

Elisha, Servant Leadership, and the Second Chair

By Roger Patterson

Jesus' call to servant leadership is challenging. It is one that more and more Christian leaders, both in the church and in the marketplace, are striving to fulfill. Frankly, Jesus' call was difficult for me to listen to. For the longest time, my focus was to get all that I could out of my current chair so that I could move on to a first chair. But God, who is gracious and a whole lot smarter than me wanted to teach me some very important lessons where I was. One way that He did this was by refining my calling from a preparation for the pastorate, to a call that was much more specific for this season of my ministry. Honestly, I thought I was in a short-term role so that I could learn to see the big picture, to improve my administration, and to preach occasionally. But God wanted to teach me to serve. My current calling is simple: Stay put and serve my pastor!

So, here I sit in the second chair serving my church by serving my senior pastor. And this has taught me a great deal about servant leadership because it has forced me to get my eyes off of what I could get from the experience and has challenged me to look for what I could give to it.

No matter what chair you will ultimately sit in, ponder these questions for where you sit today: What does servant leadership look like in your second chair, specifically in relationship to your first chair? How do we, as second chair leaders come alongside and serve so that God might fulfill all that He plans for the first chair leader we follow?

This type of question might be foreign to you, or a little too focused on one individual, but I am learning that it is the question that I need to be asking. Your initial reaction may be, "What do you mean, God fulfill all that He has for the first chair leader? What about me?" This is a natural, legitimate response to these questions. I believe God is teaching me that part of maturing as a second chair leader involves discovering how God might use me to help accomplish His purposes in those I serve.

A Great Example

This article deals with a second chair leader's role in furthering the ministry of the first chair, and the call to service that accompanies it. This type of servant leadership is found in the relationship between Elijah, the great prophet, and Elisha, the one that God had chosen to succeed him. It is an interesting relationship because it opens our hearts and minds to a way in which we can serve the lead leader God has placed in authority over us.

Let me start with the conclusion of their relationship to see the fulfillment of their time together. 2 Kings 2:1-2 states:

When the Lord was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the Lord has sent me to Bethel."

But Elisha said, “As surely as the Lord lives and as you live, I will not leave you.” So they went down to Bethel. (*NIV*)

This process is repeated three times and then Elijah asks, “Tell me, what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”(2 Kings 2:9a) Elisha’s reply is quite telling of his respect, admiration, and desire to serve alongside Elijah. He states in reply, “Let me inherit a double portion of your spirit.”(2 Kings 2:9b) As Elisha has heeded the call to succeed Elijah, he longs to possess twice the power, wisdom, boldness, and discernment that he sees in Elijah. This culmination of a genuine servant relationship ought to be what we strive for in our relationship to our first chair.

Even though Elisha is the subordinate, he is an initiator expressing his heart to follow and serve. Elisha’s refusal to leave and his persistence to proceed on three different times shows his desire to serve the man of God that he has had the privilege to follow. This heart of service was the key for Elisha then, and it is the key for you and me today. How often do you ask your first chair leader this question, “Is there anything that I can do for you?”

I made it a habit a few years ago to ask my pastor this question every Sunday morning before we ever stepped into a service together. During our “power meetings” to review the service and pray together, I would ask, “Barry, do you need anything today? Is there anything else that you need or that I can arrange for you?”

Some second chair leaders may discover that this continual service of the subordinate to the first chair leader can lead to the first chair’s service in return. Look at how this service is returned to Elisha. The prophet finally asks, “. . . what can I do for you before I am taken from you?”(2 Kings 2:9a)

Have you ever had your first chair ask you that question? This is the question that I am advocating that you ask to your lead-leader each week. Some day, you may experience it the other way around! Don’t plan on it or expect it, but don’t be hesitant to answer honestly when presented with the opportunity. Elisha got what he needed, and you may too!

When the First Chair Leaves

Elisha’s relationship with Elijah is not merely that of servant and master. In its final moments, the text reads as if Elisha is hanging on for just one more experience with his leader. It is as if he has decided to do anything in his power to keep Elijah with him, and his grief is plainly seen at Elijah’s departure. Verse 12 reads, “Elisha saw this and cried out, ‘My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!’ And Elisha saw him no more. Then he took hold of his own clothes and tore them apart.”

