

Do servant leaders ever show tough love?

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BIG SANDY, Texas—For a number of decades now people in business and service organizations have discussed and practiced the concept of servant leadership.

The purpose of this article is to ask whether there is ever a time for servant leaders to show tough love.

But before we enter that discussion I want to remind you that believers are not always trapped in situations where leaders use the idea of tough love to control people.

If you live in a society that has a dictatorship and obvious slavery, you may be trapped. However, if you live in a society that promotes a certain amount of freedom, you do have choices in your life.

Trapped in one area

Let's quickly look at four areas of life where a person should encounter servant leadership.

■ Probably the first area of life where a person should see servant leadership is also the area of life where a person does *not* have many choices.

Children are basically stuck with the parenting style of their parents. Children are not in a position to leave their family, and only under severe circumstances should an outside agency remove children from a home.

Let's hope that a child experiences the servant leadership discussed in the Bible.

The next three areas are also situations where servant leadership should be experienced, but these areas provide more opportunities for a person to change his circumstances.

■ Let's hope that believers find servant leadership in their marriages. While God intends for marriages to stay together, He has allowed for biblical exceptions. Even when a spouse has the right to leave a marriage, it is rarely an easy and painless decision.

■ Let's hope that believers find servant leadership in their employment situations. If you do not have an ideal situation, consider all the factors before changing employment. (By the way, this decision is easier than leaving a marriage.)

■ Let's hope that believers find servant leadership in their congregational settings. If you do not have an ideal situation, consider all the factors before changing congregations. (By the way, this decision is easier than leaving a marriage or changing employment.)

Servants be tough?

Now let's go back to the discussion about whether a servant leader can demonstrate tough love.

It is easy to see the extremes of life. Some people are so tough that they are actually mean and cruel. Other people are so tender that they don't stand for any standards in life.

People who practice those extreme behaviors in the name of love give the concept of love a bad name. However, we have a perfect example of tough love. His name is Jesus Christ.

In Luke 19 we see the contrast of Jesus' loving approach. In verses 41-44 we see the tender side of Jesus. In verses 45-46 we see the tough side of Jesus.

Although we have more examples of Jesus' tender side, we do have a few examples of His tough side. Here are two examples: We have an example early in His ministry (John 2:13-16), and we have an example later in His ministry (Matthew 23:1-33).

Practicing servant leadership is about serving needs.

And sometimes there is a need to demonstrate tough love.

Reference works

In an effort to help you study the subject, I would like to recommend two books.

In his book *The Strong-Willed Child*, James Dobson discusses two important concepts about helping children. He says that parents should "shape the will" and "protect the spirit."

While this is great advice for how to deal with children, it also applies for demonstrating tough love with adults.

On page 78 he writes: ". . . My point is that the will is malleable. It can and should be molded and polished—not to make a robot of a child for our selfish purposes, but to give him the ability to control his *own* impulses and exercise self-discipline later in life. In fact, we have a God-given responsibility as parents to shape the will in the manner described in the previous chapter.

“On the other hand (and let me give this paragraph the strongest possible emphasis), the *spirit* of a child is a million times more vulnerable than his will. It is a delicate flower that can be crushed and broken all too easily (and even unintentionally) . . .”

In their book *The Two Sides of Love*, Gary Smalley and John Trent discuss the range of the subject of love and how to demonstrate the full scope of love.

On page 6 they write: “It’s essential that we learn to balance love’s two sides if we want to communicate the deepest, most meaningful kind of love.”

On page 7: “Hardside love is doing what’s best for another person *regardless of the cost*. Held in balance, it’s the ability to be consistent, to discipline, to protect, to challenge and to correct.

“It’s the strength a mother needs to stand up to a defiant two-year-old instead of caving in to his immature demands. It’s the courage of a father who risks his relationship with his daughter to point out how far she’s wandered from the Lord.”

A few paragraphs later they continue:

“Softside love is a tenderness that grows to be the same color as unconditional love. When held in balance, it manifests characteristics like compassion, sensitivity, patience and understanding.”

On page 10 they write: “Until we learn to love others the way God loved us—with both of love’s sides—we’ll never have the kind of relationships that reflect the nature of God.”