

Leadership Beatitudes

E-Book

Volume 1



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Introduction to leadership

The heart of a leader demands a love that will get involved in the struggles and messes that their followers face in life, a love that will confront out of a security drawn from knowing God and His purposes in our lives.

To accomplish the purpose of forming leaders, the leader former must have:

- A clear understanding of the nature of leadership
- A sound sense of self-awareness
- In-depth relationships
- The ability to confront
- The courage to take loving stands
- The willingness to be vulnerable
- The willingness to humble one's self
- Clarity of vision
- An understanding of truth
- The willingness to risk rejection
- Insight into the heart of others
- Sensitivity as to how to respond to others

FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES:

Leaders must understand what leadership is.

Leadership is the act of influencing/serving others out of Christ's interests in their lives so they accomplish God's purposes for and through them.

Influence comes from serving by:

- modelling
- instructing
- exhorting
- evaluating
- confronting
- training
- releasing

Influence does not come by:

- overpowering
- belittling
- manipulating
- threatening
- avoiding
- competing
- controlling

Serving is *slave leadership*—a radical commitment to Christ in every follower's life that impels the leader to act in love with truth no matter what it costs that leader (Mt. 20:26-27; John 13:16; Phil. 2:5-11; II Cor. 4:5).

The leader focuses on God's purposes *for* and *through* the followers.

God's purpose *for* the followers is to grow them into Christlikeness, and the leader is one of His prime instruments in guiding the followers to become more and more like Christ.

God's purpose *through* the followers is to participate with Him in accomplishing the Great Commission in accordance with their gifts and opportunities.

The leader focuses on both the *functional* and the *foundational* in the followers' lives.

The *functional* refers to the tasks the followers undertake and to their competence in light of their gifts, knowledge, and developed skills.

It refers to the followers' competencies.

The *foundational* refers to the followers' character, the core essence of their being on which all they do rests.

The *foundational* determines how well the leader and the followers function.

It relates to their *character*, that is, *who* exercises the knowledge and skills to get the vision accomplished.

It relates to their *motives*, that is, *why* they do what they do.

It relates to their *actions*, that is, *what* they do (for example whether they confront, avoid, forgive, overlook, exhort, lie, cheat, steal, say harsh words).

It relates to their *method*, that is, *how* they do what they do (for example use a method that communicates freely or seeks to hold power to themselves, sacrifices their own recognition or grasps platform for themselves).

It relates to their *situation*, that is *where* they act (for example acting appropriately in public in such a way that the leader and followers demonstrate a wisdom that is appropriate for the moment or living in private what they proclaim in public).

It relates to their *timing*, that is *when* they act based on the depth of relationship they have with the followers, the need in the moment, the particular lesson they seek to teach, and the need in their followers that must be met before they can become increasingly effective in serving Christ.

When the *foundational* and the *functional* integrate with consistency, leaders and followers will show an uncommon Christlikeness. In a very real sense, character controls competence. Leadership is not only getting something done; *leadership is getting someone grown*. Ultimately leadership is as much about leadership

development and leader formation as it is about the act of leading itself. Leading is knowing where you want to go and getting others to go there with you.

Leading is getting a vision accomplished.

But leadership is about far more than this.

To get a vision accomplished and burn followers out is to fail as a leader.

To get a vision accomplished and build followers up is to succeed as a leader.

If you pursue leadership development (knowledge and skill development) and leader formation (character growth) in the action of accomplishing a specific vision, you will more than get that vision done.

Leaders must have a sound sense of self-awareness

Leaders must have a sound sense of self-awareness that they pass on to their followers. This means *leaders must think of themselves in appropriate ways* and teach their followers to do the same. Leaders must think of themselves as new mind leaders.

To do this they must understand several critical realities:

- new identity (Rom. 6:1-14)
- new resource (John 15:1-11)
- hardened hearts (Mark 6:52-8:33)

- new power (Eph. 5:18)
- new life (Rom. 6:4; 8:1ff)
- new role (John 13:1-17)
- new mind (Co. 3:1-2)
- new self (Rom. 12:3ff)
- new community (Rom. 12:9-15:1)
- new commitment (Mark 8:34)
- new hope (I Peter 1:13)

They must understand that they have *everything for everything* (II Peter 1:2-4).

Leaders and followers must think of themselves in the light of how God has gifted them (Rom. 12:3).

- God has given every believer a gift (Eph. 4:7ff).
- God plans to bless every believer through the exercise of these gifts (I Cor. 12:6).
- God expects leaders and followers to use his/her gift(s) in accordance with God's grace (Rom 12:6-8).

Leaders are responsible to equip followers in the exercise of their gifts (Eph. 4:11-12).

Leaders must know how to:

- equip their followers to exercise their gifts (Eph. 4:11)—mend nets (Mk. 1:19), restore sinners (Gal. 6:1), set bones
- develop their followers skills

- delegate, evaluate, and hold their followers accountable
- observe, correct, train, rebuke, and encourage
- wash feet—confront character needs and even remove followers when necessary, no matter how strong his/her skills may be or how many followers that follower may have

Leaders must have in-depth relationships

You cannot have an in-depth relationship with everyone you lead, but everyone on your team or in your sphere of responsibility should have some kind of in-depth relationship with a leader former. Some will be more effective than others as leader formers, but all must have someone ahead of them who seeks to know them at the heart level.

To know someone at the heart level, you must know that person's

- fears
- reasons for anger
- dreams
- identity needs—where they feel they lack the emptiness they're trying to fill through achievements the things that drive them and generate their expectations, both appropriate and inappropriate

Leaders must have the appropriate ability to confront

You need to determine your own willingness to confront when you must despite your adversity to it; know your primary and secondary styles. Understand confrontation biblically, not culturally or personally. Note different confrontation models for differing circumstances:

- Inferior to superior (Nathan to David)
- Superior to inferior (Jesus to Peter + James and John)
- Equal to equal (Paul to Peter + Paul and Barnabas to one another).

Realize there are many levels/kinds of confrontation from gentle correction to direct command. Understand what it will cost not to confront and see which is the most costly, confronting or not confronting.

Leaders must have the courage to take loving stands

The courage to take loving stands relates directly to your willingness to confront. Taking stands doesn't always involve confrontation, but it certainly can lead to it. Frequently, followers want their leader to take a stand even when they argue for a different position. Sometimes they are seeking for leadership from their leader as well as testing their leader's willingness and courage to fulfill their responsibility and lead. Taking stands does not mean you should be inflexible; the secret to taking stands is knowing what is worth entering tension over and what isn't. Make certain the stand you take is for the benefit of the person's growth in light of

the defined and agreed upon vision and goals, not just for policies, your preference or convenience.

Leaders must be willing to be vulnerable

Vulnerability is the willingness to let my followers see my needs, my fears, my feelings, and my growth in such a way that it edifies them and helps them grow in character and competence. Vulnerability must edify without manipulating. You will be vulnerable against your will because one of the key reasons why God has you in leadership is to grow you in public. Because of this, God will make certain that you have many opportunities to be vulnerable, and not infrequently, against your will. This is not because God wants to embarrass or shame you, but grow you in such a way that you model growth for others and influence them to know God through your struggles. When God makes you vulnerable, don't run away and hide—everyone already knows what's going on, and you will gain and keep respect by being appropriately accountable about your vulnerability.

Invite others into your pilgrimage in the way Paul did in the New Testament:

- He frequently gave his testimony, even though it wasn't complimentary to him;
- He spoke of fear and trembling when coming to Corinth;
- He spoke of facing lions and fearing for his life in Ephesus;

- He spoke of not finding rest for his soul in Troas;
- He spoke of his inadequacy for God's triumph to the Corinthians;
- He spoke of his weakness as his strength, that is, His vulnerability was the channel God most used to make a difference in others through him;
- He spoke of the weight of the churches upon him;
- He spoke of his need to confront Peter for the Gospel in Galatians;
- He spoke of his gratitude for funds in Philippians;
- He spoke of his need for prayer to the Colossians;
- He spoke of his need for funds to the Romans;
- He spoke of the hurt done to him by those who attacked him to Timothy;
- He spoke of his intense loneliness and need for others when he was deserted after his trial for his life in II Timothy.

Follow Paul's lead and be vulnerable about your pilgrimage; it will make a great deal of difference in the lives of those who follow you.

Leaders must willingly humble themselves

Jesus washed feet because none of His followers had the currency to pay the emotional bill to serve when it came due. He knew this and chose to model self-humbling to them because He knew power plays, self-assertion, and competition would never accomplish His mission. Jesus

knew power leadership may be short-term, productive leadership, but in the end it is actually destructive leadership. Jesus also knew His men would never change without some very direct teaching, but the teaching could not be in words; the teaching had to be in unforgettable actions that would make a permanent impact on them. We find the currency to humble ourselves where He found it—in a relationship and mission that meant more to Him than His image, His power, His drive to be right, His need to win, or anything else in the world. This relationship and mission was motivated by a love that only He can give. Leader formers *must* be growing in a love for Christ that frees them from every other dependency and releases them to humble themselves and serve.

Leaders must follow Jesus and model what they want their followers to be and do

Jesus alone was willing to do what the disciples should have fallen all over themselves to do. He knew exactly what He was doing and why He was doing it when He got up from the table, stripped to the waist, took a towel and a basin of water, and went from man to man washing their feet.

He knew who He was and what His authority over them was.

He knew the only way He could demonstrate true authority was to serve.

He knew they would never have true authority unless they became servants in exactly the same way as He did.

He knew He was living out what Paul came to describe in Philippians 2, the very same mental attitude the apostle calls us to have.

He knew only this mind-set can take up the cross and He had already established that fact that without the cross, the disciples would never be able to follow Him.

He consciously chose to model what He wanted them to become.

He deliberately commanded them to do what He did, to follow Him as a model.

If we are to have His same mind-set and follow His model, then we will be models for those emerging leaders whom we are forming. This is the way of obedience for us as leader formers.

Leaders must have clarity of vision

Vision focused our Lord's love and gave Him a dream for His men. He saw them doing things they could *never* do apart from His love and His mission for them. He saw these ordinary fishermen, businessmen, and common villagers changing the world.

- He called them because of His vision for them
- He taught them because of His vision for them

- He challenged them because of His vision for them
- He cleansed them because of His vision for them
- He confronted them because of His vision for them
- He modeled for them because of His vision for them
- He commissioned them because His bigger vision of the world included *them*

Jesus was *never* off vision; He always knew what He was doing because He always knew why He was doing it. You must always be on vision, always forming your emerging leader's character and competence in light of your vision—the vision Jesus has called you to pursue, to which they have responded and committed themselves with you. You must align your emerging leaders' character and competence with the vision and keep calling them to it. You must also allow them to pursue the vision according to their peculiar (unique) God-given make up and not force them to pursue it according to yours; the point is to achieve the vision well, not to conform to the gifts and approaches of others.

If you force them to do what you do or to do things the way you do things is not vision, it's control, and it's the Lord's responsibility to control others, not yours.

Leaders must have an accurate understanding of truth

Theology matters, and even more so in an emerging church. Consider the first five hundred years of the church when virtually all theological problems were considered and defined. There is great theological diversity in your area at this time and a limited ability to communicate or to have theological conversation across the culture. It is critical for solid theological development to mark the emerging church or the cults will have a field day in the future. Jesus knew exactly how to serve Peter because He knew theology—He knew the truth Peter need to know if Peter was going to be useful to Jesus in the course of his life. Truth was critical to Peter’s future. Jesus knew the right truth at the right moment; He knew to say the right thing that would make the right impact. Leader formers must both know truth and know how to use truth to edify those they are forming in such a way that they are impacted and changed for a lifetime. Emerging leaders need to understand the truths concerning God, the trinity, the Holy Spirit, the Word of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. In addition to this, they must need to understand at the heart level a core of truths concerning the ways of God in forming leaders through pilgrimage:

- Factors of identity from Romans 6
- The reality of the flesh and the Spirit from Romans 7 and Galatians 5
- The nature of spiritual gifts including how to discern theirs and how to develop theirs and others
- The need for community

- The value of injustice, suffering, and grief in God's hand and how to respond appropriately to each
- The truth depth of sin and its impact on them (sin hides in the nooks and crannies of our lives and masquerades itself as humanness and other destructive excuses
- The heart of love and forgiveness.

All of these truths must be communicated in the action to people who already think they know them and who, like the disciples, frequently are blind to their own blindness.

Leaders must be willing to risk rejection

Jesus clearly risked rejection by the leaders of His day, both Jewish and Roman. But He also risked the rejection of the very leaders He was forming, even as Peter rebuked and resisted Him; Jesus even asked them at one point if they would leave Him. Rejection comes whenever one person goes against the values, expectations, desires, or demands of others in such a way that those others feel challenged, threatened, and angry. Jesus went against the selfish values, core expectations, driven desires, and overt demands of His followers as represented by Peter who rebuked Him (Mark 8:33). Those engaged in leader formation must take the same risk and may even pay the same price of desertion and denial. Unless the leader former runs this risk—and even experiences it—he will not be effective in fulfilling his task. Like Jesus, the leader former must have the

emerging leader's needs and not his own success in view.

Leaders must have insight in the hearts of others

Leaders must understand the hearts of those they influence:

- Insight comes first from Scripture
- Insight comes from observing the experience of others
- Insight comes from reading what others have learned
- Insight comes from the counsel of others who have wisdom about the heart
- Insight comes from personal experience and growth

Leader formers need to keep a journal of their growth, recording

- What they learned
- How they learned it
- What they felt while learning
- What overcame their resistance to learning
- What helped them through their learning experience
- What changed in the core of their being as a result of their learning

Insight into their own hearts—without projecting themselves on others—brings humility, sensitivity,

patience, and understanding of the hearts of those they form. The formation of their own hearts gives them significant insight into the hearts of those they influence.

Leaders need sensitivity as to how to respond to others

They respond sometimes directly.

They respond sometimes indirectly.

They respond sometimes publicly.

This comes from knowing people by

- Understanding their temperaments,
- Respecting their concerns,
- Believing in their gifts
- Supporting their dreams
- Challenging their flaws

Dependence on God

In C.S. Lewis' *Prince Caspian*, a child named Lucy encounters Aslan, the Christ-figure of the Narnia stories, after not seeing him for a long while. "Aslan, you're bigger," she says.

