

## How to Be a Servant Leader

Matthew 23:1-12

I read a story this week about a former Heisman trophy quarterback for the Florida Gators, Tim Tebow. Many of you have probably heard of him. He was a backup quarterback for the Denver Broncos at the start of this season, but their starting quarterback, Kyle Orton, has played kind of the same way he played for the Bears, which caused the coach to start Tebow instead.

One of the things that makes Tim Tebow unique is his very outspoken views on his Christian faith. He was raised in the Philippines where his parents served as missionaries. In the off season he has been known to go and serve on mission trips while other players are relaxing or playing golf.

Most of the people who interview him say he comes off as a very genuine, sincere, thoughtful young man who takes a very humble attitude toward his life and his career success. But others are critical of him and very public way he talks about his faith.

For instance, he tells the story that his mother had a very difficult pregnancy with him. The doctors told her that if she brought him to term she herself would likely die in the process, along with him. They counseled her to have an abortion for medical reasons.

His parents were against abortion because of their religious faith, so they took the risk and she survived giving birth to him. That fact has led him to be even more adamantly against abortion, even in cases where a mother's life is in danger.

During the last superbowl he starred in a spot on a family TV station where he talked about how abortion is immoral and incompatible with the Christian faith. Millions of people saw it. He has a tremendous following.

But later on a reporter asked him what he would do if he were in the same situation as his parents were. If his future wife was struggling with serious complications from her pregnancy and was advised to undergo an abortion to save her own life, what would he want her to do?

He said, "That would be hard." But he didn't say he would tell her to try and bring the baby to term anyway. In the eyes of many people those kinds of statements appear to be hypocritical. If he believes what he says he does as strongly as he does, then there should have been no hesitation in stating that he would want his wife to risk her own life.

Another thing he did that rubbed people the wrong way, and this is kind of pertinent to the passage we're looking at, was to take a marker and write a Bible passage in the black grease that football players put under their eyes, knowing that since he was a quarterback, everyone watching on TV would see it.

In one of the games his coach ordered him not to do it, but he did so anyway. Now you could say that there's nothing wrong with putting Bible verses on your face so people will see it. But other people reacted very negatively because they thought he was trying to draw attention to himself by doing so.

They have a point. He was a backup quarterback, and yet he published his memoirs and went on a nationwide book tour to promote them. That has been perceived by many people as going beyond the realm of speaking about faith and entering the realm of self promotion.

Now if you think those criticisms are a bit harsh, and many Christians do, then I want to remind you about the kind of approach to our faith that Jesus teaches in the Gospel of Matthew.

While Jesus does send his disciples into the entire world to preach, teach and baptize, he is adamant that their own personal expressions of their faith remain private.

Sometimes you'll see football players who are people of faith join together in the end zone on bended knee and have a prayer after a game on national TV. But Jesus tells his followers that when they pray they should go into their room and close the door so that no one else knows.

You'll often see a press release from an athlete or a business person or someone of fame who has given a large amount of money to a faith based organization. That act of charity, which is a tremendous benefit to many people, makes the TV, the newspaper and the radio.

But Jesus tells his disciples to do the opposite. Not only should no one else know when you give to the poor, but your left hand shouldn't even know what your right hand is doing when it donates to the needy. By the way, if you find a way to do that literally, let me know.

That approach to the Christian faith is the basis for the passage we read for today. Jesus is giving his disciples further instructions about how to practice their faith in their everyday lives.

And just like he did in the examples I just mentioned, he does so by first telling his disciples how not to practice their faith. He contrasts the way they are supposed to practice their faith with the way it was practiced by other respected religious groups of his time.

At the time the Gospel of Matthew was being written, a group called the Pharisees were widely regarded as the most pious religious group around, and I mean that in a good way. Everyone looked at these folks and wished they could live as righteous a life as the Pharisees did.

The Pharisees claimed that they lived righteously because they strictly followed the laws that God gave to Moses, the laws that the Jewish people were supposed to follow as part of their agreement with God.

But Matthew describes Jesus as someone who also believes that the way to righteousness is to follow those laws very strictly. In fact, Jesus says that he and his disciples follow the laws even more strictly than the Pharisees do, and that they, in fact, are hypocrites who do not follow the law very well.

That's why in today's passage he tells his followers that they should listen to the Pharisees, who at the time were thought to be the best at reading and interpreting Moses' laws for the people. When they read people the laws of Moses, his disciples should listen.

But they should not try to act like the Pharisees as the Pharisees apply those laws to their lives. The problem Jesus seems to raise is that the Pharisees have turned their efforts to follow the law into an effort to promote themselves and their standing in society.

Jesus gives a few examples of that tendency in today's passage. He recalls a passage in Deuteronomy 6 where Moses tells people to bind the laws God gave them to their forehead as a way of reminding themselves to always follow God's laws.

Many Jewish people who were trying to live a godly life obeyed that verse by taking small pieces of lambskin and writing a small portion of God's law on the skin. They would then put the skin in a tiny box called a phylactery. They tied that box to their headwear so that, just as the passage says, the law would be bound to their foreheads.

So wherever you went, people would see that you had God's law literally dangling in front of your eyes. It seemed like a very godly thing to do. But for the Pharisees a simple phylactery wasn't pious enough.

They put large pieces of lambskin in large boxes and attached them to their headwear. I imagine it must have been unbearable at times to have that big thing dangling from your head. But people were impressed by how religious they were. Jesus doesn't think God is all that impressed, though.

Another thing people were commanded to do is to put a piece of fringe on the hem of their clothes in order to remind them of the law. Again, people who were genuinely trying to live godly lives did attach a fringe as a way of reminding themselves to follow God's laws.

