

Servant Leadership: Everyone
Delivered October 7, 2012

My journey into leadership (which I consider an ongoing one) took a while and included many ups, downs, twists, and turns. Most of those challenging moments had more to do with the internal dialogue I had about my shortcomings than it had to do with any kind of external opposition or challenges to my leadership. I am by nature rather reserved, introverted, and prefer to be out of the spotlight rather than in it.

Because that's the case, I had a hard time accepting that I was a leader of any kind. Combine that with the fact that I never held any leadership positions in school or on teams, and I honestly never felt like I had much leadership potential. In other words, if I was picking out potential leaders based just on the external measures of leadership potential, I never would have chosen myself.

Then I somehow got landed with the leadership title of Senior Pastor of New Life Assembly at the ripe old age of 24 and found that the title didn't really make me a leader either. Sure, I was officially leading a group of people, but I soon found out that leading because I had a title didn't mean anyone was actually interested in following, especially when I wasn't really sure of where I was supposed to be leading anyway.

So I started going to leadership conferences and read leadership books, but while I was often initially encouraged by these things, I also found that there was a downside later on. I would start to measure myself against these guys with big churches and big platforms and wonder why I couldn't quite get to the place where they were. At some point a few years ago I had an important realization in regards to leadership: I was only a leader because God was asking me to lead a particular group of people, and he was going to equip me for my leadership task, not someone else's.

Many of us may hear that we are walking through a series on leadership and assume that we can check out of it because we don't think we're leaders in any sense of the word. We probably don't think about ourselves as leaders because we don't fit the leadership stereotype we have created for a leader. Or we look around at our lives and we find that we are not sure anyone is following us, so we start to question whether we could possibly be leadership material if we don't have a title or a following.

But when we buy into that model of leadership, we have bought into an idea of leadership that is more founded on the celebrenality driven culture in which we live than it is based on God's ideal for leadership in the Kingdom of God. When we assume that leadership is a matter of standing out in the crowd, or popularity, or charismatic personalities and titles then we are buying a lie. This morning we want to throw that image of leadership out the window because it has nothing to do with the kind of leadership God has for any one of us. His definition of leadership will be more encompassing than that, and will ultimately be more fulfilling for each of us.

If we're going to understand leadership from God's perspective we are going to have to ground our picture in the Scriptures to see what leadership looks like from his point of view. Those who are going to lead in God's Kingdom are not going to take their cues from culture, but from the Scriptures. And when you look at the leaders God used throughout Scripture you find that a very different picture emerges: it's not about charisma, personality or titles.

To give us that perspective we're going to look at three different leaders from the Old Testament to see God's approach to finding leaders. The picture that emerges is a pretty clear one: everyone is qualified as a potential leader in God's Kingdom. Moses, Gideon, and David are leaders who often get credit for amazing leadership moments, but when you look at their early encounters, you don't get the feeling that they were exactly brimming with self-confidence and leadership potential that everyone was aware of.

Moses' leadership calling is recorded in Exodus 3 and 4, and his journey towards that calling begins with the extraordinary story of God speaking to him from the burning bush, calling him by name and giving him the charge of going to rescue his people from their slavery in Egypt. But rather than running to the front of the line to apply for such a prestigious responsibility, we see Moses actually running in the other direction, attempting to convince God that he's the wrong candidate for the job of great deliverer.

In **Exodus 4:10-17**, he points out his lack of eloquence and his inability to speak properly as evidence that he can't really perform this leadership task, encouraging God to find someone else more qualified to take the leadership role. When God insists that Moses is the right man for the job, Moses outright tells him that he needs to find someone else. He doesn't sound bold, charismatic, or very leader-ly at all. He sounds quite the opposite, in fact. And yet, when he submits to God's calling for his life he becomes exactly what he thought he couldn't: the Great Deliverer, the Lawgiver, the leader of an entire nation out of its bondage. But none of that happens because he was cool, popular, or particularly charismatic. It is all a result of God's calling, purpose and desire to use him.