"That is because you're older, little one," answered he.

"Not because you are?"

"I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger."¹

The more mature in the faith we are, the bigger God will be for us. As our vision of God becomes clearer and we understand his enormity, we learn to rest in him. We grow in our ability to depend completely on him and know that with a God as competent as the God we find in the pages of Scripture, the universe in which we find ourselves is truly a safe place for us.

At least, this is as it ought to be. Reality, for far too many of us, is quite the opposite. In spite of this large and competent God who cares for us and promises to never abandon us, we often find ourselves beset by worry, anxiety and fear. It is only the most mature leader who understands that as we come to rely on God, we find rest in this world.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian, The Chronicles of Narnia* (New York: Collier/Macmillan, 1985), p. 136.

Worry-free Living

All people who lead others or carry organizational responsibility find more than enough reasons to worry – deadlines, financial pressures, market instability and other pressures (you fill in your own blanks here) make stomachs churn and account for many a sleepless night. But Jesus cautions us against worrying about anything – even the food we eat or the clothes we wear:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run

after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 6:25-34

In this passage, Jesus gives his disciples (and us) six reasons for trusting in God rather than worrying.

First, the same God who gives us the greater gift of life will certainly supply the lesser gifts of food and clothing. In typical Jewish fashion, Jesus reasons from the greater to the lesser: If God has given us life, won't he be faithful to give us the things that will sustain that life and make it rich and rewarding? If God can be trusted to take care of big things, can we also trust him with the small details? The answer is: of course. God never begins something he does not plan to see through to completion.

Second, the God who cares for birds will care for his people. After all, humans are of much greater value than any bird. "Look at the birds" implies "Look and Learn." We can learn much from these flighty little fellows. They are industrious yet carefree. Without the benefit of barns they manage to find food each day. That is God's provision for them. For us, God's provision is greater. We have been given the ability to manipulate our environment. To grow crops, raise animals and preserve food. Not only are we more capable than the

birds to provide food for ourselves, but we are also more valuable in God's eyes (Matt. 10:29-31). How much less, then, we should worry.

Third, worry expends energy pointlessly – it doesn't change the reality of the situation a single bit. Worry is kind of like a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but doesn't get you anywhere.

Fourth, worry ignores God's demonstrated faithfulness in our lives. The same God who so wonderfully clothes the flowers of the field is responsible to care for them. Every blossoming flower is a reminder of God's faithfulness to us. A field of wild flowers sprinkled across a bed of fresh spring grass is a remarkable sight indeed. These little beauties do not labor or spin (probably a reference to both men's and women's work respectively). But even Solomon's wardrobe paled in comparison. If God is so generous with something as transitory as kindling for the fire, what do you suppose he will do for us? No wonder Jesus rebukes us, "O, you of little faith," when a mere glance out our bedroom window should teach us the futility of worry. As R.H. Mounce has said, "Worry is practical atheism and an affront to God."²

Fifth, we are God's children. God will never treat us as orphans who need to fend for themselves. Failure to grasp this will lead inevitably to worry and failure in our moral lives. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say

² R.H. Mounce, *Matthew* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), p. 80.

that the most important thing about us is what comes to mind when we think of God, as A.W. Tozer clarifies:

That our idea of God correspond as nearly as possible to the true being of God is of immense importance to us. Compared with our actual thoughts about Him, our [doctrinal] statements are of little consequence. Our real idea of God may lie buried under the rubbish of conventional religious notions and may require an intelligent and vigorous search before it is finally unearthed and exposed for what it is. Only after an ordeal of painful self-probing are we likely to discover what we actually believe about God. A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well. It is to worship what the foundation is to the temple; where it is inadequate or out of plumb the whole structure must sooner or later collapse. I believe there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts about God.³

If we view God as a cosmic killjoy, we will likely be plagued with guilt and shame over every sinful

³ A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), p. 8

thought or angry moment. If God is seen as some kind of doting grandfather who turns a blind eye at our shortcomings, we will be likely to excuse our wrong actions. If we think God is looking for a good bargain, we will expect him to come through for us when we have done something good for him. Our quality of life will always rise and fall on our view of God and our expectations of him. Once we come to know God as the faithful Father he is, worry simply does not make sense.

Sixth, when we worry about tomorrow we miss out on today. Jesus recognizes that our days will be filled with trouble. We simply cannot afford the luxury of worrying, casting our eyes on future affliction. Each day will demand our best attention. Any problem we face can be handled, with God's help, one day at a time.

As leaders who want to reach our generation for Christ, we need to lead in a way that allows others to see our faith in God. One way we can do that is by depending on God in the face of our daily pressures. The next time you're under pressure, pray for the grace you need to depend on God, who is perfectly and eternally worthy of your trust. Remember that those you lead will see how you respond to such pressures and will follow your actions.

Those who have not placed their faith in God often live only for the moment. Their peace of mind or anxiety is tied to their circumstances. But those whose faith is secure in the One who is secure are able to live above the worries of this world. As Dallas Willard points out:

People who are ignorant of God...live to eat and drink and dress. “For such things the ‘gentiles’ seek” – and their lives are filled with corresponding anxiety and anger and depression about how they will look and how they will fare.

By contrast, those who understand Jesus and his Father know that provision has been made for them. Their confidence has been confirmed by their experience. Though they work, they do not worry about things “on earth.” Instead, they are always “seeking first the kingdom.” That is, they “place top priority on identifying and involving themselves in what God is doing and in the kind of rightness...he has. All else needed is provided” (6:33). They soon enough have a track record to prove it.⁴

This is not to say that believers in Christ will be exempt from the usual troubles of this world. Worry-free does not mean trouble-free. Sometimes it may be our faith which actually brings on troubles as we navigate our way through a world that insists on flying upside-down. Still, in spite of our circumstances, those who depend on God will find out for themselves the truth the psalmist discovered long ago: “A righteous man may

⁴ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), p. 212.

have many troubles, but the Lord delivers him from them all” (Psalm 34:19).

Seeing Old Faithful

We live in a time when all forms of external authority are being challenged in favor of subjective, inner authority. The quest for autonomy rather than accountability has become rampant. Yet the Scriptures tell us that an autonomous mindset is a mark of foolishness, since it ignores our fundamental need for dependence on God.

Jeremiah struggled with occupational hazards faced by many effective leaders. Because he knew that Israel’s behavior was destructive, he needed to function as a constant agent for change. He preached and counseled and urged his followers to turn from sin and to practice righteousness.

As he prodded, Jeremiah lived with opposition and persecution, and one wonders whether Jeremiah ever asked himself the question that confronts many leaders today: “Since change arouses opposition, why not back off and let things remain as they are?” That wouldn’t have been a good option for Jeremiah. It rarely is for a leader, because change is intrinsic to the nature of leadership. And that led to the second hazard: Since the changes were essential to Israel’s survival, he was compelled to live with the hard knocks he was taking as the agent for change.

No one has ever found a way to improve anything without changing it in some way. Our second

dilemma could be phrased: “Since change arouses personal opposition, I have to steel myself against the way people feel about me. But I can’t stop caring about what they think or feel. If I do, some of those I am supposed to lead might become my ‘enemies.’” The second leadership hazard, then, is that the leader may become so hardened to opposition that he or she no longer hears or cares about the personal concerns behind it. The resentment of opposition can turn followers into opponents.

Jeremiah knew that what he was doing was right and necessary, and he continued pushing for change even though he took a beating for it. He was attacked by kings, priests, false prophets and, most painfully, his friends (Jeremiah 20:10) and family (12:6). How does a leader survive such hardships and still maintain his integrity? That leader must come to depend on God above anything else. That leader must, like Jeremiah, remember:

Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. I say to myself, “The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for him.” The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him, to the one who seeks him; it is good to wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord.

Lamentations 3:22-26

The horror of the complete destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians was still vivid

in Jeremiah's mind when he wrote a series of five lamentations. Nevertheless, these verses, placed as they are in the middle of this short book, are words of hope and not of despair. They remind us that our only real hope is in the character and promises of God.

The Lord's lovingkindness, great compassion and complete faithfulness make him the supremely worthy object of personal reliance. He is always good to those who seek him and who put their hope in him. Everything God asks us to do is for our ultimate good, and everything he tells us to avoid is harmful to us, even when we may think otherwise.

The problem may be that God's faithfulness is too faithful. Philip Yancey writes:

I remember my first visit to Old Faithful in Yellowstone National park. Rings of Japanese and German tourists surrounded the geyser, their video cameras trained like weapons on the famous hole in the ground. A large digital clock stood beside the spot, predicting twenty-four minutes before the eruption.

My wife and I passed the countdown in the dining room of Old Faithful Inn overlooking the geyser. When the digital clock reached one minute, we, along with every other diner, left our seats and rushed to the windows to see the big, wet event.

I noticed immediately, as if on signal, a crew of busboys and waiters descended on the tables to refill water glasses and clear away dirty dishes. When the geyser went off, we tourists oohed and aahed and clicked our cameras; a few spontaneously applauded. But, glancing back over my shoulder, I saw that not a single waiter or busboy – not even those who had finished their chores – looked out the huge windows. Old Faithful, grown entirely too familiar, had lost its power to impress them.⁵

It seems faithfulness often goes unappreciated – especially the faithfulness of God. His presence is so regular, so commonplace, that we tend to overlook the very quality that separates him from all other gods. In fact, one of the few things God cannot do is be unfaithful (he also cannot remember our sins once they’ve been cleansed!).

Still, we are often tempted to complain that “my way is hidden from the Lord; my cause is disregarded by my God” (Isaiah 40:27); but doing so means judging according to appearances and not according to reality. There are only two possible perceptions of God’s character and our circumstances; each of us will choose one when we encounter trouble. We will either view God’s character in light of our circumstances, or our

⁵ Philip Yancey, “What Surprised Jesus,” *Christianity Today*, 12 September 1994, p. 88.

circumstances in light of God's character. If we choose the former, we will tend to look away from God and look to ourselves. Instead of leaning on the Rock, we will lean on a broken reed (2 Kings 18:21; Isaiah 36:6).

Everyone Lives by Faith

Faith is a universal experience – everyone, including the atheist, lives by faith. The issue is not whether we will trust in a belief system or trust in people or things, but whether we are placing our trust in that which is reliable or untrustworthy. Faith is only as good as the object in which it is placed. The prophet Jeremiah provides us with a look at two conflicting sources of personal dependence:

This is what the Lord says:

“Cursed is the one who trusts in man, who depends on flesh for his strength and whose heart turns away from the Lord. He will be like a bush in the wastelands; he will not see prosperity when it comes. He will dwell in the parched places of the desert, in a salt land where no one lives.

“But blessed is the man who trusts in the Lord, whose confidence is in him. He will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

Jeremiah 17:5-8

Jeremiah draws a sharp contrast between those who depend on human strength and those who depend on the living God. He makes it clear that we cannot look to both as our supreme basis of trust; we will either put our hope in the promises and power of people, or we will look beyond human capability to the person and promises of God. When we make people the basis of our confidence we experience rejection and disappointment again and again. But when God becomes the ultimate source of our confidence, we are never let down.

Willy Loman is the central character in Arthur Miller's brilliant and moving play *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman personifies failure and broken dreams as he spends his life chasing the ever-illusory dream of being an irresistibly successful salesman. He lives in denial, tossed back and forth between the notion that tomorrow will bring great success and the heart-wrenching desperation of feeling utterly worthless. He continually tortures himself with the belief that if he just tries harder, believes in himself more, persists long enough, he will find success. His biggest mistake is the belief that success will fulfill his deepest longings.

If only Willy Loman could have found the courage to face the pain of failure and his emptiness, perhaps he might have realized that he was pursuing the wrong dream. In the end, he commits suicide. His son, Biff, comes to see the truth his dad could not face:

There were a lot of nice days. When he'd come home from a trip; or on Sundays, making the stoop; finishing the cellar; putting on the new porch.... You know

something, Charley, there's more of him in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made.... He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong.... He never knew who he was.⁶

Habakkuk learned that “the righteous will live by his faith” (Habakkuk 2:4), and he was not talking about faith in men. “Fear of man will prove to be a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is kept safe” (Proverbs 29:25). Those who put more confidence in themselves or in other people than in God will find bitterness and disappointment in the end. They may appear to prosper for a season, but the journey will not get them to their desired goals. But those who transfer their trust from themselves or the promises of others to the Lord will discover that their lives are deeply rooted in well-watered soil. The Lord declares that “Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained” (1 Samuel 2:30).

How Things Really Get Done

Zerubbabel must have felt overwhelmed. His task was so huge he needed a prophet of God to give him perspective. The Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem and its temple 70 years before, and now Zerubbabel was in charge of the group that had come back to rebuild it. When Solomon first built the temple, he had the optimal situation – nearly unlimited resources and a motivated

⁶ Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (New York: Penguin Books, 1949), pp. 110-11.

workforce. Zerubbabel now faced strong opposition, a demoralized workforce and limited resources.

God's word to him in Zechariah 4 is everlastingly and universally true: Work hard and smart. But if God doesn't look favorably on your work, it will result in nothing significant. The text reads: "This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel: 'Not by might nor by power but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty" (v. 6).

Zerubbabel had to make tough decisions, wrestle with personnel problems, sit in long meetings, listen to grievances – everything other leaders do. But the prophet Zechariah's message to him was that the job ultimately depended on God's Spirit, not on his or anyone else's might or power. The wonderful truth of this is that all of our activities are now infused with meaning as we work in the power supplied by God's Spirit. We can now join in the prayer of Blaise Pascal: "Lord, help me to do great things as though they were little, since I do them with your power; and little things as though they were great, since I do them in your name."⁷

Leaders are responsible to manage their resources well and to lead their people effectively. But prayer to God and dependence on him for the outcome is the wise leader's constant strategy for success.

⁷ Quoted in Bill and Kathy Peel, *Discover Your Destiny* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1996), p. 215.

An Everlasting Guarantee

Every leader will discover that there are times when it's hard to trust in God. In an effort to help us do that R.C. Sproul reminds us of the absolute dependence of God as demonstrated in his promise to Abraham:

So the Lord said to [Abram], “Bring me a heifer, a goat and a ram, each three years old, along with a dove and a young pigeon.”