Have you stopped to think about what it will be like when you and your first chair leader are no longer serving together? Have you pondered the emotion? Will it be elation, mourning, or somewhere in between?

If it is elation, there is a significant problem, as you probably already know. At this point, there is probably need for significant attitude adjustments on both sides of the relationship. But you as a second chair leader can only control your attitude, not that of your first chair. So, what are you going to do as a servant leader, even if your lead-leader fits in the range of difficult to dysfunctional? Frankly, that is its own future article, but you still have a choice and an opportunity to honor Christ by being a servant. So, ask yourself, “What can I do to improve this key relationship?” My counsel to you is to do what you can do and serve your leader. Though it may be difficult, God will honor your service as an offering to Him.

If your response to their leaving is mourning, isn't that the way it should be? When I leave my second chair, or when my senior pastor leaves his chair, I expect to feel loss and grief because of the joy that we have had in serving together. I want this to be the case because I will then know I was continually striving to give the most to the relationship and serve as effectively as possible.

A Key Word in Elisha's Calling

Now, let's look to the beginning of their story to see what we can learn about Elisha's calling that will help us grow as second chair leaders.

So Elijah went from there and found Elisha son of Shaphat. He was plowing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. “Let me kiss my father and mother good-by,” he said, “and then I will come with you.”

“Go back,” Elijah replied. “What have I done to you?”

So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the plowing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant. (1 Kings 19:19-21, *NIV*).

It is clear that God desired for Elisha to succeed the prophet Elijah. Yet in this succession plan, it is also clear that God planned a time of following, serving, and subordination as the “attendant” of Elijah that Elisha might learn from the prophet in preparation for the ministry that God had in store.

This last phrase, “became his attendant,” gives insight to second chair leaders and is the key ingredient that prepared Elisha for the ascension into leadership as the people's prophet. The key word, attendant, or in the Hebrew, *shaw-rath'*, indicates the force of this role and relationship. This word is translated as “ministered unto him” in both the *KJV* and the *NASV*. The word is rendered, “became his servant” in the *NKJV*, and is translated “became his attendant” in the *NIV*. Literally, then, Elisha took on the role of personal minister to the prophet, looking after his needs in an effort to further the effectiveness of Elijah's ministry. Or stated another way, Elisha took on this role of

attendant to help Elijah become all that God wanted Elijah to be and to fulfill His purposes in His chosen people, Israel.

This can be true of you also, even if you never aspire to the first chair, because your attention to the needs of your first chair leader and your efforts to attend to those needs will only assist in the growth and progression of the ministry that you share. Elisha's heart and his actions expressed this spirit from the time he left his father and mother to follow and minister to the prophet, to the time where he requested a double portion of the prophet's spirit and mourned his departure.

The Way to be Remembered

In all the days of their relationship, Elisha served Elijah. He served by following with a servant's heart of humility and he was remembered for his humility. Some time after Elijah's departure, we see this telling scene: "But Jehoshaphat asked, 'Is there no prophet of the Lord here that we may inquire of the Lord through him?' An officer of the king of Israel answered, 'Elisha son of Shaphat is here. He used to pour water on the hands of Elijah.'" (2 Kings 3:11, *NIV*.)

This text speaks volumes about what others saw in Elisha's ministry with Elijah. He was known for pouring water on Elijah's hands. This commentary of Elisha should be a commentary that is heard of our ministry as well.

How many young, emerging, high potential leaders are remembered by a contemporary for this type of service to their first chair leader? Too often they are (or hope to be) remembered for their talent in front of the masses – as great musicians or great communicators or for their funny, charismatic personality. But the heart of a true second chair leader, even those who are on their way to the first chair, is one that is willing to say, "I want to come alongside my first chair and serve. As I do this, God will do what He needs to do in me." This is a God-honoring perspective and I am glad to say that God has been working this change in me. I trust that He has already begun this change in you as well.