

Source of Leadership

We're starting a new series this week on leadership. For the next four weeks I'm going to be talking about being the kind of leader God wants and intends for you to be. We're going to be talking about Leading Like Jesus and we're taking it from the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus is our leadership source.

Leadership is key to helping us become all that God wants us to be. Proverbs 11:14 says, "*Without wise leadership a nation is in trouble.*" That's true of nations, it's also true in other areas. Without wise leadership a family's in trouble, a business is in trouble, a community is in trouble, a church is in trouble. Everything rises or falls on leadership.

One problem today is we've forgotten the difference between celebrities and leaders. Celebrities are famous. Leaders get things done. We've got too many celebrities and not enough leaders. We don't need more people who are just famous for being famous.

But we don't just need leaders, we need principled leaders. As United Methodists we defined Four Areas of Ministry Focus a few years ago and we reaffirmed them at our General Conference a few weeks ago. Those areas of ministry focus are: engaging in ministry with the poor, improving global health, creating new and renewed congregations, and developing principled Christian leaders. There's a real shortage of godly, good leadership in the world. It's one of the largest problems we face today. The leaders we do have are often the wrong kind of leaders.

You may never have thought of yourself as one, but you're a leader whether you realize it or not. Leadership can be summed up in one word: *influence*. Every time you interact with anyone you influence them. Anytime you influence anyone you're a leader. The question isn't whether you're a leader; the question is, how are you leading? Are you a good leader or a lousy one; effective or ineffective; positive or negative; a godly leader or a poor one? If you're a believer, God expects you to lead others for good and for God's glory.

So we're going to spend the next four weeks looking at improving your leadership skills in your home, with friends, in your small group, our church, your job, your school, your community, wherever. God wants you to influence others for good rather than them influencing you for something else.

The only perfect leader is Jesus. There are no other perfect leaders in the world. I'm not perfect; you're not; no one is. But I'd rather have people influenced by imperfect you than some celebrity who's not even trying to be a good example. At least you're trying! That's why I want you to be influential and I believe God calls you to do that.

I'll tell you up front, in four weeks we couldn't possibly cover every characteristic of godly leadership. Today we'll begin with some drawn from Jesus' life. Let's get right to it:

The first characteristic of leadership that God wants to build into your life is **1. A Genuine Self Awareness**. Basically, I need to know who I am. Good leaders know their strengths and weaknesses. They accept their strengths and admit their weaknesses and are realistic about them. You have some real strengths; you also have some real weaknesses. So do I. Leadership isn't ignoring either. It's being honest about both. Good leaders don't try to be something they're not.

Jesus was up front about his identity. He says, "*I am the light of the world... I am the Son of God... I am the way... I am the truth... I am the life... I am the bread of life.*" Over and over Jesus defines himself. He didn't let others define him. To be a godly leader you've got to start with knowing who you are. Good leaders take other people into account, they care about them, but they don't have to look to other people for validation. If you don't know what God has made you to be then you are likely to fall into a couple of common traps:

The first is allowing people to control you with their expectations. You'll allow people to manipulate you into being what they want instead of what God meant you to be. If you don't discover who you are, other people will decide for you. God has a plan for your life but so does everyone else. Other people will pressure you with their expectations.

Some of us are still trying to live up to what someone else expected of us years ago. You don't need to do that. God did not create you to be what they wanted you to be. God created you to be what God intended for you to be. If you're going to live the life God wants and be the leader God wants, you have to let go of the expectations of other people and focus on what God made you to be.

Another trap is living a phony life; living a lie. You'll live one way with one person and another way with another. You act one way at work or at home, another way at church and another way at work. You wear a mask. You're pretending. If you're going to be a leader that influences others, and God wants you to be that, you must accept your strengths, which you have and which are unique, and admit your weaknesses, which you have and which are also unique, and work on being what God means for you to be.