Abram brought all these to him, cut them in two and arranged the halves opposite each other; the birds, however, he did not cut in half. Then birds of prey came down on the carcasses, but Abram drove them away....

When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, “To your descendents I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates....

Genesis 15:9-11, 17-18

Legal counselors are some of the highest paid executives in business because they protect us from each other. We find it so hard to depend on anyone's word that we have to close all the loopholes in any transaction. In business, doing so is more than smart – it's essential.

But Sproul reminds his reader that there is One on whom we can always depend. Commenting on this passage, he wrote:

The meaning of the drama is clear: As God passed between the pieces His message was, “Abraham, if I fail to keep my promise to you, may I be cut asunder just as those animals have been torn apart.” God put His eternal being on the line. It was as if He were saying, “May My immutable deity suffer mutation if I break My promise. May My infinite character become finite, My immortal essence suffer mortality. May the impossible become possible if I lie.”

The author of Hebrews reflected on this event when he wrote, “Since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself” (Hebrews 6:13).

The surety of God’s promise is God Himself. All that He is stands behind His promise. It would not do for God to swear by the temple or by His mother’s grave. He has no mother. The temple is not sacred enough to confirm the oath of God. He must swear by His own integrity, using His divine nature as an everlasting guarantee.⁸

⁸ R.C. Sproul, *One Holy Passion* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987), pp. 154-157.

In spite of the great and wonderful promises, in spite of the centuries of proven faithfulness, in spite of mounting evidence, empirical and anecdotal, demonstrating the folly of trusting in ourselves, people still reject the faithfulness of God. Perhaps because of their status, leaders are more acutely prone to lean on their own understanding. But God calls each of us – especially those of us in positions of leadership – to lean on him.

Such trust is difficult. It requires humility. It requires commitment. It will demand a constant vigilance. We will need to regularly review and renew our commitment, but if we train ourselves to trust in the only One who is worthy of our dependence, we may find, as Lucy in Narnia found, that our God is bigger than we ever imagined.

Obedience to God

Along with the costs of leadership come many opportunities – some positive, some negative. Many leaders have access to information or financial resources that they could use to their personal advantage. Others travel widely and almost anonymously, and have ample opportunity to compromise their purity. Still others may be tempted to use their position to unethically crush the competition – whether internal or external. Whether the temptation is about money, sex or power, many leaders sell themselves out. We read about the higher profile cases on the newspaper headlines every day.

What's Your Price?

The television show *Fear Factor* is based on the idea that everyone has a price. If the price is right, anyone will do anything at any given time – from eating live slugs to being placed in a glass coffin with thousands of snakes, worms and hissing cockroaches. Every week millions of viewers tune in to see if people just like them would be willing to conquer their fears for money. Quantifying revulsion has proven to be amusing and profitable for network television.

It's one thing to ask someone how much it would cost for them to wear a silly outfit in public or parachute out of an airplane or eat something gross. These things are morally neutral. But there are some things that shouldn't ever have a price – things like integrity, honesty, morality, our commitment to God and to our family. These things are not a game. Every leader

should periodically ask, “Do I have a price? What would it take for me to compromise?”

It would be nice to think that followers of Christ do not have a price; that with an initial one-time commitment to Jesus comes a lifelong, resolute loyalty. And yet, it is not uncommon to find people who claim to be Christians cheating on their taxes, padding their expense accounts and stealing from their workplace. A godly leader’s commitment to God should be such that he or she will obey him no matter what he or she is offered to compromise. Unfortunately, Saul – the leader who had everything a nation would want – lacked such commitment. When the pressure was on, instead of obeying God’s command to completely destroy the Amalekites, Saul spared the king and the best of the livestock (1 Samuel 15:9). That was Saul’s price – a defeated king to gloat over and expanded wealth through owning animals, one of the major contemporary wealth indicators. Saul thought he could rationalize away God’s clear instructions. But notice how the Lord responds:

Then the word of the Lord came to Samuel: “I am grieved that I have made Saul king, because he has turned away from me and has not carried out my instructions.” Samuel was troubled, and he cried out to the Lord all that night.

Early in the morning Samuel got up and went to meet Saul, but he was told, “Saul has gone to Carmel. There he has set up a monument in his own honor.”

1 Samuel 15:10-12

Many of the great characters in the Bible struggled with major character flaws. Moses wrestled with his anger, Solomon with narcissism, Samson with his lack of self-control. For King Saul, it was insecurity. He was more concerned about gaining honor and prestige in the eyes of men than in pleasing God. It is this insecurity that causes Saul to rationalize his rebellion:

When Samuel reached him, Saul said, “The Lord bless you! I have carried out the Lord’s instructions.”

But Samuel said, “What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?”

Saul answered, “The soldiers brought them from the Amalekites; they spared the best of the sheep and cattle to sacrifice to the Lord your God, but we totally destroyed the rest.”

1 Samuel 15:13-15

Saul is layering lie upon lie upon lie. He said he had carried out the Lord’s instructions. But he hadn’t. Saul said it was the soldiers who had done the wrong thing. Maybe, but they were doing so with Saul’s permission. It was his fault, not their sin. And then he has the gall to say, “We’re saving these animals to sacrifice them. They’re an offering to God, Samuel!” The animals weren’t taken as offerings to God; they were taken to expand the king’s wealth.

Finally, he makes this telling comment, “Samuel, we’re going to give them to the Lord *your* God.” From his heart, Saul speaks, and from his heart, he cannot speak of “the Lord *my* God.” Saul’s disobedience has led to lying; a lifetime of rebellion has killed Saul’s relationship with a loving God.

It’s always fascinating to hear people rationalize their disobedience. Perhaps the worst example is Moses’ brother Aaron. Moses went up the mountain to get the law, and the people grew impatient. They became rebellious and wanted some idols so that they could worship:

When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, they gathered around Aaron and said, “Come, make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.”

Aaron answered them, “Take off the gold earrings that your wives, your sons and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He took what they handed him and made it into an idol cast in the shape of a calf, fashioning it with a tool. Then they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt.”

Exodus 32:1-4

When Moses came down from the mountain and saw what was going on, he asked his brother, “How did this happen? Where did this thing come from?”

Aaron answered, “You know how prone these people are to evil. They said to me, ‘Make us gods who will go before us. As for this fellow Moses who brought us up out of Egypt, we don’t know what has happened to him.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever has any gold jewelry, take it off.’ Then they gave me the gold, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf!”

Exodus 32:22-24

It’s unbelievable the lengths to which people will go to rationalize their rebellion. “I just threw the gold in the fire, and out came this calf! What could I have done?” The idea is so preposterous. We want to grab Aaron by the collar and shake him, “Do you really expect Moses to buy that? How stupid do you think God is?” But before we get too puffed up with righteous indignation, perhaps we should examine some of our own rationalizations. Our excuses probably sound just as lame when they are spoken out loud. “But God wants me to be happy.” “She just wasn’t meeting my needs.” “The Lord helps those who help themselves, doesn’t he?” Try saying those at the foot of the cross and you’ll hear how absurd they sound.

The Bible never says God wants you to be happy; he wants you to be holy. He wants you to be like Christ. That may lead to happiness ultimately, but it doesn’t

work the other way around. The quest for happiness will never lead to a life of holiness, but the quest for holiness leads to a life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These come as a byproduct of pursuing God above all else.

Saul tries to justify his sinful behavior by blaming the soldiers, but Samuel stops him short:

“Stop!” Samuel said to Saul. “Let me tell you what the Lord said to me last night.”

“Tell me,” Saul replied.

Samuel said, “Although you were once small in your own eyes, did you not become the head of the tribes of Israel? The Lord anointed you king over Israel. And he sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites; make war on them until you have wiped them out.’ Why did you not obey the Lord? Why did you pounce on the plunder and do evil in the eyes of the Lord?”

“But I did obey the Lord,” Saul said. “I went on the mission the Lord assigned me. I completely destroyed the Amalekites and brought back Agag their king. The soldiers took sheep and cattle from the plunder, the best of what was devoted to God, in order to sacrifice them to the Lord your God at Gilgal.”

1 Samuel 15:16-21

Saul has, in his own mind, redefined the command God gave. He's changed it to fit with what he actually did. Saul says, "I *did* obey God. I did everything he told me to do. I went there. I destroyed everyone. I brought back the king. Isn't that what God told me to do?" When we rationalize, we can end up believing our own lies. Here is Samuel's response to Saul's lame excuse:

"Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of divination, and arrogance is like the evil of idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, he has rejected you as king."

1 Samuel 15:22-23

As important as it is to perform the ritual correctly, Samuel says, it would be better to not do it at all than do it with a rebellious heart. It is not externalism that pleases God; it's the internal attitude and inclination of the heart. It is possible to perform religious activities and still be in rebellion against God. This is why religion has always been appealing to people. We can hide the true nature of our hearts behind religious activities. But if Christianity is a relationship, the old rules no longer apply. God doesn't want what is *ours*; he wants *us*. Why? Because when God has us, he also has what is ours.

So what is your price? What would it take for you to disobey God? Hopefully, your commitment is nonnegotiable. Such commitment is a crucial element in the character of a leader. If you ever find your commitment waning, reread the tragic story of Saul's disobedience to God and think through the tragic consequences of his failure.

The Purpose of God's Commands

A brief overview of Israel's history shows that the fundamental problem of God's covenant people was their repeated failure to obey God's commands. God always blessed their obedience, but their habitual disobedience was the cause of their misery and their eventual downfall. Clearly, there is a basic principle here that applies to our own lives as well. In Deuteronomy 10:12-13, we find God's loving requirements for his people:

And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God ask of you but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the Lord's commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?

God's requirements in this passage relate to trust and the obedience that flows out of trust. Since our natural disposition is to trust in the visible rather than in what we can't see, we will engage in a spiritual conflict as long as we walk on this earth.

This conflict between the call to obedience and the lure of disobedience is well illustrated in the lives of the kings of Judah. Of the 42 kings of Israel, there were only nine of whom it was said that they did what was right in God's sight, and even they struggled with the issue of obedience. Six of the nine slipped into disobedience in the latter part of their lives. Whenever this slippage occurred, it happened because the kings decided to trust in something or someone other than the Lord.

In one sense, God's requirements of us are quite simple: fear him, walk in his ways, love him, serve him, obey his commands. All these things are facets of one thing: a growing personal relationship with the God who has already demonstrated his unflinching commitment to our best interests. Note well the stated purpose behind the commands in this passage: they are "for your own good."

God doesn't just give us a bunch of commands because he's interested in restricting our freedoms. He gives us his commands for our own good. In the book *Experiencing God*, the authors use the following illustration:

Suppose you had to cross a field that was full of land mines. A person who knew exactly where every one of them was buried offered to take you through it. Would you say to him, "I don't want you to tell me what to do. I don't want you to impose your ways on me"? I don't know about you, but I would stay as close to

that person as I could. I certainly would not go wandering off. His directions to me would preserve my life. He would say, “Don’t go that way, because that way will kill you. Go this way and you will live.”⁹

The more we realize in our thinking and experience that God always seeks our good, the more we will be willing to trust and obey him in what he asks us to do and to avoid. Trust and obedience are intricately bound together.

Eugene Peterson, in his book *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*, tells about working on his lawnmower in his front yard one day. He wasn’t a very mechanically inclined person, but he was trying to get the blade off because it needed a new blade. It was all chewed up, dented and banged. He got the biggest wrench he could find and started working on the one nut that was holding the blade on. He worked and strained, but it wouldn’t budge. He got a four-foot pipe and stuck it on the end of the wrench to try to gain more leverage, but it would not budge. When that didn’t work, he actually picked up a rock and started banging on it. He was beginning to get emotionally involved in the process when a neighbor came over and said, “I used to have a mower like that; and seems to me I remember that the nut on that thing turns the opposite direction.”

⁹ Henry T. Blackaby & Claude V. King, *Experiencing God*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994, 13.

So he got his wrench and his pipe extender and in a few minutes he had it off – because somebody came along and said, “You’re going the wrong way. That’s not the right direction to go.”¹⁰ Sometimes it’s hard to be told we’re going the wrong way. But when we disobey God, that is precisely what we’re doing. We’re like Eugene Peterson banging, pushing, straining to get the nut off the wrong way. God doesn’t come along to make fun of us or shame us; he comes alongside to say, “It’s not designed to turn that way.” He knows how we are designed. He is, after all, the architect of life. If anyone knows how things are supposed to work, it’s him.

Sometimes people say that they wish there was some sort of instruction manual for life. Well, there is. It’s called “The Bible.” Imagine if someone read the owner’s manual on their car and objected to the fact that it says, “Never put anything other than unleaded fuel in the car’s gas tank.” How strange it would seem to us if the person said, “Unleaded fuel only? They’re so narrow-minded and restrictive. Water is so much cheaper, and I can get it right out of my garden hose. These automobile manufacturers just want more money from me. I bet they’re in league with the oil companies!” We know that the reason the manual says “unleaded fuel only” is because that’s how the car was designed. To put water in the gas tank would damage the car. Likewise, to live outside of God’s will is

¹⁰ Adapted from Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, 38.

detrimental to our well-being. It's opposed to the way we were designed.

Obedient and Loving It

Even when God's revealed will runs counter to our culture and counter to our intuition, it is not only the right way to live, it is the best way to live, the only sane way to live. We may run the risk of being considered out of step with society, but in the long run, obedience pays huge dividends. According to Scripture, a fundamental factor of the quality of this life and of the next is our response to God's initiatives and claims on the choices we make. Response is unavoidable; we may ignore, resist or reject God's initiatives and requirements, or we may respond in positive obedience. But as we respond in obedience to God's loving commands, his word assures us: "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3).

Despite appearances to the contrary, God's commands are not burdensome. The word the apostle John uses for "burdensome" literally means "heavy." This is not to imply that the commandments of God are easy to keep. Rather, it means that they do not impose an encumbrance when they are kept. Childbirth is a difficult and weighty process for any woman to go through, but it is not viewed as a burden. Most women rejoice when they are pregnant because, while it is difficult, pregnancy is primarily thought of as a blessing. So it is with the commandments of God. Far from being hardships, they are consistently beneficial, because

obedience to God's will inevitably leads to divine blessing. In fact, it can be stated categorically that in the long run, disobedience to God always produces more pain than obedience to God. This is ironic, since the reason we usually disobey God is because we think that obedience will be more painful to us than following our own desires.

