



Continuing the Mission: Servant Leadership Modeled by the Proverbs 31 Woman and Applied as a Soldier and Veteran

Bobbi Y. Cumpston

Director of Veterans Affairs

Washington County, Pennsylvania

Roundtable: Servant Leadership

Abstract

Servant leadership began with Robert Greenleaf in 1970. Discussions over the definition, constructs, and measures continue today. The standardized description of servant leadership is servant first, and then leader, but the constructs differ with time and research. In addition, measurements of the successful application of servant leadership have adapted as the concepts of servant leadership have been redefined and expanded. One example of servant leadership is the Proverbs 31 woman, who demonstrates servant leadership through her heart and actions. Her characteristics include love, altruism, faith, and wisdom. Her actions demonstrate a spirit of service combined with leadership abilities in her family, household, and community. This paper proposes that the Proverbs 31 woman is an example and definition of servant leadership with a practical application through an Army veteran's leadership experience both in service and after retirement.

Keywords: servant leadership, military, practical example, leadership development

Examining Proverbs 31:10-31 with inner texture analysis provides a comprehensive view of servant leadership that demonstrates its virtuous components. Proverbs 31:10-31 models characteristics of servant leadership that apply to individuals and guide businesses or ministries to develop a template for servant leaders to follow. A theoretical model of servant leadership proposed by Patterson (2003) included virtuous constructs that lay a foundation of principles that can be defined and measured. Van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) developed a study that measured servant leadership qualities and identified leadership development and training areas. Proverbs 31:10-31 is a template of servant leadership that identifies virtuous constructs and principles with suggestions for measuring and validating servant leadership success within the organization. A practical application of servant leadership through military and post-military service is discussed, demonstrating the necessity for further research and development of servant leadership concepts, principles, and measures.

2023 Regent Research Roundtables Proceedings pp. 372-383.

© 2023 Regent University School of Business & Leadership

ISSN 2993-589X

The methodology used to argue the principles and measures of servant leadership within the Proverbs pericope is two-fold: inner texture analysis and thematic elaboration. Inner texture analysis is a means to increase knowledge of a particular text by examining the words, patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text that depict meaning and effects (Robbins, 1996). Six methods of inner texture analysis include repetitive, progressive, narrational, open-middle-closing, argumentative, and sensory-aesthetic (Robbins, 1996).

Robbins (1996) described an elaboration as a complete argument composed of five parts: the proposition, the reason, the proof of the reason, the embellishment, and the resume. The current author proposes that Proverbs 31:10-31 describes virtuous constructs of servant leadership, characteristics, and measures of success. Further, the verses demonstrate and support modern servant leadership theory and measures. In addition, an example of a life of servant leadership expands the discussion and presents a practical application of servant leadership constructs and measures.

Analysis of Proverbs 31:10-31

Repetitive Texture

Repetitive texture examines the words or phrases of the pericope that occur multiple times (Robbins, 1996). Several significant words repeat throughout the text. The words she, her, and herself appear 39 times; household appears four times; the word hands appears five times; strength or strong three times; and clothing or clothes five times. The repetition shows the significance and requires further investigation into the inner texture analysis.

Proverbs 31:10-31 describes a virtuous woman caring for her family and household. Proverbs 14:1 (*New American Standard Bible, [NASB], 1995*) says, "A wise woman builds her house, but the foolish pull sit down with her hands," further showing the importance and significance of a woman caring for her household. In addition, Genesis 2:18 describes the woman as "keneged," translated as "corresponding to," meaning she is equal to Adam and adequate for any task assigned to Adam (Morford, 2011, p. 4). Maintaining a household, raising children, and buying and selling goods give her a purpose for which she is capable.

Strength or strong are metaphors for the woman's clothing. Proverbs 31:17 (*NASB, 1995*) says, "She surrounds her waist with strength and makes her arms strong." *The Passion Translation [TPT], (2021)*. Another version translates this verse: "She wraps herself in strength, might, and power in all her works." Proverbs 31:25 (*NASB, 1995*) again describes her clothing as "strength and dignity." Psalm 18:32 (*NASB, 1995*) says it is "God who encircles me with strength" and "trains my hands for battle so that my arms can bend a bow of bronze. In addition, the Lord is "robed in majesty, the Lord has

clothed and armed Himself with strength" (Ps. 93:1, *NASB*, 1995). God created people in His image, which includes clothing them in strength, as He clothes Himself with strength.

