward domination.” “There exists [in Africa] a traditional context that does not favour the spirit of service.” This

may explain why, thirty years after Osei-Mensah published *Wanted: Servant Leaders*, many continue to lament the absence of servant leadership in Africa.

Perhaps the better way of improving African Christian leadership is not promotion of servant leadership but promotion of the biblical image of the leader as steward. The image acknowledges the authority of the leader, but also places the leader under God's authority. This may speak more to the high power distance of sub-Saharan cultures. Africans naturally associate leadership with power and are inclined to be deferential toward their leaders. But the greatest power distance is between human beings - including leaders - and God. Acknowledging the ultimate power and leadership of God may speak more to the African cultural context. Leaders must become deferential to God and obedient to the mandate they receive from him to care and provide for their followers. Increased emphasis on the leader's accountability to God, which is most clearly seen in the image of leader as steward, may provide the necessary motivation for leaders to take seriously their responsibility to care and provide for their followers.

Conclusion

This article proposes that a Christian philosophy of leadership can and should be developed from the biblical image of a leader as steward. Jesus himself commends this image to us in Luke 12:42-46. The image does justice to the biblical teaching of authority, something often overlooked in servant leadership. Unlike the image of leader as shepherd, which is only applied to ecclesiastical leaders in the New Testament, the image of leader as steward has broad applicability to all spheres of human life. The image is particularly relevant to the high power distance culture of sub-Saharan Africa.

The image explicitly acknowledges the triad to which all Christian leadership theories must attend: God, leader, and followers. Both servant leadership and shepherd leadership are prone to focus on the relationship between the leader and his or her followers, neglecting the relationship between the leader and God. Finally, the image of leader as steward brings together two important themes that all Christian philosophies of leadership should include: responsibility and accountability.

Hall's (1990) words about the aptness of the steward metaphor for humanity are equally applicable to the aptness of the steward metaphor for leadership.

The steward is a particularly apt metaphor for humanity because it encapsulates the two sides of human relatedness, the relation to God on the one hand and to the nonhuman creatures of God on the other. The human being is, as God's steward, accountable to God and responsible for its fellow creatures (pp. 25-26).

Hall's (1990) description of the steward in the literature of the Old Testament is equally applicable to leadership today: The leader is;

a servant, but not an ordinary servant who simply takes orders and does the bidding of others. Rather, he is a rather superior servant, a sort of supervisor or foreman, who must make decisions, give orders, and take charge... The steward is one who has been given the responsibility for the management and service of something belonging to another, and his office presupposes a particular kind of trust on the part of the owner or master (p. 32).

Servant leadership does not always recognise that leaders, though servants, are, as Hall (1990, p. 235) writes "a rather superior servant." The challenge in Africa, however, is not to reclaim the "superiority" of leaders. Too many African leaders are too ready to make decisions, give orders, and take charge. The challenge is for leaders, especially Christian leaders, to acknowledge that their authority is "a particular kind of trust." As Hall (1990, p. 235) concludes, "the steward [manager/leader] is not the master and owner." Many have proposed servant leadership as the antidote for arrogant, authoritarian leadership. The solution, however, is not to make leaders mere servants, but to recognise their accountability. This the image of the leader as steward does. It is an image especially relevant to the African context and worthy of further development in Christian leadership studies.

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