If God really is loving, the things he asks us to do are best for us. If God is sovereign, he alone can order our circumstances to bring about what is best for us. Thus, obedience is not burdensome if we are committed to the truths of God's goodness and sovereign purposes.

Jesus told his disciples that obedience to him was the clearest demonstration of their love for him:

If you love me, you will obey what I command.... If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching.

John 14:15, 23-24

Obedience flows out of love for God and leads to greater intimacy with him. Think about this for a minute. Have you ever regretted an act of obedience to God? Have you ever regretted an act of disobedience?

Disobedience to God will lead to a life of regret. So, why in the world do we wait? We often have this silly notion that somehow we'll wake up a very religious and spiritual person when we are a little older. But the reality is that as we get older we become more of the

person we are now. The habits of today shape the person we will become. Habitual disobedience will make us more foolish and set in our ways and rebellious. And there is a scary “point of no return” that we can reach. Ann Spangler and Robert Wolgemuth pose an interesting question: “Think about the condition of your heart. Would you want God to harden it right now, that is, to set the attitude of your heart in stone for the rest of your life?”¹¹ Could it be that a person gets to the point where he’s hardened his heart so much that God starts hardening it for him? Certainly that happened to the Egyptian Pharaoh in Exodus.

The more we know about God, the more we can trust him. The more we trust him, the more we love him. The more we love him, the more we will obey him. The more we obey him, the more we will learn about the trustworthiness of God. It becomes a cycle, an upward spiral, as opposed to the downward spiral of compromise and disobedience. We are either spiraling up or down, drawing nearer or moving away from God.

So I must ask myself, “To what degree are the choices I make based on right thinking (a biblical worldview), on wrong thinking (a temporal view of the world) or on emotions (the subjective tensions in my life)? Those are the three options. I can make decisions based upon right thinking, wrong thinking or emotions. Only the first option will result in good choices.

¹¹ Ann Spangler and Robert Wolgemuth, *Men of the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002, 93.

We have said that God doesn't want what is ours as much as he wants us. He knows that if we are surrendered to him, then everything we have is surrendered to him as well. Conversely, we might ask ourselves the question: "Do we really want God, or do we merely want his blessings?" If we seek God only for the good things he can give to us, we will miss out on the relationship he invites us into. However, if we seek his face, we will have access to whatever is in his hand.

The High Cost of Obedience

If we are only concerned with obeying God as long as he blesses, what will we do when obedience to God is costly? If we do not see immediate blessing from obedience to God, why bother? All of us had *better* have an answer to that question before we find ourselves in the vise of a tough decision. Three young men in the Bible put their lives on the line rather than disobey God. We see why in Daniel 3:16-18:

Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to the king, "O Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to save us from it, and he will rescue us from your hand, O king. But even if he does not, we want you to know, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up."

If they had stopped with the first part (“He will rescue us from your hand”), what would have been the problem with that? Well, it demonstrates a lot of faith, but is that a biblical promise? Many times we pin our hopes to things God never promised. There will be times when we don’t know what the outcome will be. In Hebrews 11 we see several people of faith who were rescued from tremendous persecution. We also see others who were not delivered.

Most of what God requires is so obvious and beneficial to his followers that we do it without even thinking about it. It makes good sense to comply with God when he says, “Do not lie.” What kind of society would we have if everyone broke that command? It would be foolish to violate God’s will on truthfulness. But there are other commands that are not so obvious. It will require discipline, commitment and accountability to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us. Periodically a leader may find himself or herself backed into a corner. That’s when it’s crunch time: “Obey God and lose the deal,” “Obey God and kill the chance for a promotion.” For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego it was, “Obey God and lose your life.”

For these three young men – and for all of us – obedience at that level requires a clear conviction, a thought out resolution. At that level, obedience is never based on what’s at stake, what’s to be gained or lost. It is only based on what’s *real*. To these three men the furnace was real. The threat on their life was real. The choice they faced was real. But, more importantly, so was the Sovereign God.

For Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, this issue was highly focused. Although two conflicting orders were given, the issue wasn't so much, "What was the order?" but "Who gave it?" For these three, the order of a king who could take their lives would never take precedence over the will of Almighty God. Their story of courage has inspired untold numbers of believers who have faced the fire – both literally and figuratively – over the centuries. Let their courage work its way into your life as well.

The Gethsemane Mindset

No one said this would be easy. There will be times when obedience to God means saying no to our personal desires. Jesus modeled such obedience in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will."

Matthew 26:39

This is the ultimate statement of obedience. What Jesus wanted at this moment was not in line with what his Father wanted. Following the Father's will led Jesus to an agonizing death and unimaginable separation from God. Jesus was fully aware of that, yet he still professed his conviction that God's will was best. This is precisely the opposite of Adam. Adam was in a garden of his own, but he determined "My will, not yours." In so doing, his garden became a desert. Here,

the second Adam is in a garden at his moment of temptation, and he turned that garden into the entry to paradise, because of the choice he made to trust God.

Although no human will ever know the depth of suffering that Jesus faced in that quiet garden, his statement in this moment of decision should be every leader's response to the Almighty God. Author Vernon Grounds helps us appreciate the mindset that enabled Jesus to obey his Father even when it meant going to the cross, when he calls this attitude of obedience "the Gethsemane mindset."¹²

The Gethsemane mindset is the attitude of trustful self-surrender demonstrated by Jesus as he prayed to his Father, "Not as I will, but as you will." It is the renunciation of our own human feelings, desires, hopes, dreams and ambitions so that God's purposes may be accomplished. We develop this mindset as we follow Jesus' example. We set our minds on doing the will of God, obeying him even though obedience involves denying self and surrendering anything that would interfere with the fulfillment of the divine purpose. We do this in the confidence that, as we follow our Lord's example, we are going to experience, beyond loss and loneliness and pain, the joy and blessing and glory which mean unimaginable self-fulfillment.

Jesus Christ ultimately fulfilled his glorious purpose only through obedience to his Father. The

¹² Vernon Grounds, *Radical Commitment*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1984, 42.

ultimate test of any leader is his willingness to obey the same Father to whom Jesus entrusted himself.

Incidentally, in the Gospels there is never a command to self-denial without a promise of greater gain. God knows that we desire profit; he made us that way. His concern, then, is that what we pursue is worthy of our pursuit, that we not sell ourselves cheaply.

The Game of Life

God invented the game of life. He constructed the cosmos and breathed life into the laws of physics. He designed the human psyche, so he knows how we're wired. Because he loves us so much, he gives us a rule book and begs us, "Please, don't try to change the rules. It will only result in your inability to make things work. It will lead to frustration and confusion."

Sometimes parents will let their children change the rules of a game or make them up as they go along. But when the child grows up and finds that things don't work that way, that rules cannot be altered or abandoned, the child can become embittered towards the parents who left him or her ill-equipped for life. Life has its rules, and God set them up. There is a glorious purpose to which we have been called. But this glorious purpose can only be achieved through a steadfast willingness to trust God enough to follow his rules, in spite of appearances to the contrary.

Joseph Stowell reminds us of the importance of "followership" when he writes:

I don't know whether kids still play Follow the Leader, but I can remember spending some of my wasted youth in the pursuit. Interestingly, I always wanted to be the leader. In fact, so did just about everyone else. The reason? The leader was always right, never caught off guard, and never embarrassed by having to imitate others. It is like playing Simon Sez: The leader always looks good, and the followers are the ones who stumble and can't quite keep up.¹³

Unfortunately, getting older doesn't necessarily change our understanding of the difference between being a leader and a follower. As we get older, the stakes only get higher. But life is not a child's game, where the worst thing that can happen is looking silly or being made fun of. Eternity hangs in the balance. The outcome of our lives rises and falls based on whether we choose to determine our own destiny or follow someone far wiser and better equipped to lead. When it comes to the things that matter most in life, we have a tendency to resist yielding. We're concerned that someone might think we're unable to figure out by ourselves that the nut screws the other way. We're afraid that someone might think we're unwise or weak.

¹³ Joseph M. Stowell, *Following Christ*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996, 14-15.

But it is precisely in our weakness that God is strongest. And it is in our obedience to him that we are made strong.

Wisdom

A friend tells about a recent trip to northern England when he and his family had the opportunity to visit Durham Cathedral. This magnificent place of prayer has stood for more than 900 years, still offering services daily. The main structure took 200 years to build! There were men who worked their entire lives on one level of the building and died knowing that even their grandchildren wouldn't live to see it completed.

Smith says that the next day, he and his family drove past some apartment buildings that were thrown up in the 1960s. After only 40 years the buildings were in a terrible state. The problems weren't just cosmetic; the buildings themselves were falling apart.

The contrast was striking. One building had been wonderfully put together and was still awe-inspiring after nearly 1,000 years. The other had been thrown together, and within a short time was an absolute mess.¹⁴ What a clear illustration of the difference between wisdom and folly. Centuries after Durham Cathedral was complete, men and women have much more knowledge in the areas of construction and engineering. And what do we produce with this knowledge? Ugly and shoddy apartment buildings!

¹⁴ Colin S. Smith, *Unlocking the Bible Story*, vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody, 2002), p. 55.

The Purpose of Wisdom

Wisdom has less to do with knowledge than it has to do with the application of knowledge in very specific ways. Wisdom is skill in the art of living life with each component under the dominion of God. When a person in the Old Testament demonstrated exceptional ability in a craft or art, that person was said to have what the Hebrew language calls *hokma*. English-speaking translators render it as “skill.” In Exodus 31:3-5, God filled a man named Bezalel with the Holy Spirit and with “skill, ability and knowledge in all kinds of crafts – to make artistic designs for work in gold, silver and bronze, to cut and set stones, to work in wood, and to engage in all kinds of craftsmanship.” The word translated “skill” here is this word *hokma*.

Bezalel was given the ability to take raw materials and shape them into something beautiful and ornate. Likewise, in the book of Proverbs, we are viewed as that raw material. We are valuable but unshaped, worthwhile but undisciplined. We are precious but given to waywardness. We do not have within us the ability to take the raw material of our lives and shape it into the lifestyle our Creator desires us to live. Solomon selected that Hebrew word *hokma* to describe the quality needed by anyone who wanted to live life in the superlative – a life of excellence.

The Pursuit of Wisdom

The entire theme of the book of Proverbs is this: *pursue wisdom*. With the tone of a father giving instructions to his sons, Solomon writes:

Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction; pay attention.... Do not forsake my teaching.... Get wisdom, get understanding.... Do not forsake wisdom.... Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost you all you have, get understanding.... Accept what I say.... I guide you in the way of wisdom.

Proverbs 4:1-11

Verse after verse, the message is the same. Seek wisdom because it pays:

Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding, for she is more profitable than silver and yields better returns than gold. She is more precious than rubies; nothing you desire can compare with her. Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. Her ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace. She is a tree of life to those who embrace her; those who lay hold of her will be blessed.

Proverbs 3:13-18

Wisdom is that quality that enables one to live a noticeably, recognizably outstanding life. Imagine how

much this wonderful thing called wisdom can contribute to effective leadership.

Not all leaders think about wisdom as a character trait that needs to be carefully cultivated. Of course, we would quickly agree that wisdom is more valuable than money or status. At least we would agree with that statement intellectually. But how many of us pursue wisdom with the same vigor with which we pursue wealth? How many of us cultivate wisdom with the same passion we use to cultivate our stock portfolio? Somehow we believe that wisdom just comes by itself. Certainly, wisdom can and often is the end result of long experience in the leader's field of expertise. But the leader who gains wisdom by making poor decisions and learning from them is much farther behind than the leader who seeks the right kind of wisdom from the start.

In other words, learning from our own mistakes can lead to wisdom in the end. Malcolm Muggeridge said, "Every happening, great and small, is a parable whereby God speaks to us, and the art of life is to get the message." Events in our lives are not neutral; they are God-given opportunities to gain wisdom. In Proverbs 8 wisdom is portrayed as a woman calling out for all to embrace her. Notice especially what she claims:

"I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;
I possess knowledge and discretion. To
fear the Lord is to hate evil; I hate pride
and arrogance, evil behavior and perverse
speech. Counsel and sound judgment are
mine; I have understanding and power.
By me kings reign and rulers make laws

that are just; by me princes govern, and all nobles who rule on earth. I love those who love me, and those who seek me find me. With me are riches and honor, enduring wealth and prosperity. My fruit is better than fine gold; what I yield surpasses choice silver. I walk in the ways of righteousness, along the paths of justice, bestowing wealth on those who love me and making their treasuries full.”

Proverbs 8:12-21

What leader in his or her right mind would not want such a priceless tool? Why would we not heed wisdom’s invitation? Imagine this wise and wonderful woman, gazing into your eyes and saying:

“Now then, my sons, listen to me; blessed are those who keep my ways. Listen to my instruction and be wise; do not ignore it. Blessed is the man who listens to me, watching daily at my doors, waiting at my doorway. For whoever finds me finds life and receives favor from the Lord.”

Proverbs 8:32-35

Could anything be more valuable to leadership than this?

The Provider of Wisdom

As with most things of value, however, wisdom is elusive, and it seems to be in short supply. Some

people are crafty and shrewd, others are well-informed and highly educated, but few of us manifest the quiet depth of wisdom. In his book *Making Life Work*, Bill Hybels tells of a conversation he'd had recently with a businessman. Business was going so well that he'd had to hire new salespeople to fill all the orders. "The only problem," the man told Bill, "is that so many of my new salespeople act weird.... They do stupid things and get themselves in trouble." He went on to catalogue all the "weird" things his new salespeople did. They showed up for work late. They inflated prices. They were rude and uncooperative. Rather than building a successful career, they sabotaged themselves and wound up getting fired.

