

Who Do You Want to Follow?

Scripture: Matthew 20:25–28

Code: B120514

A glance around the evangelical landscape today offers a wide variety of leadership models and styles: entrepreneurs, kings, rock stars, motivational speakers, armchair psychologists, and modern-day monks. You would have to look much harder to find a simple servant.

Christ's views on leadership are conspicuously out of step with the conventional wisdom of our age: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:25–28).

According to Jesus, then, the truest kind of leadership demands service, sacrifice, and selflessness. A proud and self-promoting person is not a good leader by Christ's standard, regardless of how much clout he or she might wield. Leaders who look to Christ as their Leader and their supreme model of leadership will have servants' hearts. They will exemplify sacrifice.

I realize those are not characteristics most people associate with leadership, but they are essential qualities of a biblical approach to leadership, which is the only kind I'm interested in.

Notice, by the way, that Jesus was expressly teaching Christians to approach leadership in a different way and from a radically different point of view than the leaders of this world. It's folly for Christians to assume (as these days many do) that the best way for Christians to learn leadership is from worldly examples.

There's a crucial reason for that: Leadership for the Christian always has a spiritual dimension. The duty of leading people carries with it certain spiritual obligations. That is as true for the Christian president of a secular company as it is for the stay-at-home mom whose sphere of leadership might extend no further than her own children. All Christians in every kind of leadership are called to be spiritual leaders.

If you truly understand your accountability before God as a leader, you can begin to see why Christ portrayed the leader as a servant. He was not suggesting, as many have supposed, that lowliness alone is the essence of leadership. There are plenty of humble, meek, tenderhearted, servant-minded people who are not leaders. A true leader inspires followers. Someone who has no followers can hardly be called a leader.

So while it is certainly true that leadership demands a servant's heart, it is by no means the case that everyone with a servant's heart is thereby a leader. There's far more to leadership than that.

To put it simply, leadership is influence. The ideal leader is someone whose life and character motivate people to follow. The best kind of leadership derives its authority first from the force of a righteous example, and not merely from the power of prestige, personality, or position. By contrast, much of the world's "leadership" is nothing but manipulation of people by threats and rewards. That is not true leadership; it's exploitation. Real leadership seeks to motivate people from the inside, by an appeal to the heart, not by external pressure and coercion.

For all those reasons, leadership is not about style or technique as much as it is about character. Want proof that effective leadership is not just about style? Notice that a number of divergent leadership styles are modeled in Scripture. Elijah was a loner and a prophet; Moses delegated duties to trusted people whom he kept close to him. Peter was brash; John was tenderhearted. Paul was a dynamic leader, even when being carried about in chains. He influenced people primarily through the force of his words. Evidently, his physical appearance was anything but powerful (2 Corinthians 10:1). All were men of action, and all used their diverse gifts in markedly different ways. Their leadership styles were varied and diverse. But all were true leaders.

Again, I think it's a serious mistake for Christians in leadership to pass over these biblical examples of leadership and turn instead to secular models in pursuit of style-obsessed formulae they think will make them better leaders.

So what kind of leader are you? Or more to the point, what kind of leader do you want to be? Who are your aspirational models for leadership? What kind of leaders should you follow and should influence you and your family?

In the coming days we'll look closely at some of the dominant, modern models for leadership and see how they measure up against Christ's command to humble ourselves for a life of sacrifice and service.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John MacArthur". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.

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