

## **Jesus, the Originator of Servant Leadership**

### **A Narrational Texture Analysis of John 13:1-17**

#### **Abstract**

Jesus is the originator of servant leadership. He portrayed, practiced and introduced this new model of leadership in John 13:1-17 referred to as servant leadership. This model of leadership became visible and prominent when Jesus washed the disciple's feet. Jesus exhibited of love, humility, and service through relationship building, counsel, mentoring, teaching, and training. This paper reviews John 13:1-17 in light of socio-rhetoric criticism using inner texture analysis with a focus on narrational texture and pattern. Jesus' interactions with the disciples are examined and how such acts display servant leadership, a current leadership theory in today's organizations.

#### **Introduction**

Has anyone humbly washed your feet? Has your leader? Would a leader do this sort of thing? Jesus did. Jesus washed his disciple's feet in the gospel of John, chapter 13. This act represented many things. It represented a true display of love and humility in leadership. This paper reviews John 13:1-17 in light of socio-rhetoric criticism using inner texture analysis with a focus on narrational texture and pattern. Jesus' interactions with the disciples are examined and how such acts display servant leadership; a current leadership theory and model in today's organizations.

#### **Narrational Texture and Pattern/ Scenes and Voices of John 13:1-17**

Narrational texture dwells in voices through which the words in texts speak (Robbins, 1996). In John 13:1-17 it is evident there are three major scenes within the text, each commencing with a description of events. The initial scene is noted as taking place after the supper and reinforces Jesus knowing the climax of his mission is at hand. In the following scene, the narrator sets the stage for Jesus washing the disciples' feet and ends with Jesus telling his disciples he has shown how they should practice in his absence. The final scene begins and ends with Jesus telling his disciples about servant hood. The three scenes in John 13:1-17 are illustrated in the tables below.

**Table 1: Scenes in John 13:1-17 (NKJV)****Introduction: John 13:1-4**

1. Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from the world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end.
2. And supper being ended, the devil having already put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him.
3. Jesus knowing that the father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come from God and was going to God.

**Body: John 13:5-15**

4. Rose from supper and laid aside His garments, took a towel and girded Himself.
5. After that, He poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciple's feet,
6. And to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.
7. Then He came to Simon Peter. And Peter said to Him, "Lord, are you washing my feet?" Jesus answered and said to him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this."
8. Peter said to Him, "You shall never wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."
9. Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head."
10. Jesus said to him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."
11. For He knew who would betray him; therefore He said, "You are not all clean."
12. So when He had washed their feet, taken His garments, and sat down again, He said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you?"
13. "You call Me Teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am."
14. "If then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet."
15. "For I have given you an example, that you that should do as I have done to you."

**Conclusion: John 13:16-17**

16. "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him."
17. "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

The narrator, Jesus and Peter are the major voices in John 13: 1-17. The initial scene begins with the voice of the narrator unfolding the situation before and after the last supper. The narrator's voice is captured again in the second scene with a description of Jesus' preparation and actual act of washing his disciple's feet. Peter's voice is introduced in the second scene and refuses to have Jesus wash his feet. Jesus' voice is captured in the third scene as he affirms the new model of leadership introduced to the disciples. The narrator's voice is central in this account as he introduces the communication between Jesus and Peter. Table 2 captures the three major voices as seen in John 13:1-17.

**Table 2: Major Voices in John 13:1-17****A: John 13:1- 4**

Narrator: "Now before the feast of the Passover..."(v.1)

Narrator: "And supper being ended...." (v. 2)

Narrator: "Jesus knowing that the Father had given him..." (v.3)

Narrator: "Rose from supper and laid aside his garment..." (v.4)

**B: John 13:5-15**

Narrator: "After that, he poured water into a basin and began..." (v.5)

Narrator: "Then he came to Simon Peter." (v.6)

Peter: "Lord are you washing my feet?" (v.6)

Narrator: "Jesus answered and said to him..." (v.7)