The second characteristic of leadership God wants to build into your life is having **2. A Clear Life Direction**. This is more than having just a vague sense of purpose in life. This is being aware of the direction of your life - knowing what God has called you to do in life. This is important because determining the direction of your life is voluntary. God will not force you to go and other people can only choose your direction for you if you allow it. If you don't like the direction you're headed right now, change it.

Good leaders know where they're headed. They know what God has called them to do. They know what they want to accomplish. When you clarify your goals in life it helps free you from the tyranny of the urgent. Urgent and important are two different things. A lot of urgent things won't matter a week from today, but what's important matters forever. So it's of major value to you to distinguish between them.

Jesus knew exactly what he was called to do and what he wanted to accomplish. He set clear-cut goals. In John 8 Jesus says *"I know where I came from and where I am going."*

Do you ever get to the end of the day and think, "Did I accomplish anything significant today?" There's a difference between activity and productivity. You can be busy but just going in circles. Busyness can keep things from getting done.

What turns activity into productivity is a clear purpose and a clear direction. If you know where you're heading, you know better what you're doing - you have a better sense of what needs to happen to get there. It makes you more strategic. Jesus was a strategic leader. Be strategic with your life because you've only got one life and this is preparation for eternity. Be strategic in how you use your time.

Jesus had a clear purpose and direction. He knew what he was meant to do with his life. Luke 4 says, *"I must preach the Good News of the Kingdom of God... because that is why I was sent."* It's not "I should. I might. I'd like to." It's "I must!" He has a purpose and must fulfill it. God has a purpose for your life and if you don't fulfill it, you've wasted your life. Period. At the end of Jesus' life on the cross almost his last words were: *"It is finished."* Because he was clear about his purpose, it was clear when he completed it.

The third characteristic God wants to build into you is, **3. A Holy Motivation**. Know where your inspiration is coming from and know who you are trying to please. You can't please everyone. So you have to know who you're trying to please.

If you try to make people happy, about the time you get Crowd A happy, Crowd B gets ticked off. When you get B happy, A is upset. Even God can't please everyone. We just celebrated Independence Day. During the Revolutionary War, both sides prayed for victory - the British were unhappy with the outcome. At a championship game some people pray for one team and some for the other. Some are going to be disappointed. Some people are praying for rain, some for a sunny day. Even God can't please everyone. Only a fool would try to do what God can't do.

As a leader you'll constantly disappoint people because you can't please everyone. If you support one project you're saying no to others. Everyone has different expectations. As a leader you have to ask God for tough skin and a tender heart, not worrying so much about what people think or say. Just have a caring heart and take the disappointment into account.

How did Jesus handle it? What he worked to do was please God the Father. John 5 says, *"I can do nothing alone. I judge only the way I am told, so my judgment is fair. I don't try to please myself, but I try to please the One who sent me."* He wasn't out to win a popularity contest - just please God. If you're going to be an effective leader then you have to learn to not be floored by all the different opinions people have. Focus on God's opinion. When you're running the race there are people who will cheer you and jeer you. If you pay attention to either one you'll get sidetracked. You can't focus on critics or compliments. The moment you take a stand someone will start throwing tomatoes. They'll say negative things. What do you do about that? Let it go. There are too many important things to accomplish. We don't have the time to worry about cheers or jeers, strokes or pokes, criticisms or compliments. Just focus on what God calls you to do.

Rick Warren was going through a tough time with a lot of people criticizing him. He asked Billy Graham, "What do I do with all this criticism?" Billy Graham said, "Rick, if you wrestle with a pig, both of you are going to get messy. But only one of you is going to like it." If you contend with critics, the critics are the only ones who get what they want. So if you're going to be a leader, don't focus on critics or compliments very long. Just say, "I know who I am. I know what God's called me to do and what we're trying to accomplish." Keep moving forward; know who you're trying to please.

