

Leading in the Local Church

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In all of human relations, few things are more important than leadership. It's not intuitively obvious why this should be so. After all, we might think that if people see some good goal that is worth working toward, they will motivate themselves to pursue that goal. In reality, any group of people depends on its leaders for motivation and success.

Practically speaking, there are two ways that a leader can go wrong. The first is that he can be weak and ineffective. Scripturally speaking, one of the most conspicuous weak leaders is the high priest Eli. He knew that his sons were doing wrong, but he failed to rein them in. As a consequence, he and his entire house were destroyed. Even today, a thriving corporation with immense revenues and a good name can be destroyed by a single ineffective CEO.

Second, even if a leader is strong and capable, he can forcefully lead his followers in a disastrous direction. One of the best Scriptural examples of this kind of leadership is not a man, but a woman. The Israelite queen Jezebel had a clear vision for her nation, and she worked tirelessly to carry it out. The problem was that her plan was to lead Israel to worship the Baals and to exterminate the worshipers of God. Good leader, terrible plan. Many of the most famous evil men of history fall into this category. Hitler and Napoleon had enough vision and charisma to change the world. Sadly, they used their abilities not to build, but to destroy, and they ultimately ruined themselves and all who followed them.

Reflections like these should give us pause before we commit ourselves to any leader, even Jesus. Because we are Christians, we are followers of Christ. However, just what kind of a leader is Christ? Where is He leading us? How can we be sure that He isn't a monster too? The only way to answer these questions is by turning to the word. It reveals Jesus as a unique leader, uniquely committed to the good of his followers. Let's look, then, at Christ the servant-leader.

What Jesus Did

The story in the gospels that best captures what kind of a leader Jesus was appears in the first part of John 13. John presents us with **THE SITUATION** in John 13:1-2. This entire story takes place on the night in which Jesus was betrayed. What's more, Jesus was fully aware that the time had come. He knew that He had only a few hours remaining to live the life of a free man. He knew that in less than 24 hours, He would be dead on the cross. If, as the saying goes, the prospect of hanging concentrates the mind wonderfully, Jesus' mind is really concentrated right here. Just like any of us would do, He is going to use the minutes He has left to do what He considers most important.

This text also tells us what Jesus' motivation is. Just like any good leader, His concern is for His followers. He loves His disciples, right up to the very end of His life, and what He is going to do next flows out of that love. In fact, with His actions in the next few minutes, Jesus is going to pursue three different goals. First, He wants to serve His disciples. Second, He wants to give them a frame of reference that they can use to understand His sacrifice. Third, He wants to provide them with a pattern they can follow after He's gone. He achieves all three goals in a unique way.

We see this unfold as we turn our attention to **JESUS' ACTIONS**. Let's look together at John 13:3-5. If we want to understand what's going on here, we have to understand the significance of foot-washing in ancient Palestine. This wasn't some arcane ritual that Jesus was carrying out. It was a necessary function. In that day, of course, Jesus and all of His disciples wore sandals. They didn't provide the same sort of coverage for the foot that our closed-toe shoes do today. What's more, they didn't have nice paved streets and sidewalks to walk on, either. The streets of Jerusalem were dusty, muddy, and filled with various kinds of garbage and waste. It wouldn't have been pleasant to see or smell, much less walk through. As a result, anybody who traveled by foot ended up with yucky feet. If you wanted clean feet, either you had to wash the yuck off yourself, or, if you owned a slave, you got the slave to do it. Washing slime off somebody else's feet is hardly a pleasant task. As a result, it usually fell to the lowest-ranking slave of the household. When we see Jesus washing the disciples' feet, then, we see Him taking on one of the most menial tasks a person could do.

This passage, though, tells us why Jesus chose to do this. He knew that He had come from the Father, that He was returning to the Father, and that the Father had given everything into His hands. Jesus knew Himself to be the Lord of heaven and earth. To us, this makes no sense. Why is the Lord of heaven and earth down on the floor washing feet? However, to Jesus, that made perfect sense. This wasn't an opportunity for Him to have others to wait on Him. He didn't need that. He didn't need validation from anybody. Instead, His recognition of His own high position freed Him from insecurity and pettiness, so that He could serve others in the lowliest way possible. The same strength and quietness of spirit that allowed Jesus to wash feet also allowed Him to surrender His own life for others on the cross.

The Results.