Jesus: "What I am doing you do not understand now... (v.7)

Peter: "You shall not wash my feet!" (v.8)

Jesus: "If do not wash you, you have no part..." (v.8)

Peter: "Lord not my feet only, but also my hands..." (v.9)

Jesus: "He who is bathed needs only to wash.... (v.10)

Narrator: "For he knew who would betray him..." (v.11)

Narrator: "So when he had washed their feet..." (v.12)

Jesus: "You call me Teacher and Lord..." (v.13)

Jesus: "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed you feet..." (v.14)

Jesus: "For I have given you an example, that you should do as I..." (v.15)

**C: John 13:16-17**

Jesus: "Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master..." (v.16)

Jesus: "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them" (v.17)

**Literature Review: Jesus' Leadership Qualities in John 13:1-17**

John 13:1-17 outlines several leadership characteristics as exhibited by Jesus and the kind of interactions and relationship he had with his disciples. In verse 1, Jesus portrays a *vision for the future*; "that he should depart from the world to the Father" (John 13:1). Scheiders (1981) and Herhold (1983) see Jesus as acting in full consciousness of his origin and destination. Jesus "*had come from God and was going to God*," as stated in verse 3. Jesus displayed a clear *purpose and mission*; "knowing that the father had given all things to his hands."

In John 13:4, Jesus puts His clothing to the side to wash the feet of His disciples. As a leader, He chooses to let his authority go, through a symbolic act of taking off his clothing and tying a towel around himself (Grayston, 1990). Similarly, Coloe (2004) reports the act of Jesus taking off his clothing and later taking up his garments in verse 12 displays his identity as that of the Good Shepherd where he lays down his life for others. Jesus brought himself down to

the level of His followers to the extent of washing their feet (Coloe, 2004). This act was considered the work of a slave in Jewish culture (Belsterling, 2006). In the same way, Sloyan (1988) and Coloe (2004) point out that the foot washing experience was an act among equals, where position did not matter. According to Zorrilla (1995), Jesus' act of washing the disciple's feet in John 13 is interpreted as a sign of submissiveness and modesty, while at the same time, sophistication. Connell (1996) and Kitzberger (1994) emphasize the fact that, foot washing is demonstrated as service and humility. Coloe (2004) agrees, but also adds the fact that foot washing is more than modesty and humility. During this act, Jesus instructs his followers to feel affection for one another just as he has cherished them. Weiss (1991) believes this type of service is the only way for individuals to obtain eternal life.

Jesus' act of washing the disciples' feet in John 13 has become a representation of love, as written by Coloe (2004) and Duke (1995). Leadership can therefore be expressed not only through an act of humble service, but also through an intentional effort by the leader to pay close attention to his follower's physical and spiritual life and showing sincere love (Winston, 2002). In today's organizations, leaders tend to force their agenda on followers (Lussier & Achua, 2007). On the contrary, Jesus empowers His disciples by showing them true love (Coloe, 2004).

Jesus introduced a new model by which his disciples should live. John 13:12-15 presents an understanding that Jesus is a symbol of humble service for his disciples are to imitate and follow (Coloe, 2004). Jesus told his followers to wash one another's feet. In the act of foot washing, Jesus wanted to teach his disciples how to love one another as he has loved them (Coloe, 2004). Jesus casts a vision for the future with regards to how his disciples should live when he is gone and reiterates this affection for one another must endure to the end (Belsterling, 2006).