A myth that keeps people from being effective as leaders is that you have to be liked by everyone to be happy. You don't. God loves you unconditionally and will never love you any more or less than God does now. So if God likes you and you like you, if someone else doesn't, it's their problem. You don't need their approval. Just live for an audience of One.

We love to blame other people for our stress but no one can pressure me without my permission. If you feel under pressure from the expectations of others, settle the issue of motivation and know who you're trying to please. In John 17:4 Jesus was able to say to God the Father "*I brought glory to you here on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.*" I want to be able to say that! I want YOU to be able to say that! The ultimate motivation in life is living for the glory of God. Leading is hard work and if you don't know why you're doing it, you'll give up. When you figure out the why in your life God will show you how. You must do it for God's glory.

The fourth characteristic of leadership that God wants to build into your life is **4. A Commitment to Teamwork.** Leadership is never by itself. It is always in a context of a team, of a community, of a group. To be a leader, you have to build a team. All great leaders are great team builders. In fact, if you don't have a team, you're not a leader. You're a loner. The test of leadership is one thing. Is anybody following? Is anyone being influenced? You start with a team.

That's one reason why we're always stressing small groups. You can't be a good leader if you can't function in a small group. We are better together because none of us sees the whole picture. We need each other. We compensate for each other's weaknesses. Teams are far more effective.

If you think that you don't need to do this, you're contradicting the plain example of Jesus. Jesus was the model. He didn't do ministry by himself. He was always in the context of a group. Mark 3 says, "*Then he appointed twelve of them and called them his apostles. They were to accompany him, and he would send them out to preach, giving them authority...*" So Jesus gathered a small group and then enlisted other people to serve the cause with him.

Paul did the same thing. The Apostle Paul traveled with seven different people. In Acts it tells us their names. These are guys who traveled with Paul. It was his small group.

If God gives you a vision, a passion, something to do, step one is get the dream. Step two is build a team. Pray for God to bring other people to share the vision. If God gives you an idea and it's really from God, God will bring generally other people along. If nobody joins in, it's probably not from God or at least it's not the right time or place right now. So pray, "God, bring people into my life to build a team."

I often wonder why we're so hesitant to accept help? Why is it we don't like to ask for or accept help from each other? I can think of two possible reasons: insecurity and pride. We want to do it on our own. But as I said, then you're a loner and not a leader. Every soldier needs a buddy. Life is a battle. You are going to be hurt. emotionally, maybe physically. In your life. Do you have people in your life strong enough spiritually to drag you off the field and help you back to health when you're going through tough times? More importantly, are you that kind of person for anyone else? Can they depend on you?

When Jesus went to the Garden of Gethsemane, the night before he was going to be crucified, it was a time of agony for him because he was dealing with what was going to happen the next day. Think about this: Jesus was about to take every sin: every rape, molestation, murder, jealousy, rejection, disloyalty; every sin, past, present and future, and all guilt on himself. I can't imagine how that would feel. And neither can you. That's why we sing in the song, Here I Am to Worship: "I'll never know how much it costs to see my sin upon that cross." It wasn't just the physical pain. It was the emotional and spiritual pain. He paid for our sin.

In that moment in the garden when Jesus was agonizing what did he ask for? He asked for support from friends. He needed a team: Peter, James, and John. He says, "*My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death...*" He said I'm grieving so much. I feel like I'm dying inside. Then he says, "*stay here and keep watch with Me...*" Even Jesus needed a small group in his grief.

The fifth characteristic is **5. A Willingness to Focus.** You have to be willing to keep bringing your focus back to what's important. Focus on what's important because life is filled with things that will distract you. And it's not only bad things that are distracting; lots of good things distract. You can get caught up in doing so many good or enjoyable things that you don't have time for the important thing. If Satan can't mess you up by getting you to do wrong things, Plan B is to get you to do too so many good things that you can't focus.

Jesus, again, is our model. He refused to be distracted. Luke 9:51 says, "*As the time drew near for him to ascend to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.*" He was heading toward Jerusalem to die on the cross for us. He

did it with an iron will. He was persistent, determined, focused. He wouldn't let anything distract him from what was important.