In that respect Gideon's journey echoes Moses'. Israel is once again enslaved, this time to the nation of Midian, and in **Judges 6:11-15** God initiates a conversation with Gideon about delivering his people from their bondage. At the beginning of the conversation God addresses Gideon as a mighty warrior, and asserts that He is with Gideon in a strong way. Gideon responds with some understandable skepticism about this claim. If God is really with us (me) then why am I (we) in this position?

And then Gideon basically takes another page from Moses' book when he tells God that he isn't qualified for the job of leadership. He is least in his family, his family is least among their tribe, and his tribe is least among the nation of Israel. But as with Moses, God responds not by pointing to Gideon's leadership credentials or even potential, but by pointing to God's presence with him throughout his leadership tasks. "I will be with you," God says to Gideon, and that is expected to be enough to remind Gideon that he can accomplish what God calls him to regardless of whether he fits the expected "Leader Profile" or not. Gideon's smallness is of little concern to God's ability to use him to lead others. Only God and his greatness matter.

Finally we have the well known portrait of David, which begins in **1 Samuel 16:6-13** with the story of Samuel the prophet going to anoint the next king of Israel while Saul is still reigning on the throne. But God has rejected Saul as the king of Israel despite the fact that, from a purely external perspective, Saul seems to have all the desirable leadership qualities. He came from a good, respected family, was head and shoulders taller and more physically imposing than the people around him. He looked like a leader, but his heart was not conformed to God's purpose, so God moved on from him.

Samuel arrives at the house of Jesse in the town of Bethlehem to secretly anoint the next king of Israel, but doesn't advertise that publicly lest Saul get wind of this. When he arrives at Jesse's house, he asks for his sons to come stand in front of him so that from among them he can anoint the next king. When the firstborn son stands in front of Samuel, his immediate thought is: "This is the one". Even Samuel the prophet gets fooled by the external appearances – he looks like a leader, but God hasn't chosen him.

In fact, in the process God passes on a critical leadership lesson to Samuel about his Kingdom – God doesn't judge by what other people can see, measure, and observe on the outside. He judges based on the heart, and something in Eliab was not what God desired. The heart of the next king of Israel would be one devoted to God and his purpose for him and for the nation of Israel. It would be the heart of a servant leader rather than a tyrant, even if he wouldn't be a perfect leader. He was a leader who would make mistakes, but just as quickly express his repentance for those failures. His heart would always drive him back towards God's purpose for him and his people.

When David is finally brought in from the fields, God speaks to Samuel immediately: "Rise and anoint him". The one overlooked by his brothers and his father was not overlooked by God. God has prepared this one for the task not only of leading Israel for this time, but to be the line of the eventual King of Kings – the perfect leader.

Each of these three men in their own way point forward to the leadership of Christ both in his humility and his servanthood. Isaiah 53 talks about the suffering servant, the Messiah, as one who would not have any external form that would draw us to him based on what we could see on the outside. But he would carry a different kind of leadership and bring that to bear on the world in ways that no one had ever seen before. He expressed perfect submission to his father, a submission imperfectly modeled by Moses, Gideon, and David in their turn. Christ is at the center of each of their stories, not a method to becoming a better leader. Great kingdom leadership is completely dependent on submission to God's purpose for our lives.

You are a leader, regardless of whether you fit the profile you imagine. As a follower of Jesus I suspect that he expects you to live up to that leadership regardless of how many people are following you. Moses had millions, Gideon had 300 by the end, and David expanded the nation of Israel beyond anything they had ever seen before. Jesus himself left with 11 devoted followers, but we never question his impact on the world. It is not the size of your platform, but the size of the God who calls you to lead in that place.

It may be within your family with just a few people following. It may be in a ministry here at the church with a small group of people who are looking to your leadership. It may be at work, or in the community, or at your school with a small group of friends. Your job is to submit to God's purpose for your leadership in that place and allow him to build (or not) the platform. God is not calling you to lead based on anyone else's estimation of your leadership, but based on his estimate of what he can accomplish with you when you are fully submitted to him.

We want to be the kind of church that creates a true leadership culture, not a separate and distinct leadership "class" of people. When we understand that everyone here is a leader in the making, then we have a chance to achieve that purpose.