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Leadership in God's economy

In our zero-sum world, becoming great means making someone else small. But Jesus taught that true abundance comes from becoming “the servant of all,” writes Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove.

by [Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove](#)

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When I was a student at Eastern College, David Black took it upon himself to teach me the way of Jesus. He was president of Eastern, and it wasn't in his job description to disciple an undergraduate student. But every few weeks he'd meet me for breakfast. He reminded me almost every time we met that Jesus was a “man of no reputation” (Philippians 2:7). Make this your constant prayer, he would say: “What does it mean to be a man of no reputation?”

What does it mean to be a man of no reputation in our reputation-obsessed world? I ask myself this question as I consider how actually to live the alternative reality of God's kingdom that we preachers are wont to wax eloquent about. We like vision. Unfortunately, our record is spotty when it comes to implementation. And one example of this is the challenge of living God's economy in the midst of an economic crisis.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus teaches his disciples how God's economy slips into the world. His tactic has a lot to teach us about leadership, especially in uncertain economic times.

“People were bringing little children to Jesus to have him touch them,” Mark recounts, “but the disciples rebuked them” (Mark 10:13). On the face of it, this seems strange. Why would the disciples have such a strong response? People were always crowding Jesus, asking to be blessed and healed. Why did it get under the disciples' skin when some normal folks brought their kids for a blessing? Isn't this the sort of thing that preachers and politicians are supposed to do -- shake hands and kiss babies?

Mark offers some background in the chapter before this scene when he tells a story about an argument that the disciples had on the road to Capernaum. Jesus overhears the guys grumbling with one another, and he asks what it's about. They don't want to tell him -- they're embarrassed that they've been arguing about who was the greatest among them. They're stuck with the zero-sum assumption

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that becoming great means making someone else small.

In an economy of scarcity, we get used to thinking in terms of competition. But over and against this economy's way of thinking, Jesus offers this tactic for abundant life: "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). If you really want to be great, Jesus said, don't aspire to become the successful father of a great household. If you really want abundant life, Jesus tells the disciples, try to become least in the household economy. Make yourself the servant of all.

Mark said Jesus called a child to stand beside him as he was teaching this. "Whoever welcomes one of these little children in my name welcomes me," Jesus said; "and whoever welcomes me does not welcome me but the one who sent me" (Mark 9:37). In the ancient household economy, children were worthless -- too young and weak to be even as valuable as an adult slave. In God's economy, Jesus said, welcoming the lowest of servants was the same as welcoming the Father -- the pater familias. But the disciples were having none of it. Dragging Jesus into their argument about who is greatest, they tell the parents pressing around Jesus to take their kids and get lost.

"When Jesus saw this, he was indignant" (Mark 10:14). The disciples weren't simply shooing away some kids -- they were publicly rejecting the instruction Jesus had recently given them. Resources were limited, the disciples thought, and Jesus' time and energy should only be spent on the most promising candidates.

Maybe the disciples figured that when Jesus said, "Follow me" he was offering them access into a higher circle -- like the high school senior who imagines a whole world of opportunity when she gets a letter saying, "We are pleased to inform you that you have been accepted into Harvard University." Soon James and John will reveal privately their true desires to Jesus, asking if they might have the top posts in his coming administration (Mark 10:37). They want the access you need to become a "great man" -- the father of an abundant household. The disciples keep thinking God's economy works like the system of this world. They want Jesus to help them get ahead.

But Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me," his voice no doubt still indignant, "and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it" (Mark 10:14-15). Often we take this verse out of context. In our time, children often are romantically idealized. But that is not what Mark is pointing to. Jesus fires back in the argument about who is greatest by saying that the kingdom will be closed to them if they don't become weak, despised servants, like children in the household economy.

As repulsive as it might seem to young revolutionaries, Jesus said you don't overthrow the system of this world by beating the rulers at their own game. "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," Jesus said at the conclusion of this exchange with the disciples. "Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all" (Mark 10:42-44).

We don't establish God's new economy by becoming a new pater familias and running things right -- freeing our slaves, sharing the work, and providing for others beyond our home. Jesus didn't aspire to fix the system or to overthrow it. He submitted himself to people in simple service to show us a better way.

Jesus offers this tactic: we usher in a new way by subversively submitting to others in the twisted economy that is all around us. We expose the lie of this world's system by rejecting the greatness that it aspires to and worships. We proclaim the goodness of our Father and his economy when we delight to be his children -- utterly dependent on God and one another, the lowliest of servants in God's great economy of never-ending gift. "I would rather be a gatekeeper in the house of my God," the psalmist sings, "than live the good life in the homes of the wicked" (Psalm 84:10). We celebrate our abundance in God's economy -- and ridicule the false economy of this world -- by aspiring to be servants while everyone else is scrambling to get in on the good life.

I was reminded of this one summer in college when I volunteered to help students into the dorms. Lugging boxes up the stairs for the 50th time, I bumped into a middle-aged man in shorts and a dirty T-shirt. He was breathing heavily and let out a grunt. I peered over my boxes to apologize and saw the man's face -- it was David Black.

When I wonder what it means to be a man of no reputation, the image that comes to mind is my college president carrying boxes in a soaked T-shirt, meeting new students as their servant before he was introduced to them as their president. It reminds me there is no system of the world inside which we can't walk with Jesus in the practice of subversive service.