Make no mistake—this was a shocking thing for the Messiah to do. However, we don't know what any of the disciples thought about it until we get to Peter. **PETER'S OBJECTION** appears in John 13:6-11. As always, I can't help but feel some sympathy for Peter here. He has a good heart, he's trying to do what's right, and He believes that Jesus is the Son of God. Peter's problem, though, is that he thinks that He knows how to be the Son of God better than Jesus

does. Sometimes, according to Peter's way of thinking, Jesus does things that aren't very Messiah-like, and He needs somebody to correct Him. Ironically enough, when we criticize Peter for his impulsiveness and lack of self-control, we are probably echoing the way that Peter thought about Jesus. Sometimes, Jesus simply embarrassed Peter.

This was one of those times. Here, Jesus and His disciples are all gathered solemnly together to partake of the Passover meal, and suddenly the Messiah starts crawling around on the floor, washing feet like a slave. We can almost see Peter covering his eyes, too embarrassed to watch. And then, the Messiah is in front of him, wanting to wash his feet! Peter stammers out an incredulous question, hoping that something else is going on here, but all Jesus tells him is that he doesn't understand what's going on, and reaches out for his feet again. Peter probably jerks his feet away so quickly he barks his shins. He tells Jesus in no uncertain terms that he, Peter, has some sense of propriety, and he is not going to be a party to this farce! Jesus replies that if He doesn't wash Peter's feet, Peter has no part in Him.

That must have been a chilling moment for Peter, because Peter still doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about. Make no mistake about it; the problem here is not that Peter doesn't want anything from Jesus. Peter believes in Jesus, but when Jesus comes into His kingdom, Peter expects to be rewarded too. Just like the faithful companions of David did well for themselves, Peter looks forward to the day when Jesus will shower riches on His faithful companions. Those are the kinds of rewards that great kings give their followers. Foot-washing is not part of the equation.

What Peter had to learn to do, and what we must learn to do also, is understand Jesus' gifts for what they are. In worldly terms, a foot bath is a bizarre gift from a king. So too is the example of a life of poverty that lasted only thirty years. So too is the body of a humble carpenter, hanging on a rough-hewn cross, dripping blood from where it has been nailed to that cross. Even today, people don't understand those gifts. They want Christ to give them some denominational kingdom on earth. They want the same material compensation for following Him that Peter wanted. However, if we don't seek and receive the gifts that Christ is actually offering, we have no part in Him either.

This takes us to the next exchange between Jesus and Peter, in which Peter asks for his head and hands to be washed too. This shows little more than that Peter still doesn't get what Jesus is doing. All he knows is that Jesus said that if Jesus doesn't wash Peter's feet, he has no part in Him, and Peter wants a part in Jesus, ideally, the bigger the better. Peter's logic, then, is that if Jesus washes more of him, then he will have a bigger part in Jesus. Jesus points out that such service is unnecessary, except for Judas the betrayer, and not even a full-on bath was going to help Judas.

After this, Jesus offers a few comments on **HIS EXAMPLE**. These appear in John 13:12-15. Jesus begins by asking His disciples if they understand what He has done to them. On one level, this is a duh question. We know what Jesus just did, and we weren't even there. He washed His disciples' feet. Obviously, this isn't the answer that Jesus is looking for, and nobody there is clueless enough to volunteer it. This story is not about foot-washing per se.

Instead, what Jesus wants His disciples to think about is the apparent contrast between His position and His actions. They call Him Teacher and Lord, He actually is Teacher and Lord, and yet, the Teacher and Lord is washing feet. This was not the norm. No Jewish rabbi or Roman proconsul would ever have debased himself by washing the feet of the unwashed masses. In Jesus' day, leaders got their feet washed. They didn't do the washing.

By contrast, what Jesus is presenting to His disciples is an entirely different definition of leadership. Jesus isn't washing feet despite the fact that He is Teacher and Lord. He is washing feet because He is Teacher and Lord. The difference is that Jesus' kind of Teacher and Lord exists not to be served, but to serve. Because this is Jesus' perspective on Himself, He is willing to lower Himself to washing feet, or even to dying on a cross, if that's what others need.

This is the example that Jesus wants to convey. He's not giving His followers a lesson in how to scrub between somebody's toes and dry off feet really well. He wants them to understand what it means for Him to be a leader, and what it means for them to be leaders. We don't follow Jesus' example by enacting some unnecessary foot-washing ritual. We imitate Him by refusing to let our ideas about rank and status keep us from helping our brethren.