In addition to clothing with strength, the verses contain references to textiles the woman makes, sells, and clothes her family with. In Proverbs 31:13, she looks for wool and flax; in verse 19, she stretches her hands to the distaff and spindle used in weaving cloth. In verses 21-22, the woman clothes her household in fine linen. She also sells linen and supplies belts to tradesmen. Just as the Lord clothed Adam and Eve in the garden (Gen. 3:21), the woman ensures her family is clothed. She sees to their needs with garments left to sell.

Progressive Texture

Progressive texture adds another layer of discovery to Proverbs 31:10-31 through sequences of words and phrases within the text (Robbins, 1996). The description of the woman begins with excellence and worth more than jewels (v. 10); her husband trusts her, and he will have no lack of gain (v. 11). The verses that follow describe who she is, what she does, and how these things make her valuable to her husband, family, household, and community. The woman is skilled in working with textiles and making clothing for her household. The woman's skill is comparable to the women in Exodus 35:25-26 who made fine materials and linens suitable for holy garments. Her linens are known as her husband wears them while sitting at the gates with the elders (vv. 22-23).

The woman is also known as a businesswoman. She sold linen garments (Prov. 31:24), supplied belts to tradesmen (v. 24), purchased a field, and planted a vineyard (v. 16). She is wise in managing a household and ensuring all members are fed and clothed (vv. 15, 21). The woman's children rise and call her blessed (v. 28). Her husband praises her (v. 28). The progression of the text ends with the woman's fear of the Lord, which is worthy of praise. She receives the work of her hands and praises in her home and the community (vv. 30-31). Her strength, dignity, and worth come from walking with God. Proverbs 9:10 states that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, which the Proverbs 31 woman knows and teaches to her children.

Opening-Middle-Closing

Opening-middle-closing texture examines the pericope's beginning, middle, and end (Robbins, 1996). Proverbs 31:10-31 opens with the woman's relationship with her husband, describes the actions and care over her household, and concludes with her wisdom and kindness. As the text builds on the woman's description, the multiple layers of the woman's actions, qualities, and character are visible through the opening-middle-closing sections.

Proverbs 31:10 (NASB, 1995) describes the woman as "excellent." Proverbs 12:4 (NASB, 1995) says, "An excellent woman is the crown of her husband." She is also virtuous. The Hebrew word "Chayil" includes descriptions like valor, strong, substance, valiant, and wealth (Strong, 1999, p. 217). The opening description of the woman presents who she is, with words and phrases that she is worthy and valuable. An opening such as this requires an explanation of the deeper meaning behind excellence and virtue.

The middle portion of Proverbs 31:10 dives into the woman's excellent and virtuous character through examples of what she does for her family, household, and community. The woman provides shelter, clothing, and food for her family and household. She places their needs above hers (vv. 14, 19, 21-22). She is a businesswoman, using wisdom and experience to buy and sell, with a mind to profit and positive return (vv. 16, 24, 24). She is a generous giver to the poor and needy (v. 20). She teaches her children and her household, instructing them with wisdom and by example (vv. 16, 17-18, 23, 25-27). She is humble and noble, looking to the care of her family and household rather than seeking the accolades of others (vv. 21-23, 28-31). The woman's actions deliver the substance of who she is and her character.

In the closing verses, the pericope describes the woman's foundation. Above all, she fears the Lord – she places God first and receives blessings and praise from a life of service and reverence to the Lord (Prov. 31:30-31). She is a woman of faith; she thinks and acts as one who serves the Lord first. She ensures that her family and household are cared for with the Lord's wisdom, grace, and confidence. Psalm 112:1-2 (NASB, 1995) says, "Praise the Lord! How blessed is the man who fears the Lord, who greatly delights in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; The generation of the upright will be blessed." Moreover, Proverbs 22:4 (NASB, 1995) says, "The reward of humility and the fear of the Lord are riches, honor, and long life." These verses indicate the blessing from the fear of the Lord, which also extends to her future generations.