Hybels concludes that the bottom line of the man's complaints is that he can't find wise people. The people he hired were acting like fools. Hybels writes:

Today the word *fool* often means someone with low intelligence, but in biblical usage, fools may have a high I.Q. and a reputation for success. What makes them fools is that they ignore God's wisdom, preferring to follow the shifting dictates of the crowd or their own fallible opinions. While fools often consider themselves clever – people who know how to beat the system – their cleverness all too often leads to their ruin. Their penchant for distorting the truth, their lack of discernment and discipline, their unwillingness to exhibit self-control and their apparent delight in throwing caution

to the wind put them on a path to disaster.¹⁵

What is the secret and the source of wisdom? Job asked this question:

“But where can wisdom be found? Where does understanding dwell? Man does not comprehend its worth; it cannot be found in the land of the living. The deep says, ‘It is not in me’; the sea says, ‘It is not with me.’ It cannot be bought with the finest gold, nor can its price be weighed in silver. It cannot be bought with the gold of Ophir, with precious onyx or sapphires. Neither gold nor crystal can compare with it, nor can it be had for jewels of gold. Coral and jasper are not worthy of mention; the price of wisdom is beyond rubies. The topaz of Cush cannot compare with it; it cannot be bought with pure gold.

“Where then does wisdom come from? Where does understanding dwell? It is hidden from the eyes of every living thing, concealed even from the birds of the air. Destruction and Death say, ‘Only a rumor of it has reached our ears.’ God understands the way to it and he alone knows where it dwells, for he views the

¹⁵ Bill Hybels, *Making Life Work* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), pp. 19-20.

ends of the earth and sees everything under the heavens. When he established the force of the wind and measured out the waters, when he made a decree for the rain and a path for the thunderstorm, then he looked at wisdom and appraised it; he confirmed it and tested it. And he said to men, ‘The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.’”

Job 28:12-28

According to this passage, only God understands the way to wisdom because he alone is the source of true wisdom. The wisdom of God is evident in the beauty, subtlety, richness, intricacy, variety and splendor of the created order, and it is also evident in the person, powers and perfections of the God of creation.

Read that last verse again: “The fear of the Lord – that is wisdom, and to shun evil is understanding.” True wisdom can only be attained by cultivating the fear of the Lord. “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding” (Proverbs 9:10). To fear God is to nurture an attitude of awe and humility before him and to walk in radical dependence upon God in each area of life. The fear of the Lord is similar to the mindset of a subject before a powerful king; it is to be under divine authority as one who will surely give an account. In his discussion on what it means to honor God’s name, Rubel Shelly writes:

Scripture describes the spirit that hallows God's name as the *fear* of the Lord. This spirit is at once an attitude of esteem and awe before the majesty of God and a confidence in his mercy and love. While Yahweh has revealed himself as a mighty and terrible God who is to be feared, he does not invoke the cringing, groveling terror that worshipers of pagan gods felt.

The people of God's covenant community respect him. When he speaks, the people listen; when he commands, they obey; when he is disobeyed, he does not hesitate to punish. There is thus a stability about his relationship with his worshipers that was never present in any of the pagan myths. Their gods were petty, unpredictable, and untrustworthy. But Yahweh is the same yesterday, today, and forever.¹⁶

Fearing the Lord relates to trust, humility, teachability, servanthood, responsiveness, gratitude and reliance on God; it is the exact opposite of autonomy and arrogance.

King David cried out to God: "Teach me your way, O Lord, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (Psalm 86:11). David knew that he could not fear God if he had

¹⁶ Rubel Shelly, *Written in Stone* (West Monroe, LA: Howard Publishing, 1994), pp. 78-79.

a divided heart. If his loyalties were divided between this world and the world to come, he would not be able to truly fear God. Wisdom relates to developing an eternal perspective on life, and it can only come from God – the fountain of all wisdom.

The Priority of Wisdom

Wisdom includes the ability to use the best means at the best time to accomplish the best ends. It is not merely a matter of information or knowledge, but of skillful and practical application of the truth to the ordinary facets of life. James tells us, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him” (James 1:5). Admitting we lack wisdom is a difficult but necessary first step on the road to skillful living.

Many of us are like the CEO who was visited by an angel right in the middle of a board meeting. The angel said to him, “Because of your pious life, I’m going to give you a choice between unbounded wisdom, wealth or beauty.” Of course, being a pious man, he chose wisdom without hesitation. “Very well,” the angel said and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

The CEO sat in silence with a glow about him as all the board members stared at him. Finally, someone whispered, “Say something to us. We want to hear the voice of wisdom.”

“I should have taken the money.”

If God (or a messenger from God) approached you and offered to grant you one wish, what would it be?

Your answer to this question is one of the most telling things about you; it illuminates your value system.

Instead of asking for a long life or wealth or power, Solomon pleased the Lord by requesting a discerning heart of wisdom:

At Gibeon the Lord appeared to Solomon during the night in a dream, and God said, “Ask for whatever you want me to give you.”

Solomon answered, “You have shown great kindness to your servant, my father David, because he was faithful to you and righteous and upright in heart. You have continued this great kindness to him and have given him a son to sit on his throne this very day.

“Now, O Lord my God, you have made your servant king in place of my father David. But I am only a little child and do not know how to carry out my duties. Your servant is here among the people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong. For who is able to govern this great people of yours?”

The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for this. So God said to him, “Since you have asked for this and not for

long life or wealth for yourself, nor have asked for the death of your enemies but for discernment in administering justice, I will do what you have asked. I will give you a wise and discerning heart, so that there will never have been anyone like you, nor will there ever be. Moreover, I will give you what you have not asked for – both riches and honor – so that in your lifetime you will have no equal among kings. And if you walk in my ways and obey my statutes and commands as David your father did, I will give you a long life.”

1 Kings 3:5-14

Because of his focus on wisdom above all other things, Solomon was also granted things he did not ask for. This is an illustration of the truth of Jesus’ words concerning the one thing most needful for leaders today: “But seek first [God’s] kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well” (Matthew 6:33). When we pursue first things first, the second things are thrown in; when we pursue second things first, we not only miss out on the first things, but we also miss the fullness of the second things.

Wisdom is skill in the art of living with each facet of life under God’s authority. This wisdom differs greatly from the wisdom of this world. James tells us:

But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such

“wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.

James 3:14-17

The wisdom of Christ is very different from the wisdom of this world; do not confuse the two.

Wise men and women throughout the centuries have spent regular time in the book of Proverbs. Some have even made it their practice to read one chapter a day each month, asking God for the qualities celebrated in this marvelous book: wisdom, prudence, understanding, discernment, discipline, insight, knowledge, discretion, guidance, instruction, faithfulness, sound judgment, humility, justice, diligence, the fear of the Lord and a true understanding of success.

The Pain of Ignoring Wisdom

How many of us have looked back across the ruins of failure and said, “I knew better. Why didn’t I listen?” Solomon offers an essential fact about wisdom that scares the discerning reader into thinking twice about heeding wisdom’s invitation:

Wisdom calls aloud in the street, she raises her voice in the public squares; at the head of the noisy streets she cries out, in the gateways of the city she makes her speech:

“How long will you simple ones love your simple ways? How long will mockers delight in mockery and fools hate knowledge? If you had responded to my rebuke, I would have poured out my heart to you and made my thoughts known to you. But since you rejected me when I called and no one gave heed when I stretched out my hand, since you ignored all my advice and would not accept my rebuke, I in turn will laugh at your disaster; I will mock when calamity overtakes you – when calamity overtakes you like a storm, when disaster sweeps over you like a whirlwind, when distress and trouble overwhelm you.

“Then they will call to me but I will not answer; they will look for me but will not find me. Since they hated knowledge and did not choose to fear the Lord, since they would not accept my advice and spurned my rebuke, they will eat the fruit of their ways and be filled with the fruit of their schemes. For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in

safety and be at ease, without fear of harm.”

Proverbs 1:20-33

Gary Richmond, a former zoo keeper, tells about an experience a friend had with a raccoon. He explains that raccoons go through a glandular change at about 24 months. After that they often attack their owners. Since a 30-pound raccoon can be equal to a 100-pound dog in a scrap, Richmond felt compelled to warn his young friend of his named Julie of the change coming to her pet raccoon. She listened politely as he explained the coming danger. She responded by saying what people always say, “It will be different for me.” She smiled and added, “Bandit wouldn’t hurt me. He just wouldn’t.” Three months later, Julie underwent plastic surgery for facial lacerations sustained when Bandit attacked her for no apparent reason. Bandit was released into the wild.¹⁷

God is not often interested in shortcuts, but there is a God-given shortcut to wisdom. Solomon assures us: “He who walks with the wise grows wise” (Proverbs 13:20a). We are given the opportunity to learn wisdom from others who are further down the road than we are. We don’t have to live and learn; we can learn and live. James Emery White says,

I am shocked at how many people attempt to make life-changing decisions, try to determine God’s will for their lives, or

¹⁷ Gary Richmond, A View from the Zoo Video Series (Nashville: W. Publishing Group).

seek to follow their life purposes, and *never* bring other people into the process! This causes you to miss out on two very important tools that God wants to use in guiding you, the first being *objectivity*. You're not objective about yourself, much less your life. Neither am I. I'm surrounded by my emotions, my circumstances, my biases, and my desires. I need to go to people who can see things independently of all that. But that's not all I get through counsel. I also get *wisdom*. When I go to someone else, I get his or her experiences, maturity, and knowledge concerning what I'm trying to decide. This isn't about running your life by committee, or taking what somebody says and feeling as if you have to follow it. It certainly shouldn't be used as a shortcut to the hard work of studying the Bible for God's moral will, or investing in prayer, evaluating circumstances, and using your common sense. But going to someone who is intimate with God, intimate with you, and able to tell you what you may not want to hear, is invaluable.¹⁸

Here is the critical principle of wisdom: The person who refuses to act on what he or she knows, who

¹⁸ James Emery White, *You Can Experience a Purposeful Life* (Nashville: Word, 2000), p. 160.

refuses wise counsel, who ignores sage advice, will get in trouble. In the resulting despair that good information will haunt that person; the fact that he or she knew what wisdom advised will become a cruel joke. While this passage says that wisdom will laugh and taunt, all the noise will come from inside this person's own head. When he or she searches for some intelligent way out of the pit he or she has so foolishly dug, there will be no wisdom left.

The long-range view is a basic tenet of wisdom. The fool lives in the present moment while the sage considers the longer-term consequences of present action. The next time you hear someone say, "I know better," or "Why didn't I listen?" you'll recognize this song of wisdom-after-the-fact.

Wisdom calls (vv. 20-21). Some listen (v. 33). Some don't (vv. 21-32).

The Perseverance of Wisdom

When writing to the young men who were being educated for leadership, Solomon told them that wisdom was essential for their future hope. Was this the kind of wisdom that they could reproduce on a test? The kind of wisdom that they could recite in front of an audience? No – that's a better description of information than wisdom. Leadership without wisdom will do more harm than good.

As much as students prepare for leadership, there is no textbook that will give them a technical answer to every difficult situation they will face. Still, Solomon

instructs: “Know also that wisdom is sweet to your soul; if you find it, there is a future hope for you, and your hope will not be cut off” (Proverbs 24:14).

John Piper writes about why Biblical wisdom is so essential to the godly leader:

Of course, the Bible does not answer every question about life. Every fork in the road does not have a Biblical arrow. We have need of wisdom in ourselves to know the path of lasting joy. But that, too, is a gift of Scripture. “The law of the Lord is perfect...making wise the simple...the precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart” (Psalm 19:7-8, 119:98). People whose minds are saturated with God’s Word and submissive to his thoughts have a wisdom that in eternity will prove superior to all the secular wisdom in the world. “Blessed is the man who finds wisdom, the man who gains understanding” (Proverbs 3:13).¹⁹

Knowledge isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. There were two trees in the Garden of Eden: The tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam and Eve picked the wrong tree. The knowledge of good and evil isn’t the kind of knowledge we want necessarily. From experiencing evil, we gain knowledge

¹⁹ John Piper, *Desiring God* (Portland, OR: Multnomah, 1996), pp. 123-124.

of it, but what good does that do? It only serves to alienate us from God and each other. T.S. Eliot said it this way in “Choruses from the Rock”:

The endless cycle of idea and action,
Endless invention, endless experiment,
Brings knowledge of motion, but not of stillness;
Knowledge of speech, but not of silence;
Knowledge of words, and ignorance of the Word.
All our knowledge brings us nearer to our
ignorance,
All our ignorance brings us nearer to death,,
But nearness to death no nearer to God.
Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in
information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

Our culture is fat on information but thin on wisdom. Godly leaders must know how to take the raw material of knowledge and refine it into wisdom, turning crude data into high-octane wisdom. Wisdom perseveres; it lasts beyond all the currents of culture, beyond the fashions of the day. Wisdom seeks that which will last and is willing to trade immediate gratification for an eternal reward. Failure to acknowledge this will result in leaders who carefully spend their lives constructing a house of cards.

Healthy Alliances

A boy valiantly, but unsuccessfully, attempted to move a heavy log to clear a pathway to his favorite hideout. His dad stood quietly nearby, watching his son straining against the load. Finally he said, “Son, why aren’t you using all of your strength?”

Confused and a little angry, the boy responded, “Dad, I’m using every last little bit of strength I have!”

“No, son; you’re not,” his dad quietly responded. “You haven’t asked me to help.”

Effective leaders know to reach beyond themselves for strength. They recognize, develop and utilize the strength of people around them. They develop healthy alliances both with those on their own team and those on other teams.

The Strength of Healthy Alliances

While fleeing from Saul, David certainly demonstrated the ability to build healthy alliances:

David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father’s household heard about it, they went down to him there. All those who were distressed or in debt or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him.

From there David went to Mizpah in Moab and said to the king of Moab, “Would you let my father and mother come and stay with you until I learn what God will do for me?” So he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him as long as David was in the stronghold.

But the prophet Gad said to David, “Do not stay in the stronghold. Go into the land of Judah.” So David left and went to the forest of Hereth.

1 Samuel 22:1-5

Two miles from the city of Gath is a labyrinth of hills and valleys, honeycombed with caves. One cave stood near the ancient city of Adullam, and David found refuge in it. While he was in hiding with his family, David attracted to himself others who were also experiencing hardship. In fact, somewhere between 400 and 600 men eventually allied themselves with David. But it wasn't simply David's charisma that drew people to him. By studying David's life, we find out that he not only had a tremendous loyalty to people, but he was also fiercely dedicated to serving others. People were loyal and committed to David because of the loyalty and service he had consistently showed them.