Finally, Jesus gives us **OUR APPLICATION**. We find it in John 13:16-17. The basic point that Jesus wants us to take from this is that if Jesus was willing to lower Himself so much for others, He leaves us without excuse. We have much less to be proud of than Jesus did, and yet we often defend our prerogatives much more fiercely. That's not what it means to be a disciple. Instead, we display our high rank in the kingdom by how humbly we are willing to serve. This doesn't come naturally. It's not intrinsically fun to be the one down on the floor with the basin and the yucky feet. However, if we love others like Jesus loved them, we will find our blessing in the opportunity to serve. Nor is this something that Jesus teaches us in this one location alone. Look, for instance, at Jesus' words in Mark 9:33-35. Over and over again, He emphasized that His disciples too should lead by serving others.

It is crucial for church leaders to imitate Christ, simply because the consequences of failure are so much greater. An ordinary saint who forsakes the Lord will destroy himself, but a church leader who turns his back on the principles of Christ will almost always cause spiritual harm to other Christians in the process. Just as James counsels that not many should become teachers, not everyone in the church is equipped for the responsibilities of leadership.

However, it is also true that every congregation needs leaders. Some congregations are blessed with elders who can take up the mantle of leadership; at present, we are not. However, that does not make leadership unnecessary for our

church. We need men, and even in some areas women, who are willing to soberly assess themselves and the church and take that step forward to be leaders for us, people who will direct and encourage and inspire their brethren.

For many of the would-be leaders of this congregation, that step forward is a step into unfamiliar territory. We have never been in a leadership role in a church before, so we don't necessarily have a good idea what we should do if we find ourselves in one. Jesus has shown us what it means to be a leader, but how should we lead?

Thankfully, in this area, as in all things pertaining to life and godliness, the Scripture supplies us with the answers we need. It tells us what a servant-leader needs to think about. Let's look, then, at leading in the local church.

Character Traits

Before the would-be leader begins to lead, there are several character traits that he must embody. First, he must **CARE ABOUT OTHERS**. Paul has an interesting take on this in Philippians 2:19-20. From time to time, I've been known to comment that I'd like to see more of the Christians here take an active interest in the welfare of their brethren. In some ways, it's reassuring to know that this is a problem the church had in the first century too. Even among a spiritually elite group like the companions of Paul, in Paul's judgment, only Timothy really had that concern for others.

However, unless we develop this concern, we are not equipped to lead in the local church. I'll admit, friends, that there are times that I fall into the trap of thinking of my leadership role as a way to "get things done". That's exactly wrong. Christ didn't found the church for the sake of programs and agendas. He founded it for the sake of the people He loved. When we start thinking about programs and agendas and stop thinking about helping people, we have left Christ's vision for the church behind. Nobody should put himself forward as a leader in the church unless his goal is to help his brother and his neighbor get to heaven, and everything we do should be a means to that end.

Second, the leader must **LEAD BY EXAMPLE**. Paul discusses the impact of example in Philippians 3:17. The leader must serve as an example in two main ways. First, he must be an example of moral purity and devotion to God's will. Other Christians will watch the lifestyle of a prominent member. They will pay attention to his church attendance, to the way that he and his family dress and behave, to the kinds of things that he posts about on Facebook. If sin or moral weakness is apparent in any of those areas, only bad will result. Either the brethren will become disillusioned and not listen to that Christian anymore, or they will follow him into immorality. The leader must be righteous in all he does.

Second, he must be an example in carrying out the work of the church. For decades, my parents worshiped with a church that didn't have elders, so my dad had to endure decades of business meetings. He says that one of his predominant impressions is of other men who said, "Here's what I think the church should do, and here's how I think you should do it." They had all kinds of grandiose schemes for advancing the church, but they wanted somebody else to do the hard work of actually making it happen. That kind of leadership is useless. Instead, if we want to encourage our brethren to greater efforts, they need to see that effort out of us first. If we want to see the building better maintained, we need to be the first to show up on work days. If we think the brethren need to spend more time together, we need to be the one organizing the potluck. That kind of service gives us the credibility we need to lead.

Third, if we want to lead, we must **SHARE OURSELVES** with others. Paul describes the way he did this in 1 Thessalonians 2:8. There's a simple rule at work here. Whether in the family, on the job, or in the church, people will only follow those they know and trust. A stranger cannot effectively lead, and any man's ability to lead depends on the strength of his relationships with others. If we want to lead, we must lay the groundwork by building those relationships.

This is not something that happens overnight. Instead, we build these relationships by concerted effort over time. We have to let others into our homes, our lives, and our hearts if we want them to trust us. Nor should we think that we can fake our way through this kind of relationship-building. People are smart enough to tell when we genuinely care about them and when we just want something. All this may be difficult for more introverted brethren. I'll admit that I'm naturally a private man, and this doesn't come easily to me, but it's something we must do if we want to lead.