Thematic Elaboration

The concept of servant leadership developed from Robert Greenleaf's (2014) servant leadership theory. Greenleaf proposed that the servant leader naturally desires to serve and consciously decides to lead. Patterson (2003) suggested servant leadership is a virtuous theory: "Virtue is an internal characteristic, part of one's character, and comes from the Greek word *arete*, meaning excellence" (p. 2). Servant leadership includes love, humility, altruism, vision, trust, empowerment, and service (Patterson, 2003).

Engstrom (1976) discussed guidelines for excellent leadership: integrity, vision, conflict resolution, experience, flexibility, and relationships. Servant leadership is rooted and grounded in love, which is for the benefit of others. Servant leaders have compassionate love for followers, focusing on the followers' gifts and talents first and then for the organization's benefit (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Proverbs 31:10-31 aligns

with the concepts of servant leadership. It provides practical examples of servant leadership application through virtuous constructs and excellence.

Love

The evidence and application of love through servant leadership is in the woman's actions through service to her family and household. She places their needs above her own. The woman demonstrates compassionate love, which highly values others, as seen in her care and attention to the individuals in her home. She is motivated to "gird herself with strength" (Prov. 31:17, *NASB*, 1995) so she can serve and build a culture of trust and growth within her household, further exemplifying servant leadership (Kilen & Johnson, 2023).

Humility

Servant leaders have the characteristic of humility and think of themselves less than they think of others (Coetzer et al., 2017). A servant leader is self-aware of their strengths while keeping their talents and achievements in the proper perspective and open to new opportunities (Coetzer et al., 2017). The Proverbs 31 woman considers the needs of her household, providing food, clothing, and shelter with intent and foresight. She is open to possibilities and looks to the future, as seen when she bought a field and planted a vineyard (v. 16). She understands that placing the needs and concerns of others first strengthens the family unit and encourages her household to care for one another.

Altruism

The concept of altruism as a characteristic of servant leadership is generally the link between good motives and good behavior (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leaders are strongly motivated and deeply interested in helping others (Patterson, 2003). The Proverbs 31 woman extends her hands to the needy and poor, giving unselfishly. She desires to serve others and help them become better individuals, creating a pleasant and prosperous household. Her husband calls her excellent, and her children bless her (vv. 10, 28-29). She also extends her assistance to the poor and needy (v. 29) while asking for nothing in return, further demonstrating servant leadership as an example.

Vision

The Proverbs 31 woman "smiles at the future" (v. 25, *NASB*, 1995) with vision and purpose in her life and work. Vision sees the value and worth of others and helps them achieve it (Patterson, 2003). Leaders must have insight and foresight that combine with hope and optimism to extend beyond the present to future possibilities (Engstrom, 1976). The hope and optimism the woman sees for her husband, her children, and their

household are evident in what she does for them. From provision to prosperity in business, instructing her children, and encouraging her husband, the woman's actions help them be whole and fulfill their purpose.

Trust

The Proverbs 31 woman established a trusting relationship with her husband, family, and household members through her actions. She raised her children, cared for her maidens, provided quality goods for sale, built a bond between the people, and established a good reputation throughout the community. Her husband trusted her to maintain the household while he was engaged in community affairs. She did what she said she would do, thereby growing confidence in her actions as a servant leader (Patterson, 2003). Trust is an inspiration and commitment to follow the Proverbs 31 woman's vision because of her humility and relationship with her household and community.

Empowerment

Each construct of servant leadership builds a richer meaning of servant leadership. Empowerment supports followers in developing skill sets, confidence, and leadership abilities that fully develop their human capacities and self-actualization (Northouse, 2019; Patterson, 2003). The Proverbs 31 woman empowers her husband through care and maintenance of the household so he can work well within their community. In addition, the woman empowers her household and children through wisdom and teaching. She sets an example and bonds with the members of her household to create an environment of service, empathy, and humility (Mittal & Dorfman, 2012). The woman also smiles at the future, knowing that as she develops her business, trains her children, and improves the lives of those in her household, she empowers them to think boldly of their future (Sousa & van Dierendonck, 2017). According to Patterson (2003), empowerment leads to growth, meeting goals, and realizing dreams.