The truth is you have incredible spiritual potential. Whether you've seen any of it in your life or not up to this point, you have incredible spiritual potential. But that potential won't be realized until you determine what's really important and focus on it. What's the one thing that's really important? When you settle on what's most important then God's going to do things in your life that you could never imagine.

Some guys were talking to Jesus one day. He told them the important thing is I want you to follow me. They said, yes, that's important. But first we need to go over here and do *this*. Here's what Jesus had to say to them. Luke 9:62 says, "*Jesus told him, 'Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God.'*" Jesus was pretty serious about any distraction and how dangerous it can be.

Jesus had some friends, Mary, Martha and Lazarus who he liked to visit. When Jesus dropped by for dinner he brought at least the twelve hungry disciples with him. When Jesus came one time Martha got pretty distracted. There were so many things to do that she got worried and anxious.

A lot of us get so caught up in the many things we have to do that we lose sight of the one thing that's most important, the reason we're doing it in the first place. It happens to all of us. Martha was distracted so Jesus said, "*You're worried and bothered about so many things. But only a few things are necessary... really only one.*" So you focus on that one thing.

The sixth characteristic is **6. A Devotion to Prayer**. Make listening to God a habit of your life. The Bible tells us in Mark 1: "*Before daybreak the next morning, Jesus got up and went out to an isolated place to pray.*" Jesus was busy all the time, but no matter how busy he got he took time to get alone for prayer. If you're a leader, you're going to be around people. Because you can't lead without being around people. But you also need time away from people. You need time with people and time alone with God. Luke 5 says, "*...the report of his power spread even faster, and vast crowds came to hear him preach and to be healed of their diseases. But Jesus often withdrew to the wilderness for prayer.*" Notice that word there: "often." It was his habit. If Jesus felt the need to be alone to listen to God, don't you think you need to? You need quiet times to reflect, renew recharge. Psalm 46 says "*Be still and know that I am God.*" To know God, be still.

Prayer is conversation. And in a conversation you both talk and listen. If you had a conversation with a friend and you did all the talking or they did all the talking, that wouldn't be a conversation. That's a monologue.

Some folks hear about people who pray thirty minutes a day and think, "I'd run out of stuff to say!" How about this? Don't try to say so much! Talk to God for ten minutes then sit still and be quiet for the next twenty. Many of us are put off by silence. Most of us have never sat still for twenty minutes in total silence. But if you don't you likely won't hear all that God wants to say. You need time to be quiet and listen to God.

In the middle of the day I sometimes pray a simple three-word prayer. I just say: "Lord, what's next?" Then I stop, am quiet and listen. Sometimes an inspiration, an idea will pop into my mind. Then I'll act on it. Most times nothing happens. When nothing happens, I just go with the schedule I think is best. But I give God the opportunity to rearrange things.

As a leader you want to say, What's next for my family? What's next for my work? God, what do you want to do next in our church? What do you want to do next with our small group? What do you want to do next in my relationships? Give God the opportunity to tell you.

Colossians 2:7 says, "*Let your roots grow down into him, and let your lives be built on him. Then your faith will grow strong in the truth you were taught, and you will overflow with thankfulness.*" You can't lead like Jesus until you know Jesus personally. The single greatest source of stress in life is when you get disconnected from God. Anytime throughout my day when disconnect I get stress. Stress is the warning that at that moment you're disconnected and need to get reconnected.

These six characteristics give you the beginning of the basis for leading from the source of our ministry, the source of our power, the source of grace. That's all the further we're going today. Next week we're going to go deeper into being the kind of leader God wants and intends for you to be. At that point we're going to talk about leading beyond your own abilities - how our efforts are multiplied beyond our abilities and vision. Right now I'm going to ask a member of our leadership team to come forward and pray for you as a leader - pray for your leadership in our church, our community and our world.