Leadership Traits

Once the would-be leader has developed his character, he can begin work on the traits of good leadership. First, he must learn to **BE VIGILANT**. Paul brings this up in Acts 20:29-31. Obviously, this passage is directed specifically to the Ephesian elders, but it is sound advice for any church leader. If he doesn't think about the situation of the church and what its needs are, his leadership will likely cause more harm than good. First, he must consider the dangers and potential dangers that present themselves to the church and its members. The best way to solve a problem is to stop it before it happens, and the only way that we can ever manage to do that is by paying attention to trends and the way things are headed. For example, we shouldn't just pay attention to brethren who haven't been at services in six months. We should also think about those who are attending less frequently than they used to. Usually, by the time a saint has stopped coming altogether, it's very difficult to restore him. That task is much easier when we speak to him before his problem has reached the level of spiritual disaster. However, we'll only spot the problem in the early stages if we've been watching.

Similarly, we must be vigilant for opportunities. Christ will often open doors for His people, but He doesn't hold them open forever. We must be watchful if we want to take advantage. We have to notice, for example, if a visitor has come to our assembly for several Sundays in a row, and we have to be quick with an invitation to dinner or a Bible study. If we don't pay attention, that visitor may well drift off to a church where he is more warmly welcomed.

Even though inaction may lead to all sorts of problems, so too can the wrong kind of intervention. This is why leaders must **BE GENTLE**. Paul recalls his gentle treatment of the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 2:7. Some people have the idea that leadership means putting on your stomping boots and stomping all over everybody, that you have to show that you're a take-charge, take-command kind of guy before you can be a leader. In real life, though, that kind of callous behavior only alienates its targets. As leaders, our goal must not be to condemn, but to persuade.

In this area, the conversation climate that we establish is extremely important. We must take pains never to establish an adversarial relationship with those whom we are trying to lead. We don't succeed as leaders by beating other people down, so that they knuckle under and do what we want them to. In order for us to win, somebody else doesn't have to lose. Instead, whether we are working with a strong Christian, a weak Christian, or an outsider, we need to use collaborative language, so that we are working together toward a shared goal. As leaders, we win when everyone wins.

On the other hand, though, we must always be careful to **USE GOD'S STANDARD**. Paul explains how he did this in 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12. This is the flip side of the same coin. Just as we are tempted to use the Bible as a club to bully others into doing what we think they should be doing, we can also go too far in the other direction and tolerate sin instead of urging repentance. As with so many areas of Christianity, there is a balance to be struck here. It's wrong to unnecessarily alienate others, but it is equally wrong to remain silent where God has spoken. If someone is outside of Christ, our goal must be to bring them in, and everything we say to them must work toward that goal. Either we need to be teaching them the truth, or we need to be building our relationship with them to the point where we can teach the truth. In this, we must never deceive ourselves about what we're actually doing. We can't say to ourselves, "Oh, I'll have that hard conversation with him someday", but someday never comes. Avoiding the conversation might seem loving, but it actually isn't. We are hiding the truth from our brother or friend not out of concern for his soul, but because we don't like to have tense discussions. We care about us, not him. Real leaders value the truth more than their own comfort.

Similarly, we must make sure to **BE IMPARTIAL**. James describes the problems with partiality in James 2:8-9. Sadly, it is all too easy for leaders to be partial. Many of us have close friends at church, people we enjoy associating with outside of the assembly. However, those close friends are often the people who least need our attention as leaders. Usually, they're fairly committed to the Lord and fairly connected to the congregation. Instead, it's often the people whom we're not close to, and who aren't really close to anybody else either, who most need the attention of the church leaders. Isolated Christians are vulnerable Christians, and when we focus our attention on our friends instead, we make sure that they aren't going to get that connection and support from us either. As leaders, we don't have the luxury of associating only with those whom we prefer. We also have to pay attention to those who need us.

Finally, we must **BE DILIGENT**. Let's read together from Romans 12:6-8. It's easy to get all fired up about some situation at church and take the lead in addressing the problem, but it's hard to keep leading after that initial burst of enthusiasm wanes. If we want to be effective leaders, we must be persistent leaders. Most people with spiritual problems aren't going to work through those spiritual problems on the basis of one conversation with us. Instead, we may have to spend years reaching out to them, again and again, if we actually want to see improvement. One potluck is not going to have a significant effect on the cohesiveness of the congregation. Instead, if we want to see benefits, we must encourage that association regularly. If we want to take the lead in those or in any other areas, we're going to have to get out front and stay out front. We have to be willing to work through obstacles and discouragement to reach our goal. We have to be committed, no matter what, because that's the way that true leaders are.