Service

A life of service and a call to serve is the heart of servant leadership (Patterson, 2003). It requires generosity through time, care, compassion, and energy devoted to discovering the uniqueness and creativity in others (Patterson, 2003). Service also requires sacrifice. Servant leaders who sacrifice a portion of their personal mission and identity for the greater good demonstrate powerful personal faith and influential inspiration (Roberts, 2015). In addition, Coetzer et al. (2017) suggested that placing others first helps develop a culture of service, enhancing outcomes while strengthening individuals, organizations, and communities.

Servant Leadership Applied

The legacy of Greenleaf's work demonstrates that leadership starts with the call to serve others – an innate desire to place the needs of others above self. Servant leadership is a spiritual calling that proceeds from an internal calling to serve and lead others (Crowther, 2018). The Bible contains many examples of servant leadership, from Moses and David to Jesus and Paul. Biblical leadership principles go beyond culture, time, and position and apply to all challenges in life (S. Bell, 2014).

All branches of the U.S. military have a variation of servant leadership in their core values. Selfless service, honor, commitment, character, and connection are values that service members learn and live in, fulfilling their duty to the United States. I served in the U.S. Army for 21 years before retiring in 2022. My military experience taught me many leadership principles, from ethics and values to appreciating other cultures and implementing servant leadership principles that helped me build my team of soldiers and uphold the military's mission.

During my military service, I learned the Army values and how to apply them as a young soldier. However, I always sensed a deeper meaning and purpose to military leadership, which was finally put into words when I learned about servant leadership. Early in my career, the concept and practice of servant leadership was often *caught rather than taught*. I learned how to lead from observation rather than direct mentorship or teaching. I also discovered leadership was not about self but empowering and developing my soldiers to learn and grow in their ability to lead others.

The Army incorporates six values into its training doctrine: Loyalty, Duty, Respect, Selfless Service, Honor, Integrity, and Personal Courage (LDRSHIP). One of the core Army values that resonated with me throughout my military career was selfless service. When I joined the military and learned these values, I also experienced a renewed relationship with Jesus through Sunday services and Bible study. My faith became a foundation upon which I built my leadership skills. I could not have made it through those first years in the Army without my relationship with Jesus.

All soldiers learn the Warrior Ethos: I will always place the mission first, I will never accept defeat, I will never quit, and I will never leave a fallen comrade (U.S. Army, n.d.). The essence of servant leadership in the military is placing the needs of your soldiers above your own, whether it is ensuring they eat first or answering a midnight phone call of a soldier in crisis. As an enlisted soldier and leader, I often had to rely on my faith. I experienced the death of friends through suicide and being killed in action. Those are the times when I had to go on my knees and release the grief to Jesus. Nevertheless, I had to stand tall and comfort my soldiers who did not have the same strength of faith that I had. I set aside my grief and addressed their emotional needs so that we could continue with the mission and training.

However, soldiers always need to be aware of burnout. At times in my career, I experienced burnout and was ready to resign and leave the military. If I did not have a relationship with the Lord, I would have changed career paths or given up serving my soldiers. My highest compliment during my military service was not the awards or commendations; it was the honor of being called "a good leader" and "I think very highly of her." One of the best compliments I received was, "I want to be like you when I lead soldiers." It does not get much better than that.

As I worked with soldiers, I demonstrated servant leadership principles through my actions and words. The foundation of servant leadership is love, which is an action that strengthens the relationship between leader and follower and, in my case, between my soldiers and me.

- Humility. I regarded my soldiers as higher than myself. I valued their contributions and showed confidence in their leadership abilities.
- Altruism. I had good intentions and was well-meaning and unselfish in my concern for soldiers.
- Vision. I saw the value in my soldiers and helped them achieve greater possibilities, letting them know their service was appreciated and acknowledged.
- Trust. The relationship between me and my soldier was maintained through our commitment to trust.
- Empowerment. I recognized the uniqueness of each soldier and encouraged them to tell their stories so they could grow and develop as leaders.
- Service. I was authentic by giving support and personal involvement through selfless service.

