Serving Is Messy

Euan MacRae 16 May 2023



On the 28th of September 2021, the footballing world was rocked. The world's greatest player, perhaps in the history of the game, scored his first goal for his new team, Paris Saint-Germain. Sublime as the goal was, it was not the brilliance of Lionel Messi's attacking prowess that caught the attention of the world media, but a moment Messi's loyal fans described as "horrific" and "disrespectful".

What had Messi done to send such a shockwave throughout the footballing world? Was it a mistimed tackle? Perhaps he lashed out in anger after a moment of unwanted attention from an opposing player? No, on the 28th of September 2021, Messi lay down at the foot of a strategically positioned defensive wall with the simple purpose of protecting his team's goalmouth.

For many pundits and ex-professional players, it was more than they could bear. How could the world's G.O.A.T (greatest of all time) be allowed to assume such a lowly position in the presence of others less gifted and more suitable for such a purpose? One commentator was recorded saying, "If I was in that team, I'd say; 'Listen: I'll lay down for you.' Sorry, I couldn't have him laying down like that. He doesn't get his kit dirty! That's not what Messi does".

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We live in a world of idols and untouchable “sacred cows”, a world where the great are elevated and celebrated, but we are not citizens of this world; we are citizens of heaven navigating cultures and customs that often flow in opposition to the ways of our homeland. As followers of Jesus, we must recognise that we are not impregnable to the traditions of the world. Even those closest to Jesus, James and John, once requested that He elevate them to His left and right side in glory. The heart of mankind is ambitious, and status is a tempting mistress, but it is not the way of Jesus.

Consider Jesus’ response to His disciples’ request for heavenly recognition: “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 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. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:42-45, ESV)

The Example of Jesus

The example of Jesus and the demands of following Him is considerable. If titles and human admiration confirm worldly greatness and recognition, then greatness in the Kingdom is surely sealed by the contrary qualities of humility and comfort in anonymity.

James and John must have been shocked by the response of their leader; perhaps they imagined He would guarantee them seats in the director’s box in heaven, but instead He taught them that whoever desires to experience greatness in the Kingdom must first be prepared to lay their lives down to serve people from every ethnicity and level of social standing. He was telling them – sometimes you need to lie down for your friends and be prepared to get your kit dirty! Of course, Jesus goes further to make His point clear; if His followers were to become preeminent amongst others, they must first learn to live without any rights of their own and live this way willingly and joyfully.

The journey towards true servitude in the Kingdom is one of unlearning what the world has taught us. In varying degrees, we are perhaps prepared to live “semi-surrendered” lives portraying an appearance of humility, but when the time comes to lie down behind the wall, are there undercurrents of indignation and frustration that we have been asked to serve in the low places?

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The example of Jesus is one of true submission, and we are asked to follow His example; “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.**”** – Philippians 2:3-4 (ESV)

Every day we experience opportunities to prefer others over ourselves. These opportunities, if missed, are the moments that compound hard-heartedness and a character that will continue to ebb and flow in the river of worldly arrogance. If, however, we embrace the mind of Christ and daily put our carnal desires on the altar of sacrifice; and if we choose to follow the example of our King, we will discover that being His bondservant and forfeiting our own rights will lead us into a place of perfect freedom and contentment.

Attributes of a Servant Heart

So practically speaking, what does it look like to be a servant-hearted saint or leader in the Kingdom of God?

1. Laying Down Your Life

A servant’s focus is always concerned with others rather than serving themselves or being served by others. We all have daily encounters with people who have no interest in servitude; the cashier in the supermarket who chooses to speak to their friend on the phone rather than engage with you as you pay for your shopping, the waiter who seems reluctant to take your order. Even in the church, these attitudes can penetrate God’s people: the negative children’s worker who would rather be in the main service, the “wannabe preacher” who listens to pick apart the elder’s message. Self-elevation and glory-seeking neither reflect the heart of Jesus nor have any place amongst God’s children. Instead, God is calling us to be more for others than we are for ourselves; He is calling us to lay down our lives for one another in humble service.

2. Being Willing to Step Aside

Perhaps one of the great challenges in the Kingdom is recognising that ministries and responsibilities within the body are seasonal. Seasons of service may be lengthy – for some, several decades, while for others, the seasons are shorter. The servant test often arrives when there is a change in responsibility: a leader steps aside to make way for another, a

congregational leader hands his family over to a younger “up-and-coming” elder, a worship leader transitions to a new role, a youth leader matures into eldership. Sometimes the most rigorous test of a servant’s heart is being willing to step aside to make way for another person to carry the torch that the Lord lit in our own hand.

3. Content in the Shadows

Being a servant in the house of God may require us to be content to remain in the shadows. The servant heart must learn to quietly attend to the needs of others without being seen or applauded or complete tasks that are unrelated to our various gift zones. The example of Jesus displays His endless grace towards people who would neither thank Him nor choose to follow Him. Being a servant leaves no room for looking inward, only upward and outward.

4. A Heart of True Humility

We need to carry the heart of John the Baptist, the one of whom Jesus said; “Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist” – Matthew 11:11 (NIV). It is no surprise that Jesus regarded John so highly.

If greatness in the Kingdom is synonymous with humility and a preference for other people, then surely John’s announcement of the Lamb of God helps us to understand the kind of heart Jesus loves, “This joy of mine is now complete. He must increase, but I must decrease” – John 3:29-30 (ESV). Captured in that simple statement is the essence of the servant’s heart, that my life must be lived in a way that glorifies and makes known the wonder, beauty and great love of Jesus to mankind ahead of my own personal ministry or gain.

Jesus is the G.O.A.T, and He led with a towel in one hand and a basin in the other; He washed the feet of His own disciples as a demonstration of the kind of leadership and priesthood He loved and desired to see in His followers. Let us live our lives as He has shown us. Let Him increase as we decrease. Let us demonstrate the greatness of God through servant-hearted love for our King.