In addition to those alliances, David connected with the king of Moab, who provided shelter for his parents. Notice that in the midst of his own trials, David still considers the needs of his parents. This surely must have made an impression on the king of Moab. Here is a

man who does not merely think of himself. Rather, David remains calm enough to consider the needs of others.

Finally, David listened as the prophet Gad offered the fugitive direction from God. Here we see another pattern in David's life: he remained loyal to people even when they had hard truth to tell him (see David's interaction with Nathan in 2 Samuel 12). This was not only a rare quality for biblical times; it remains a rare quality today.

David possessed the foresight to know that he couldn't go it alone. He worked to build others' trust in his leadership ability, and he evidently proved himself. David's forces were loyal to him, and together they realized success against the enemies of Israel (see 23:1-6).

Effective leaders possess the unique ability to build alliances with people who can help to advance their causes. Think again about the short story we began with. Are there people who are standing quietly by, watching you strain away at your tasks? Part of your task as a leader is to form healthy alliances and to inspire others to step forward and help you. By doing so, you'll accomplish two goals: lightening your own load and helping to develop leadership qualities in others.

If we fail to consider our strengths and weaknesses as we make alliances with others, we may consign ourselves and our organizations to mediocrity. Leaders should commit themselves to doing what they do best and forging synergistic alliances with others who have different skills and abilities. Then a leader can be

said to be doing his best – when he is willing to surrender tasks to those who are more adept.

The God of Healthy Alliances

As the perfect and eternal community of being, God is the ultimate embodiment of a healthy alliance. In a truly mystifying way, he himself *is* a healthy alliance. The perfect love that flows between the Father and the Son is manifested as a third eternal Person, the Holy Spirit.

No one can fully understand this mystery, but it provides the ultimate foundation for relationships, communication and love. Within the divine Trinity, there has always been perfect communion, perfect community. Our perfectly inter-related and inter-relating God provides a picture of the unity and diversity that we can enjoy in our own earthly lives as well, as we live in healthy alliances with others. In other words, God not only affirms diversity in community, he actually models it.

John De Gruchy's statement about the Trinity goes to the heart of the matter: "The triune God is not a homogeneous collectivity in which the uniqueness of each person is subsumed within the whole, but a community within which the distinctness of each person is affirmed and therefore within which the other remains a significant other."²⁰

²⁰ John W. De Gruchy, *Christianity and Democracy: A Theology for a Just World Order*

The triune nature of healthy relationships can be seen in any good friendship, marriage or partnership. There are three parts to all healthy relationships: there is *you*, there is *me* and there is *us*. As a relationship deepens, the love between the two individuals becomes a kind of third person. That love is the *us* of a relationship; our love creates a “significant other.” In a fitful and imperfect way, this dynamic reflects the glories and mystery of the divine Trinity. Incomplete as our picture will remain, the amazing truth is that God wants us to enter into the depths of this unity.

Before coming to know Jesus, we were in a position of hostility and alienation from God. We were dead in our trespasses and sins, being “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12). God, however, in his incredible grace, has forgiven us our sins through the work of Christ. That fact in itself should be sufficient for us to ponder for an eternity. But God went beyond mere forgiveness of sin; he gave us his very life and personally indwells us. The mystery that is encapsulated in Jesus’ words, “you are in me, and I am in you” (John 14:20), is really beyond our comprehension and exceeds all that we could ever have hoped or guessed.

But the Lord tells us that even this is not the whole story. In his high priestly prayer on the eve of his crucifixion, Jesus prayed not only for his disciples, but “also for those who will believe in me through their

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 240-41.

message” (John 17:20). What a marvelous thought to have been prayed for by Jesus himself in his moment of crisis. And from generation to generation, there has been an unbroken chain of believers. One changed life invested in someone else from their time to ours. We who are in the covenant community of God’s people are now the recipients of all the blessings inherent in those relationships. Someone invested in your life; now you are called to go and do likewise, to become a part of the continuity of alliances that has existed and will until Christ returns.

Christ’s petition to the Father was nothing less than a request that believers might experience “complete unity” (v. 23) with one another and with God himself. Jesus asked that we might enter fully into the fellowship that exists between himself and his Father, and that we might delight in his presence and behold his eternal glory. In this way the divine love of the Holy Trinity will be in us, and we in them (v. 26).

To be invited into the love of the Godhead is to be drawn into the ultimate communion and alliance. As members of that alliance, we discover our true source of significance and hope.

The Need for Healthy Alliances

On the way to Jericho from Jerusalem, in the barren hills of the desert is a colony of hermits. They all have their own private caves, but they live in close proximity to one another. They may go weeks or months without seeing each other, but they seem to find comfort

and strength from the knowledge that there are others doing similar activities nearby.

Perhaps this best illustrates that people were created for community. Even hermits frequently live in colonies! But alliances with others can be either healthy or toxic, and it is essential that we take this into account when we engage in personal and business partnerships. Again, we see the biblical character of David as a great example of this.

When David arrived in Ziklag, he sent some of the plunder to the elders of Judah, who were his friends, saying, “Here is a present for you from the plunder of the Lord’s enemies.”

He sent it...to those in all the...places where David and his men had roamed.

1 Samuel 30:26-27, 31b

By distributing part of the plunder to the elders in various parts of Israel, David wisely promoted goodwill with potential allies. In some way, he was telling them that they were part of what he was doing. He understood the importance of planning for the future and of building relationships based upon trust and mutual benefit that would serve him well in the years ahead. Leaders who look for and participate in strong alliances build a store of relational resources that can be of immeasurable value in times of change or crisis.

All of us have a need for fellowship, encouragement and accountability. Given a choice, few people would opt for the years of isolation experienced

by Robinson Crusoe instead of the family ties enjoyed by the Swiss Family Robinson.

Clearly, the most important alliance we can experience is with the triune God, but this alliance should be reflected in the way we relate to others. Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton turn a common notion on its head when they write, “God never intended anyone to be so focused on him that there is no need to stay connected with people.”²¹ The body of Christ provides a network of personal and group alliances that are critical to our spiritual well-being.

Not all alliances are beneficial, however; and Scripture is just as clear about the other side of the coin. “Do not be misled: ‘Bad company corrupts good character’” (1 Corinthians 15:33). And again, “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm” (Proverbs 13:20; cf. 28:7; 29:3). Unhealthy alliances can erode our character and our convictions. The 12th century English abbot Aelred of Rievaulx wrote that we owe love to all people, but only to a proven friend are we to entrust “the secrets of the heart.”²²

In order to make certain that the alliances into which we enter are healthy and appropriate, we must first be convinced of whom we are and whose we are.

²¹ Stephen Arterburn and Jack Felton, *More Jesus, Less Religion* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2000), pp. 136-37.

²² Aelred of Rievaulx: *Spiritual Friendship*, Book 1 (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1994).

When the truth of God’s Word begins to define our self-image, we find ourselves secure enough to love and serve others without seeking our interests first. Just as loving God completely is the key to loving ourselves correctly, this in turn is the key to loving others compassionately. As we grow in our understanding of God’s unconditional love and acceptance of us in Christ, we are increasingly liberated from using people to meet our needs. Once we know how seriously God takes us, we no longer need to take ourselves so seriously.

Second, we must not enter into deep alliances lightly. Often, because of some emotional neediness or poor judgment or pain, someone will share too deeply too quickly with a person they don’t know. Generally, this is a recipe for disaster. But, as John Ortberg has outlined, there are certain warning signs to watch for that may help you know when to slow down with a person. These warning signs may include inappropriate use of humor, judgmental statements, premature advice or violating a confidence. As Ortberg says, “Test someone’s ability to keep small confidences before you trust them with big ones.”²³

The Cost of Healthy Alliances

We all need allies on whom we can rely and whom we can trust in tough times. “Call it a clan,” says Jane Howard, “call it a network, call it a family.

²³ John Ortberg, *Everybody’s Normal Till You Get to Know Them* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 84-85.

Whatever you call it, whoever you are, you need one.”²⁴ David, as we have seen, illustrates how healthy alliances work. Second Samuel 16:15-17:23 provides an extended story of David’s strength – and weakness – in the craft of forming healthy alliances.

In this passage, we see both good and bad news about healthy alliances. The bad news is that David was running for his life because he had earlier refused to form a healthy alliance with his own son, Absalom (13:1-15:12). This scene ranks among the lower moments of David’s “best and worst of” biography. It warns us about the dangers of handling alliances, especially those in our own families, poorly.

But the good news is that David had previously formed a number of healthy alliances. Whether you refer to this as building alliances or use the more current term, “networking,” David demonstrated in this passage that leaders need to pay attention to this function.

David used his resources to help others succeed. He genuinely befriended people and repaid loyalty. Because of these things he had loyal friends who were willing to invest their resources in his continued success.

This story of intrigue has “spy novel” written all over it, but this is no novel. Hushai, a friend of David, literally put his life on the line for the king. The best part of the story appears in another passage:

²⁴ Jane Howard: Quoted in the *Franklin-Covey Day Planner* for February 1, 2002.

When David arrived at the summit, where people used to worship God, Hushai the Arkite was there to meet him, his robe torn and dust on his head. David said to him, “If you go with me, you will be a burden to me. But if you return to the city and say to Absalom, ‘I will be your servant, O king; I was your father’s servant in the past, but now I will be your servant,’ then you can help me by frustrating Ahithophel’s advice. Won’t the priests Zadok and Abiathar be there with you? Tell them anything you hear in the king’s palace. Their two sons...are there with them. Send them to me with anything you hear.”

2 Samuel 15:32-36

After he and David had devised the dangerous strategy of placing Hushai as a mole in Absalom’s court, the record tells us: “So David’s friend Hushai arrived at Jerusalem” (v. 37). This guy had guts, courage and cunning, and he was willing to step in when no one else could have successfully served in this manner. Why? Because he and David had cultivated a deep and trusting relationship over the years.

Great leaders must have allies, and allies are cultivated. This cultivation carries a cost in time, thoughtfulness and devotion. As psychologist Alan McGinnis notes, the number one rule for entering into deep relationships is deceptively simple: we must assign top priority to these relationships. We tend to spend

massive amounts of time and energy in pursuit of secondary things while relegating the most important things (healthy relationships) to the bottom of our priority list.²⁵ Allies are expensive, but genuine allies are valuable because they can't be bought.

The Payoff of Healthy Alliances

Perhaps no other American leader is as admired as Abraham Lincoln. And one of this great leader's greatest assets was his ability to build healthy alliances – even with difficult people. In his excellent book, *Lincoln on Leadership*, Donald T. Phillips points out how Lincoln built such strong alliances: “Abraham Lincoln gained the trust and respect of his subordinates, building strong alliances on both a personal and professional level.”²⁶ Lincoln knew what every skilled leader knows: Healthy alliances are crucial to making a leader's vision become a reality.

Solomon's words in Proverbs 13:20 encapsulate both the benefits and the dangers of forming alliances: “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.” While those words reflect wisdom, putting them into practice requires skill. Lincoln was so skilled at and committed to forging strong alliances that, upon occasion, he overcame others' negative feelings toward him. William H. Seward,

²⁵ Alan Loy McGinnis, *The Friendship Factor* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Press, 1979).

²⁶ Donald T. Phillips, *Lincoln on Leadership* (New York: Warner Books, 1992), p. 27.

Lincoln's secretary of state, initially considered the president unqualified and incompetent to run the administration and lead the country. Seward's feelings were so negative that he submitted his resignation before the inauguration.

Because Lincoln considered Seward a strategic leader, he met with him immediately after taking oath and persuaded him to stay by appealing to his patriotism and sense of self-worth. In the months that followed, their relationship hit a few bumps: Seward discovered that he couldn't control the president.

Yet in spite of their differences, Lincoln won Seward's support and loyalty by reaching out on a personal level. The president would stop by the secretary's home for lengthy visits. The two would take carriage rides together in and around Washington. Because they shared a deep commitment to the country and a common set of values and ethics, they eventually forged a strong friendship.

While no leader will win every potential ally into his or her camp, following Lincoln's example might prove helpful. Phillips summarized Lincoln's strategy when he wrote,

Simply spending time together and getting to know one's subordinates can overcome mountains of personal differences and hard feelings. If followers learn that their leader is firm, resolute, and committed in the daily performance of his duty, respect can be gained and trust will soon follow. Lincoln's approach

won't work for everyone. Some employees will not come around. However, the vast majority – the most competent and honest ones – will.²⁷

As important as it is to learn whom to avoid, it is more important to learn who to trust. If you are fortunate enough to have built strong and trusted associations with others, treasure them. Nurture these healthy alliances. Spread the word of their credibility. Talk them up when the opportunity arises and defend them when they're unfairly attacked. There may come a day when you might need defending. Who will stand up for you?

In spite of our individual independence and the natural anonymity our cyberspace culture affords, the world remains a pretty tight community. We must watch out for each other. We must inform one another. We must learn again what it means to be our brother's keeper. It is through partnerships, mentoring, and healthy alliances that we become stronger.

Find a partner. Find a trusted associate. Find a friend. You may be a leader but no leader is an island.

²⁷ Ibid., 31.

Purpose and Passion

“Just turn right after the railroad tracks. You can’t miss it.” Locals have a quaint way of giving directions to lost motorists. They make a lot of assumptions. “Go past the Johnson’s old farm to where the grocery store used to be.” They forget about the fork in the road or the new traffic signal. “You can’t miss it,” they insist. But the problem is that while *they* may not be able to miss it, *we* often do. And, after traveling 15 or 20 miles out of our way, we have to turn around, go back to that last intersection and ask for directions again.

Sometimes we move through life thinking we can’t miss it. The next turn will be so obvious. There can’t be any doubt which way to go at the next junction. But how many times have we discovered, to our chagrin, that we’re completely lost and should have taken the other fork 20 miles back?