Then came military retirement. When I retired in 2022, I experienced a loss of purpose, and I needed a new mission. Then, I fully understood what it meant to have a calling for servant leadership. After all, how can you be a servant leader without followers? The loss I experienced came from not having soldiers to teach and train, to encourage and lead. I was unemployed for about six months while I completed my doctorate at Regent University. However, I continued my search for a new position and prayed that God would open doors and illuminate my path. God answered my prayers in March 2023 when I became the Director of Veterans Affairs for Washington County, Pennsylvania.

In this capacity, I serve veterans by helping them navigate through the disability and benefits claims process, share resources, and engage in community outreach. However, my position's most rewarding and honoring aspect is listening to veterans' stories, hearing their voices, and sharing their remembered experiences. I get to talk about my military experience and how my faith in Jesus carried me throughout my military career

and beyond. I hear how their faith has sustained them through their military service and civilian life. When they waver, I am honored to pray for them through their troubled times. I see the delight on their faces when they learn I am a veteran who is serving my fellow veterans.

As leaders become confident in their values and know their calling and purpose, they empower followers to grow and develop, bringing about a legacy of servant leadership. As a servant leader, I live from the inside out. My relationship with followers, in this case veterans, comes from internal values of humility and respect for others (Bell & Habel, 2010). Living out those values in love gives me purpose and meaning, which I live out daily with my veterans. Just as Paul encouraged the people to walk in a manner worthy of their calling, my greatest joy as a servant leader is helping veterans and fulfilling my calling as a servant leader (Eph. 4:1; Col. 1:10; 1 Thess. 2:12, *NASB*, 1995). I walk with Jesus in love, peace, humility, and gentleness with fellow veterans to help change their lives.

I recognize the value in each veteran, from those who served in Korea, Vietnam, and the Middle East to families and loved ones. We share a common bond of military service that becomes visible when veterans understand that I am a fellow veteran. I believe God has placed me in the director's position for such a time as this, where I can continue serving and leading fellow veterans. Just as the Proverbs 31 woman models servant leadership from her heart through service to others, I do the same in my service to veterans. The qualities, actions, and characteristics demonstrate that servant leadership comes from within, from compassionate love, and permeates every action (Bell & Habel, 2010). The full text of Proverbs 31:10-31 clearly shows the woman's life of service to her household and community – an example and model of servant leadership I use daily.

Conclusion

M. Bell and Habel (2010) proposed that humility and respect for others are part of their core values, which provide personal fulfillment to the leader. As such, servant leadership comes from the inside out. A servant first and then a leader is the core of servant leadership (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Servant leaders also exhibit empowerment, authenticity, stewardship, and guidance (van Dierendonck & Patterson, 2015). Servant leaders consider stewardship of followers a high calling to elevate and empower those they serve (Sendjaya & Sarros, 2002). Stewardship requires vision, seeing followers as more excellent than they see themselves, and providing mentorship toward a better future (Patterson, 2003).

Dean (2019) suggested that the practical application of love is through everyday communication with employees, with authenticity and genuine care. Just as the

Proverbs 31 woman engages with her household and community, servant leaders can model these relationships by developing relationships in a business setting. The Proverbs 31:10-31 model includes a foundation of love, relationships with others, community actions, and a future vision that empowers the servant leader and followers. Reflecting on my military service and current position, I see the connections to servant leadership through serving others and acknowledging and valuing their worth.

The mission of servant leadership continues. Each day, God's Word reminds you to know who you are. Know your core values and beliefs, understand your purpose and vision as a servant leader, and know what you have (i.e., the qualities and attributes of service, the learned or inherent leadership skills, and abilities that help others grow and develop); know how to walk (as Paul said, walk in a manner worthy of your calling as a servant leader); model the way; and serve others. Servant leadership is the legacy Dr. Pat Robertson left with us that upholds the motto of Regent University: Christian Leadership to Change the World.