But a simple fringe would not cut it for the Pharisees. They attached these long, gaudy fringes to their clothes so that anyone who saw them would be impressed by their piety. Again, people were impressed, but God was not.

This practice of calling attention to themselves won the Pharisees a great deal of respect in a society that valued religious leaders and religious faith much more than we do today.

As a result the Pharisees were invited to sit at the places of honor at feasts. Jesus, on the other hand, tells his disciples to sit at the places of least honor at feasts.

The Pharisees got to sit at the seats of honor at the front of the synagogue on Saturdays when the community got together to study the Bible. Jesus' followers, on the other hand, were often humiliated in the synagogues because they believed that Jesus was the Messiah, something the Pharisees flatly denied.

When the Pharisees would go to the market people would see them and notice their religious garb and refer to them as Rabbi, or teacher, a greeting of respect because of what they represented.

Jesus' followers were sometimes arrested by the time the Gospel of Matthew was being because of their claims that Jesus was the Son of God, and that he was going to return to judge the world.

I hope it's obvious that one big difference between the way the Pharisees practiced their religion and the way Jesus wanted his followers to practice theirs was that the Pharisees, according to the Gospel of Matthew, made their religion about themselves and their own piety, even though they claimed to be trying to follow God's laws.

Jesus followers, on the other hand, practiced their religion in a way that pointed to God more than to their own piety. It wasn't about them and what godly people they were. It didn't matter whether most people thought Jesus' followers were faithful or obedient to God. What mattered most is what God thought about them.

He gives them some further instructions detailing the way that his followers should relate to one another so that their faith remains focused on God and not on themselves. He didn't want any of his disciples to lose sight of the fact that they were under God's authority.

He was worried that his followers might start thinking about their status in the group, that they may try to outdo one another in piety. So he says not to call each other father or teacher. God is their father and Jesus is their teacher.

He also reminds them that in his kingdom, the one who wants to be greatest, which is what the Pharisees seem to be focused on, will not be the person who puts him/herself on a plane above other people, but the one who humbles him/herself before other people.

These ancient instructions still stand not only for us in the church as a way of guiding us in our relationships with one another, but also as we try to do our best to represent Jesus in a

world where it seems like all people want to do is outdo one another, show off for one another, and impress people.

What's the point of all that? I don't know. Get people to like you I guess. So what if they like you? I don't know. I mean, do you see how pointless that is?

In the business world people are always trying to outdo one another because they want to compete for business. They have to do that in order to stay in business. If you can't compete, someone else will put you out of business. Simple as that.

But many of the people in that world who make sacrifices for their careers come to a point in their careers when they really question the meaning of what they're doing. Is the goal of life just to help some company make money? Is that really meaningful?

The board of directors at Green Lake recently hired a new Executive Director and CEO by the name of Ben Mott. Ben had been a VP at Green Lake. But the board chose him to replace Ken Giacoletto, the retiring CEO.

Ben has a Masters degree in history, but made a lot of money working in financial services in Chicago. But at some point he really started asking himself if this is what he wanted to do with his life. What point was there to having a nice place and a nice car and impressing all those other people if your life doesn't have any meaning in the end?

That's when he took on a position at Green Lake and decided that he wanted to help people for living, to help them have a place to rest and reflect and wrestle with their faith, which is what we've done up there for as long as we could remember.

I've heard that story over and over. And it's not just from people in the business world. Some clergy groups have the same kind of thing going on. I've been in groups where pastors boast about how many people attend their churches.

Others talk about how they can bend their congregations to their own vision of ministry. They try to impress one another with what inspiring leaders they are. I've noticed that the younger you are, the more you have a tendency to do that.

Some try to be competitive because they hope to move on from their churches and be appointed to larger churches. Cuz, you know how it is, larger churches are always better than smaller churches for some reason.

But what I hope to leave you with today is that none of that matters. What matters is being genuine. What matters is serving others, not putting yourself above others. It won't matter in the end how impressed people are with you. What matters in the end is how you serve others.

I want to conclude by telling you a little about an experience I had while I was preparing to be a project leader for a couple of mission trips from the ABC of New York State. I had taken a trip with a group of pastors in the spring of 1998 to the Dominican Republic to survey what kinds of mission work the region might be able to be involved with down there.

It was such a life changing experience for me that I decided I wanted to lead the next trip. The person who led my trip said he didn't want to lead anymore. So I got in contact with the organization that puts those trips together, World Servants.

They told me I needed to attend a training seminar that went for about three days down in Florida. The seminar was in February, so I was more than happy to leave that ice kingdom in New York and spend a few days in Ft. Lauderdale.

One of the things they emphasized in the training was this idea Jesus mentions where the person who leads actually serves everyone else. They told me that my purpose in going down there for a mission trip was not to teach, but to learn. I was not going to lead, but to serve.

I was not going down there to preach to those people, though the Dominicans did ask me to do that. I was going there to tell stories like Jesus did in his ministry. Now that's a very different way of going about things from what I had learned.

They told me I was supposed to manage materials, and serve people. Most leaders manage people and serve materials. That experience changed my life. It showed me that the purpose of what I was doing was not to be able to go back and say, "Look at this incredible thing I led. Look what my group accomplished."

The purpose was not even to build something for the Dominicans, which we surely did with their help. The purpose was to model for the people in my group what Jesus means when he tells his disciples, "The greatest of you will be your servant."

As you leave today I want you to ponder the question of whether or not people will see you as someone who primarily serves other people, or someone who seeks primarily to be served by others.

There's a big difference between those two. There are a lot of people who claim to be people of faith and yet still fall into that second category. I think sometimes we all do. Whenever you see yourself starting to go that direction, just remind yourself of what Jesus said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled. And all who humble themselves will be exalted."