There’s an old story about a pilot who came over the intercom and said, “Good news, ladies and gentlemen: We’ve got a very strong tailwind and are making excellent time. The bad news is that our navigation equipment has gone down, so we have no idea where we are.” Perhaps this is a fitting analogy for many of us. We’re making great time on a road to nowhere. We’re on the fast track, but we don’t really know where all of this is headed. When we finally get what we’ve wanted all these years, we discover that it wasn’t really what we wanted after all. So, we hop on another treadmill, but it leads to the same disillusionment. How far do we have to travel, before

we turn around, go back to that last intersection and ask for directions again?

A well-known poem whose author's identity has been forgotten says it like this:

Across the fields of yesterday,
He sometimes comes to me
A little lad just back from play –
The boy I used to be.
He looks at me so wistfully
When once he's crept within
It is as if he hoped to see
The man I might have been.

It is interesting to go back to the days of idealistic youth and recall the things we hoped for, the kind of person we thought we might become. But such nostalgic recollections can be depressing. We wonder where the years have gone and what happened. Could it be that we took the wrong turn somewhere along the line? Is it too late to rectify an error in judgment?

As followers of Jesus, we say that the answer is, “No! It's never too late.” We always have the opportunity of turning back and getting on the right track. Our source of direction is far greater than the people who say, “You can't miss it.” There is a source that can tell us what life is really about. Found in the pages of Scripture, particularly the wisdom literature, are directions not just to “live and learn” but to “learn and live.” The promise of skillful living is made to all those who will “listen to advice and accept instruction” (Proverbs 19:20). God has revealed truths about life; the Bible is a guidebook of sorts, a blueprint to living, the

foundation of a well-built life and a roadmap through the maze of confusion that our days often resemble. There is purpose and meaning, clarity and fulfillment in this life. But it is only found as we navigate by the wisdom contained in the word of God.

The Secret to Paul's Productivity

The apostle Paul accomplished an astounding amount in two decades of ministry. What made him tick? What drove him to carry out the work that he did? We find the secret in Philippians 3:7-9:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

This passage explodes with Paul's passion for his calling. Effective leaders, like Paul, are those who have figured out what they stand for. They have identified their purpose and pursue it with a passion.

Before his dramatic conversion (Acts 9), Paul followed a different purpose in life. As a Pharisee, Paul had attained the highest levels of status. In this instance

he could have boasted about his religious training, heritage and practice. He had been, in every sense, a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” and his credentials would have impressed the most devoted Jew. He was a passionate man, but he was passionate about the wrong things. After his encounter with the risen Lord, Paul considered all he had attained through religious effort to be garbage when compared with the value of knowing Christ. Paul was more than happy to throw away all he had attained in order to know Christ.

Paul preached that in Christ he and all believers possess all the righteousness of God. We can have peace with the one who created us, the one for whom we were made. Because of the infinite worth of knowing Christ, Paul devoted his life to knowing the Savior. That was his purpose and his passion. And that purpose and that passion shaped all he did and influenced all he led.

This is not to say that our purpose eliminates all other concerns. Bills must still be paid; food and shelter do not miraculously fall from the sky. It is even legitimate for us to desire success in business and career aspirations. However, Benjamin Hunnicutt, an authority on the history of work at the University of Iowa, notes that work has become our new religion, where we worship and give our time and energy. As our commitment to family, community and faith shrink, we

begin to look to our careers to provide us with meaning, identity and esteem.²⁸

We must be ever watchful to keep our calling (something we do *for* God) from becoming a career (something which threatens to *become* god).

Compared with knowing Christ, my activities from 8 to 5 Monday through Friday don't matter very much. In the end, what will matter is whether or not we know him, regardless of what else is on our resume or in our portfolio. When we stand before God and hear him ask the question, "Why should I let you into heaven?" what will we say? I was a vice president in my company? I did well in the market? I was on the board of the country club? I was active in my church? None of these answers are satisfactory. Only one will suffice: Jesus forgave my sins and gave me his righteousness.

The greatest achievements of this world are fine. There is nothing inherently wrong with them, but in the eternal scheme of things, Paul says, they are rubbish. Compared with the value of knowing Christ, they are trash. Actually the Greek word is *skubala*. It's a hard word to translate, and it's a word that makes a lot of church people uncomfortable. The King James Version renders it "dung," but even that is a mild form of what Paul is saying. Paul is using bumper-sticker language: *Skubala happens!*

²⁸ Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, *Work Without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

The Great Purpose of a Great God

Rubbish? Dung? How did the world get like this? It certainly wasn't God's purpose in creating the universe. Does Scripture reveal God's intention when he created humans who bear his image? If so, how can we discover God's deep passion and participate in it? Before we get too deep into this, let us recognize that even if God did tell us explicitly why he does what he does, we wouldn't understand.

In the book *A Little Book of Coincidence*, geometer John Martineau reveals the exquisite orbital patterns of the planets and the mathematical relationships that govern them. Through the movement of the Moon, Venus, Mars and Mercury, it becomes clear that Earth is much more special than simply being the right distance from the Sun. From looking into the heavens we realize that we have no idea just how complex the designer of all this must be. Nothing in the universe is random.

So, it's no wonder this magnificent designer would tell us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9). One other Scripture to keep at the forefront of our thinking is 1 Corinthians 13:12: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

These passages highlight the huge knowledge gap between what God intends and what we know of God's intentions. Basically, the difference between God and human beings is greater than that between angels and insects. We simply do not have the capacity to grasp God's ultimate purposes in creating the cosmos. Scripture does, however, reveal fragments of God's purposes that relate to our lives in this world. One such fragment is found in Ephesians 3:2-11. Here we gain a perspective on the purpose and passion of the God of creation.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,

and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God's eternal purposes reflect his perfect and eternal wisdom, and he had designed the world in such a way that we are most happy when God is glorified in our lives. For reasons that are incomprehensible to us, God has a passion for intimacy with his people, and we participate in his eternal purposes when we pursue him with an undivided heart.

Sometimes we just read over a statement like that last one and fail to be struck by just how profound and breathtaking it is. God has a passion for intimacy with his people. Singer-songwriter Michael Card put it in fundamental terms when he sang, "Could it be that You would really rather die than live without us?" That's the length to which God will go in his pursuit of fellowship with us. His desire was more than mere words; it prompted him to enter into human history. The apostle John writes, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). God believes intimate fellowship with us to be worth the death of his own son. Who could possibly comprehend that?

You are beautiful beyond description,
Too marvelous for words
Too wonderful for comprehension,
Like nothing ever seen or heard
Who can grasp your infinite wisdom?
Who can fathom the depth of your love?
You are beautiful beyond description,
Majesty enthroned in love.²⁹

This is the God who wants to know us. This is the God who gave his Son as a ransom for us. The God who created billions and billions of stars, the God who arranged the heavens with the ease of an interior decorator hanging curtains, desires intimacy with us to the point that he would enter our world with all its limitations and allow us to crucify him. If that's true, life can only be truly meaningful when we find that God glorified in our lives.

The obvious question that begs to be asked is: "If a God could create and sustain a universe as amazingly complex as ours, if that same God could put together a plan to redeem lost and fallen humanity, if that God would go to such great lengths to rescue people who don't even know they're in peril, could that God be trusted? Could it be that his purpose for our lives is better than that which we could construct on our own?" The answer is, "Of course!" But before we pat ourselves on the back for having answered correctly, the follow-up question looms large: "So what?" What are the

²⁹ Mark Altrogge, "I Stand in Awe," 1987, PDI Praise.

implications of this? How are our lives reflecting this belief?

Practice reveals priorities and beliefs. We can have a cognitive affirmation that God has a better purpose than anything I could come up with, but does it show in our practice? Contrary to public opinion, in releasing ourselves to God's purposes and giving ourselves wholeheartedly and unreservedly to him, we're not *sacrificing* anything other than the illusion of self-sufficiency. We're embracing something altogether wonderful.

Three Dimensions of God's Purpose for Us

While Scripture provides us only glimpses of God's **ultimate** purposes in creating the cosmos, the Word does reveal God's **universal** purpose for believers. In short, this purpose is to know Christ and to make him known. God does not want anyone to perish, but desires that everyone come to repentance and enter into a relationship with him through the new birth in Christ (2 Peter 3:9). Once a person is born again as a child of God, God wants that person to grow in Christ and be "conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Romans 8:29). Thus, God's purpose for each of us is edification (spiritual growth) and evangelism (spiritual reproduction).

God also has a **unique** purpose for each of us, and this relates to our distinctive temperaments, abilities, experiences, spiritual gifts, education and spheres of influence. Why do you get out of bed in the morning? What is your life purpose? Few people can articulate a

clear purpose statement for their lives. It is ironic that people tend to put more effort into planning a two-week vacation than they do in thinking about the destiny of their earthly journey. In Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth we find more of an eternal perspective on this temporal journey:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

This passage provides the context for God's unique purposes for our lives, and reminds us to develop an eternal perspective so that we will have a passion to give our lives in exchange for the things that God tells us will endure.

Biblically speaking, there are two things on this planet that are going to endure: people and the word of God. If we take God's eternal word and invest it in eternal people, then we're leveraging the temporal for eternity. We're actually sending something ahead of us into eternity. It's not what we leave behind that's important; it's what we send ahead.

Our little piles of goods will fall into someone else's hands after we're gone. Someone else will take

our possessions and our positions. The world will go on without us, and we will be quickly forgotten. This might be a major cause of depression if it weren't for the fact that God calls us to place our hope on that which lasts and to invest in that which will endure. It's not enough for leaders have purpose and passion; they need to be passionate about the right things. Leaders must come to view this world from eternity's perspective.

With this perspective, we will place more value in people than in possessions. Rather than using people to gain possessions, we will use our possessions to gain people. The marketplace becomes an arena in which we can accomplish things that will last forever. Our associations become areas of influence where we can alter a person's eternal trajectory. There is no secular part of life. When we view others the way God views them, every place becomes holy ground, a place where God is working in us and through us to accomplish his universal purpose of bringing about the abundant life of Christ in men and women. We become people who minister to others by manifesting eternal values and by loving and serving people with eternal things in mind.

Relationships are the currency of heaven. Being rightly related to God and rightly related to others – this is true righteousness. God, who loved us first, makes it possible for us to love him. Loving him makes it possible for us to love others and dwell in a community of believers, united in our love for Christ and one another.

What is your purpose for being on this planet? If you have not developed a purpose statement for your

life, ask God to guide you in the process of creating one that fits with your passion and gifts. A biblical purpose is an unchanging reason for being. Your purpose statement must include something of the transcendent. Don't settle for a purpose that only includes excellence in the temporal arena. This is something that will animate you whether you're young or old, single or married, have children or not. This is not something that ends in retirement or changes according to circumstances or season of life. Put this purpose in a transcendent context by adding a spiritual dimension to why you're doing what you're doing. Then you can be sure you're embracing the things that are worth embracing.

God's Promises Breed Passion

What is it about some leaders? They seem to have that extra "Oohmph!" Their people are unusually productive, grievances from their area are infrequent and quality is high. People from other areas want to be transferred to their departments. What is their secret? Passion! Enthusiasm! These leaders have a clearly defined purpose that transcends merely pushing product out the door.

One man who lived a hard life found this secret, and at the age of 85, was passionate about his purpose-driven life. No retirement community with shuffleboard for him. His story is a must-read. His name was Caleb, and we find his story in Joshua 14:6-14:

Now the men of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, "You know what

the Lord said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly. So on that day Moses swore to me, ‘The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.’

“Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”

Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to

Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly.

There is the key. Three times his brief biography states that Caleb “Followed the Lord...wholeheartedly” (vv. 8, 9, 14). He embraced God’s promise and followed him with a holy abandon. Now, in his twilight years, at a time when most people might think it’s too late, Caleb is enthusiastic, gutsy and passionate about proving what the Lord could do through one who trusted him completely. In the end, Caleb does lay hold of that for which he was laid hold of!

Passion and clear purpose served Caleb well for his many years. And these two qualities are still an essential part of great leadership. For Caleb, that purpose and its consequent passion were transcendent. They were greater than any product of promotion or profit. He found a life-consuming passion: “I followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.” No higher purpose and no greater passion exist. This purpose gives maximum meaning to whatever a leader does.

Purpose and Strategy for This Life

We’ve learned that, as godly leaders, our purpose in life needs to be directed toward God and his kingdom. Does that mean we sit idly by and wait for Christ’s return? No. The apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:9 that we need to please God both in this life and the next: “So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.”

Paul knew that one day the Lord would replace his earthly body with a resurrection body. While Paul didn't want to be separated from his present body, he longed to be clothed with his new one. Such a longing didn't lead the apostle to try to escape life or dismiss it as meaningless. On the contrary, that hope spurred him to please Christ.

As followers of Christ our passion for the Savior needs to both drive and define our purpose for living. Brennan Manning, in his book *The Lion and the Lamb*, writes about two ways of discerning our passion and purpose. First, he advises us to recall what has saddened us recently. He asks,

Was it the realization that you don't love Jesus enough, that you don't seek his face in prayer often enough, that you can't honestly say that the greatest thing that ever happened in your life is that he came to you and you heard his voice? Or have you been saddened and depressed over a lack of human respect, criticism from an authority figure, financial problems, lack of friends or your bulging waistline?³⁰

Then he asks the question,

What has gladdened you recently? Reflection on your election to the Christian community, the joy of praying,

³⁰ Brennan Manning, *The Lion and the Lamb*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 1986, 43.

“Abba, I belong to you?” The afternoon you stole away with the gospel as your only companion, the filling awareness that God loves you unconditionally, just as you are and not as you should be? A small victory over selfishness? Or, were the sources of your gladness enjoying a new car, a suit, a movie and a pizza, a trip to Paris?³¹

By asking ourselves these questions we come face-to-face with what makes us tick as individuals. What are the primary motivations in our lives? Then we can begin to take our personal passion and purpose and apply it organizationally.

In his excellent book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren articulates the importance of translating our purpose into practical strategies. Among other things, he suggests the following:

- Program around your purposes. Design a program to fulfill each of your purposes.
- Educate your people on purpose. Change doesn't happen by chance; it occurs as leaders cultivate settings and procedures that facilitate the education of those they serve.
- Start small groups on purpose. Rather than forcing everyone to conform to a “one size fits all” mentality, he urges people to choose the type of small group that best fits their needs.

³¹ Ibid.