Peter, a follower of Jesus, refuses to have Jesus wash his feet without a complete understanding of what Jesus was doing in John 13:8. Jesus teaches a worthy lesson through scripture. He took the time to inform Peter that he will soon understand the reason for what he is doing (John 13:7). According to Belsterling (2006), the disciple's bewilderment and questions were not seen as problems to Jesus, but rather as the opportunity to build relationships with the disciples and especially Peter, while at the same time, teaching them. As a leader, Jesus advised, counseled, and mentored his followers by focusing on a select few in order to make the maximum impact. Belsterling (2006) observed

that Jesus used every action and occasion possible to teach and train his disciples. Jesus' mission and purpose were clear to him before entering this world, but were not as clear to others. He therefore made the time to explain and answered the disciple's questions (Belsterling, 2006). Jesus portrayed a great deal of sacrifice which was a hallmark of his leadership characteristics. Jesus was willing to die in order to prove to his followers how great he adored and cared for them (Belsterling, 2006). Jesus also set clear expectations for his disciples for the tasks ahead. According to Belsterling (2006), Jesus chose his disciples and clearly outlined the circumstances that were needed in order for his disciples to follow his footsteps.

### **Jesus' Leadership Qualities and Servant Leadership Theory**

Russell and Stone (2002) believe that service is at the nucleus of servant leadership. Jesus' leadership qualities clearly correlate with the characteristics found in a servant leader. According to Russell and Stone (2002), Jesus acted as a servant in relationship to his followers. Outlined below are a number of servant leadership traits and how they can be applied to Jesus' actions as seen in the outlined scripture.

According to Spears (2009), a servant leader must pay attention to his followers as Jesus did with Peter when he exhibited confusion and frustration at Jesus washing his feet. Peter questioned Jesus in verse 6 and asked, "Lord are you washing my feet?" A servant leader must show understanding towards his followers by placing himself in the shoes of his disciples. Jesus did this by becoming a servant and washing the disciples' feet. A servant leader brings a form of therapy and reassurance to his followers as Jesus did by bringing an answer and calming Peter's heart by telling him, "He who is bathed needs only to wash his feet" (verse 9).

Jesus displayed self awareness. (Spears, 2009). He knew he was the son of God, came from God and would return to God, as stated in verse 1, "He should depart from the world to the Father." As a leader, Jesus had foresight and the conceptualized vision for the future, which he explained to his disciples regarding what would happen to him and the purpose for which he came to this world (Russell and Stone, 2002). Spears (2009), further states that a servant leader must have insight and appreciation for history and future events, as wells as, current situations and the impact on decision making. As a leader, Jesus was

clear about his history and what the future held. Jesus ensured the disciples understood the plans for the present time.

Spears (2009) argue that a servant leader influences his followers instead of forcing his followers to do what he wants. Jesus' reply to Peter regarding the washing of his feet portrayed the act of influence versus an act of force. Through the answer to Peter's question, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but you will know after this," in verse 7, Simon Peter was able to accept the proposition of Jesus to wash his feet though Jesus was the leader.

Cunningham (2004) believes servant leaders have an aspiration to provide service to others and in the process, discover how to lead. Similarly, Sendjaya and Sarros (2002), state that servant leaders are selfless, intentionally make the effort to serve others, and search for ways to change their staff to enhance their wellbeing. As a leader, Jesus took care of the disciples that God entrusted into his care. Spears (2009) allude to the fact that a servant leader must possess the qualities of a keeper and steward and an obligation towards the increase of his followers.

Barbuto and Wheeler (2006) postulate that servant leaders are portrayed as gifted, which, in turn, facilitates organizational intelligence. These qualities enhance the leader's ability to make better choices on behalf of the organization and assist in enhancing the organization's success.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus portrayed servant leadership in John 13: 1-17. He became a servant to his disciples to portray a new paradigm of leadership and, in turn, model how the disciples should treat one another and others. In order for this style of leadership to be successful, a leader must possess confidence in their personal identity. A clear path for the future and the knowledge of how to motivate and move others towards that future is imperative in a servant leader. A servant leader must serve others with genuine love and humility. This love and humility demonstrates and provides an example to the followers. It is expected the followers will display similar qualities when interacting with others. A servant leader discusses and communicates openly and is open to dialogue. Jesus' life and ministry provides several lessons that can be studied and applied to strengthen the servant leadership theory, and provide a model for today's organization.



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