Author's Note

Dr. Bobbi Cumpston is an Army veteran with a heart for the military and a passion for leadership. In 2022, she retired as Sergeant First Class while serving on active duty with the Pennsylvania Army National Guard. Bobbi's assignments included several units within the 28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania Army National Guard. She was deployed in 2020-2021 with the 28th Aviation Brigade, Operation Spartan Shield, and Inherent Resolve. Her awards include the Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, Army Achievement Medal, and the Army Good Conduct Medal.

While on Active Duty, Bobbi earned a bachelor's degree in Information Technology and a master's degree in Organizational Management. She earned her Doctorate in Strategic Leadership at Regent University. Bobbi's mission is to honor veterans and provide teaching and insight into leadership through articles, books, and speaking engagements. Bobbi is the Director of Veterans Affairs for Washington County. She is a member of the American Legion and a life member of the Pennsylvania National Guard Association. Bobbi and her husband Nevin live in Southwest PA and have been married for thirty years. They have two children and one grandson.

Dr. Cumpston can be contacted via email at bobbi.cumpston@outlook.com and LinkedIn: [linkedin.com/in/bobbicumpston](https://www.linkedin.com/in/bobbicumpston).

References

- Bell, M., & Habel, S. (2010). Enacting servant-leadership from the inside out. *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 6(1), 213-234.
- Bell, S. (2014). *Servants and friends: A biblical theology of leadership*. Andrews University Press.
- Coetzer, M., Bussin, M., & Geldenhuys, M. (2017). The functions of a servant leader. *Administrative Sciences*, 7(1), 5.
- Crowther, S. (2018). *Biblical servant leadership: An exploration of leadership for the contemporary context*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Dean, D. (2019). Integration of Christian values in the workplace. *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership*, 9(1), 35-55.
- Engstrom, T. W. (1976). *The making of a Christian leader*. Zondervan Pub. House.
- Greenleaf, R. K. (2014). Who is the servant-leader? *The International Journal of Servant-Leadership*, 10(1), 17-22.
- Kilen, E. S., & Johnson, W. R. (2023). Creating a culture to support well-being and performance. *Military Medicine*, 188(7-8), 176-178.
- Mittal, R., & Dorfman, P. W. (2012). Servant leadership across cultures. *Journal of World Business*, 47(4), 555-570.
- Morford, W. J. (Ed.). (2011). *The one new man Bible: Revealing Jewish roots and power*. True Potential Publishing.
- New American Standard Bible. (1995). The Lockman Foundation. La Habra, CA.
- Northouse, P. G. (2019). *Leadership: Theory and practice (8th ed.)*. Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Patterson, K. A. (2003, August). *Servant leadership: A theoretical model* [Paper presentation]. Servant Leadership Research Roundtable, School of Leadership Studies, Regent University, Virginia Beach, VA, United States.
https://www.regent.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/patterson_servant_leadership.pdf
- Robbins, V. K. (1996). *Exploring the texture of texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation*. Valley Forge, Pa: Trinity Press International.

- Roberts, G. E. (2015). *Christian scripture and human resource management: Building a path to servant leadership through faith*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sendjaya, S., & Sarros, J. C. (2002). Servant leadership: Its origin, development, and application in organizations. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 9(2), 57-64.
- Sousa, M., & Van Dierendonck, D. (2017). Servant leadership and the effect of the interaction between humility, action, and hierarchical power on follower engagement. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 141, 13-25.
- Strong, J. (1999). *Strong's Hebrew Dictionary*. USA: AGES Software.
- Simmons, B., & Ricker, C. (2021). *The Passion Translation New Testament Masterpiece Edition (2020 edition): with Psalms, Proverbs and Song of Songs (The Illustrated Devotional Passion Translation)*. BroadStreet Publishing Group LLC.
- U.S. Army. (n.d.). *Army values*. <https://www.army.mil/values/warrior.html>
- Van Dierendonck, D., & Nuijten, I. (2011). The servant leadership survey: Development and validation of a multidimensional measure. *Journal of business and psychology*, 26, 249-267.
- Van Dierendonck, D., & Patterson, K. (2015). Compassionate love as a cornerstone of servant leadership: An integration of previous theorizing and research. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 128(1), 119-131.