- Add staff on purpose. Rather than just hiring people who possess character and competence, he urges leaders to look for staff with a passion for the purpose of the church. People are self-motivated about an area where they have passion.
- Structure on purpose. Develop structures or teams that work together to systematically fulfill the purpose of the church.
- Evaluate on purpose. Consistent effectiveness in an ever-changing world requires continual evaluation. Warren notes that “in a purpose driven church, your purposes are the standard by which you evaluate effectiveness.”³²

There is a lot of talk about vision in leadership circles these days and rightly so. However, much of the organizational malaise found in companies, churches and families is not caused by a lack of vision but by a lack of strategy. If we fail to strategize according to an overarching purpose, we will never accomplish the things God wants for us.

The overall purpose of our lives must match up with his agenda. Otherwise, we will live out our lives in frustration and futility. God has structured reality so that when he is honored first and foremost, satisfaction comes as a byproduct. May he grant us the courage and grace to honor him in all our ways.

³² Adapted from Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 137-152.

Priorities

He was Europe's 350-pound wrestling champ a little over two generations ago. His name was Yussif, but people called him the Terrible Turk because of his massive size and awesome strength. After he won the championship in Europe, he sailed to the United States to contend with our champion – Strangler Lewis – a much smaller man who weighed just over 200 pounds.

Strangler Lewis had a simple plan for defeating his opponents. He'd put his arm around the neck of his competitor and cut off the oxygen at the Adam's apple. Many an opponent had passed out in the ring with Strangler's tactics. The problem Lewis discovered when it came time to fight the Terrible Turk was that the European giant didn't have a neck! He just went straight from his head down to those massive shoulders. In the ring, Strangler Lewis couldn't even get a hold, so it wasn't long before Yussif flipped Lewis over on the mat and pinned him.

After winning the championship, the Terrible Turk demanded that every bit of his \$5,000 prize money be given to him in gold. After he wrapped the championship belt around his vast, equator-like middle, he stuffed the gold into the belt and boarded the next ship back to Europe. He had not only captured America's glory, but he possessed her gold as well. He had won it all – except immortality!

Yussif set sail on the SS Bourgogne. Halfway across the Atlantic, a storm struck and the ship began to sink. The Terrible Turk went boldly over the side with

his gold still strapped around his body. The added weight was too much, even for the heavyweight champion, and he sank like an anvil before crew members could get him into a lifeboat. He was never seen again.

We hear stories like this – a true story – and think, “How on earth could anyone be so foolish?” But, the truth of the matter is, we all tend to grasp the things of this world and hold onto them even while we’re sinking. The story of Yussif the Terrible Turk shows us the tragic consequences that can overwhelm us when we lose our perspective and our priorities.

God calls out to us, “Let go of the things of this world and you will float, you will rise, you will live.” But if we fail to recognize that this world is not our ultimate destination, then we will never be able to risk letting go of the things this world prizes. We will never be able to handle the pressures of this life. Without a clarity of purpose and a proper sense of priorities, our lives will be shaped by the pressures around us rather than by a divine call.

The Richest Fool in the World

Jesus wanted his followers to understand this, so he did what he usually did when he really wanted us to understand something: he told a story. The story is found in Luke 12 about a rich man whose priorities were completely mistaken:

And [Jesus] told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a

good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’”

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Luke 12:16-21

Every leader lives under the influence of the Law of Limited Resources. Time, in particular, is one of those precious commodities. The time invested in any project is taken away from some other place in life. The energy invested in one job won’t be there for another one. Particularly as we get older, we realize how precious these commodities are. We discover that our energy is not what it once was, and the time it takes to complete things often grows longer as the days grow shorter. No leader will ever lack for things to occupy his or her time and energy. Because that’s the case, every leader must answer an important question: “Where

should I invest my time and energy?” Or to put it differently, “What should be my priorities?” The real issue, as we will see, has to do with the degree to which we have aligned our will with God’s will.

In telling this story Jesus not only warned against the danger of greed, but also pointed out the futility of priorities that are not in line with God’s will. The man in the parable had clear priorities. First, he wanted to accumulate wealth. Second, he wanted to use his wealth to secure his own future. Now, any retirement investment consultant will tell you that saving for the future is a good – even necessary – pursuit. But the rich fool, as he is called in this parable, started with the wrong motives and unfortunately failed to achieve either priority. He died before he could either expand his business or enjoy retirement. Jesus applied this parable to anyone whose priorities reveal a heart absorbed with self instead of God.

Many of us presume that there will be time to take stock of eternal things later in life. But there are two fatal flaws in this thinking. First, how do we know there will be a “later” in life? The man in Jesus’ story had no idea how close his death was. He had no idea that his life would be demanded of him that very night. The reason God calls him a fool is not because God is into abusive language. God chooses his words carefully; he does not call the man evil or wicked, necessarily. He calls the man a fool, because, in all the man’s planning, everything is accounted for except the one inevitability that faces every human being: death. The man failed to consider that at some point, he might actually die. He neglected to plan for the most obvious and predictable

event in human existence: We're all going to die, and we don't know when.

The second flaw in this thinking is that when the time comes and we want to turn to the eternal, we may not actually be able to do so after having cultivated a habit of avoidance. It's a naïve assumption that a pattern of steadily avoiding God's claims will suddenly be overturned just before it's too late. Our character is shaped by the decisions we make. The longer we allow the habits of our youth to remain unchanged, the harder they are to change.

Ultimately, our purpose for living should be to bring recognition (honor and glory) to God rather than to bring pleasure to ourselves (see 1 Corinthians 10:31). With that purpose in mind we can set our priorities by discovering what will bring the greatest recognition to God. If we do that, unlike the fool in the parable, we'll be rich in God's eyes.

The promise of God is, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). A half-hearted search for God will yield a harvest of bitterness, disappointment and despair. You will not find God with a divided heart. The search for God requires a singleness of purpose.

Summum Bonum

As important as success, security and significance are, there is something far more meaningful than these. Philosophers and theologians call it the *summum bonum*, the "supreme good," and they tell us

that to miss this is to miss everything. In Revelation 1:8 we find the biblical vision of the *summum bonum*. The apostle John writes, “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”

Just as the Lord God calls himself “the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty,” so Jesus, at the end of the Revelation, says of himself, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End” (22:13). Nothing and no one preceded the Lord, and nothing will follow him. He is the supreme Author of matter and energy, of space and time. The infinite and personal I AM is the ultimate reality, and everything else is derived from him.

If the utmost reality is a timeless, unchanging Person, then the *summum bonum*, the supreme good of humanity, is to know and be known by this Person. The wisest thing we can do is to seek him with whole hearts. He wants to be found, but he also wishes to be sought. He says through the prophet Jeremiah, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13).

Scripture reveals that the Son of God has made it possible for us to enter into a genuine relationship with the Father. “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27).

This is why it is possible for someone to attain the wildest fantasies of humanity and still lose everything in the end. Howard Hughes was the

wealthiest man of his day. He had success, money and the power that comes with it. Yet he died a shriveled husk of a man, insane by all reasonable accounts. Marilyn Monroe was the most adored woman of her time. Every woman envied her. Every man wanted her. She had beauty, fame and the adoration of millions, but she died alone at her own hand. How many more names must we list? Ernest Hemingway, Vincent van Gogh, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, Lenny Bruce, Virginia Woolf, John Belushi – these men and women were not considered modest successes. They were hugely celebrated artists, having achieved what this world would consider the pinnacle of achievement. And yet can you imagine a more miserable company? The penetrating insight of Jesus rings throughout the centuries to our own generation: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul” (Matthew 16:26).

There is a simple two-word question people who cling tightly to the things of this world tend to avoid asking: “Then what?” That’s the question the rich fool in Jesus’ story never asks. When the barn is finally full, when the finances are secured, then what? After the ultimate promotion, the ultimate purchase, the ultimate home, after the ladder of success has been scaled to the highest rung, after the thrill wears off – and it will wear off – then what?

There is a great danger in our society of avoiding or denying ultimate reality. So, I should frequently ask myself, “If tonight was my night, if this was the day my life was going to be demanded of me, what words would I want God to use to summarize my life?” I don’t want

them to be “You fool!” I don’t want to get to that point and realize that I’ve wasted my life on stuff that doesn’t matter – cheap baubles and cut glass. The soul does not long for something that’s material. The soul longs for more than that, that for which it was created.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God “has also set eternity in the hearts of men.” Mark Buchanan says,

Our deepest instinct is heaven. Heaven is the ache in our bones, the splinter in our heart. Like the whisper of faraway waves we hear crashing in the whorls of a conch shell, the music of heaven echoes, faint, elusive, haunting, beneath and within our daily routines....

The instinct for heaven is just that: homesickness, ancient as night, urgent as daybreak. All your longings – for the place you grew up, for the taste of raspberry tarts that your mother once pulled hot from the oven, for that bend in the river where your father took you fishing as a child, where the water was dark and swirling and the caddis flies hovered in the deep shade – all these longings are a homesickness, a wanting in full what all these things only hint at, only prick you with. These are the things seen

that conjure in our emotions the Things
Unseen.³³

Even the atheist has this longing. When people pursue the things of this earth exclusively, they end up with bitterness at the end of their journey. Life seems empty because they long for more than this life can provide. They long for the one who made them, whether they acknowledge it or not.

The Good vs. The Best

There is nothing wrong with wanting raspberry tarts or saving for retirement. However, these can never become the *summum bonum* of life. When they do, the good becomes the enemy of the best. Effective leaders have the ability to discern not only the difference between the good and the bad, but also the difference between the good and the best. Since we cannot do everything well, we must carefully choose a few things on which we will concentrate. In 1 John 2:15-17 we find the competing claims of the world and of the Father.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world.

³³ Mark Buchanan, *Things Unseen*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 2002, pp. 29-30.

The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Often we claim to have certain priorities, but our practice reveals something is out of alignment. Our practices reveal what our true priorities are. And the determining factor is our perspective. Our perspective should determine our priorities, and our priorities should determine our practice. Do we have an eternal perspective? Or have we settled for an earthly, temporal perspective?

A biblical perspective informs us that anything which keeps us away from the love of the Father is idolatrous, no matter how “good” it appears to be. In one sense, it is not strictly correct to say that a Christian’s priorities should be God first, family second and career and ministry third. If Christ is our life (Colossians 3:3-4), he is our all, and he brooks no competition or even comparative ranking. A Christ-centered life means that everything else must be seen in relation to his lordship:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:1-3

This talk of setting our minds on things above sounds impractical in our day-to-day world. Many of us

have even been warned by well-intentioned people that if we become too heavenly minded, we are of no earthly good. How is it possible to set our minds on things above rather than earthly things? More to the point, is it possible to do so without becoming a hermit and living in isolation? Thomas Kelly's insight is helpful:

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.³⁴

In other words, God has created us with the ability to be aware of two levels at one time, but many of us are content to think only on one plane at a time. We suffer from a lack of attentiveness – a spiritual attention deficit disorder.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *St. Joan*, one of the characters asks Joan of Arc why God doesn't speak to him the way she claims God speaks to her. She replies, "The voice speaks to you all the time. You just fail to listen." This kind of listening requires us to acknowledge the fact that Immanuel, "God with Us," is, in fact, with us at all times and in all circumstances. Merely acknowledging his continual, abiding presence is

³⁴ Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*. New York: Harper Bros., 1941, 12.

a huge step toward setting our minds on things above and allowing those things to order our steps, our words and our thoughts. So this ordering of our minds on more than one level at once, is a skill that can be learned.

Like Martha (Luke 10:38-42), it is easy for us to become distracted by the anxieties and concerns of the world and to miss out on the one thing that is most needful. “‘Martha, Martha,’ the Lord answered, ‘you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her’” (vv. 41-42). The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things have a way of choking the Word in us and making it unfruitful (Mark 4:19).

Any time we allow our hearts to be divided, we will be choked. We will miss out on the best, and we will be worried and upset about many things. James tells us that “a double-minded man,” a man whose trust is divided between God and the world, is “unstable in all he does” (James 1:8). Unless we are diligent and watchful, we will miss out on the best in our quest for the good.

“This One Thing I Do”

Life gets confusing and conflicted. We have to decide what matters most, or we become victims of the loudest or latest demands. Paul, whose focused life made him, literally, a world-changer, discovered the key to a prioritized life and shared that key in Philippians 3:10-14. For the godly leader, this is the finish line of the rat race:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul is a man who had much of what this world would say is honorable and good to have. He accomplished an amazing amount in the approximately 20 years he functioned as a leader in the early church. The communities of faith he planted and the letters he wrote have helped shape Western culture. Part of Paul's ability to accomplish so much is defined in this phrase: "But one thing I do...."

The book of Acts and Paul's epistles reveal that he lived a real life in real circumstances with real options to choose from. He, like everyone else, had to decide what to do and what not to do. He obviously made wise choices. He pursued matters that mattered. When options conflicted he had the ability to choose well. But priorities have to begin with a "This one thing I do."

Without a defining, central Priority, there can be no sensible priorities in leading or in life.

Life is too complex to live it by lists of priorities. Paul knew what one thing gave definition to his life, and all his priorities grew out of that central focus. Priorities help us say “yes” and “no” to things that matter and don’t matter. Far more, having a consuming priority redefines how we say yes and how we live to make that “yes” a reality. Our lives are to be given over completely to something bigger than ourselves. As George Bernard Shaw said:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.³⁵

God has a purpose, a calling, a destiny for each of us. Our work is to strain for it, to stretch for it and pour out our lives in pursuit of that one great and glorious thing for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of us. In doing this, we will not find ourselves missing out on anything other than trivial pursuits. God’s desire for us is better than anything we would choose on our own.

³⁵ George Bernard Shaw, introduction to his play *Man and Superman*.

We lack the vision, imagination and creativity to see what he has in store for us (2 Corinthians 2:9).

Often, in our rush to pursue our own desires, we become like a dog whose leash is wrapped around a telephone pole. We pull harder and harder to free ourselves only to get more and more tangled and choked in the process. The master, in order to free us, must move us in precisely the opposite direction around the pole. Rather than viewing the master as liberator, we mistakenly think he is hindering us in our pursuit of joy and fulfillment. But if we will patiently trust the master enough to obey his calling, we will find that his is the only path to real freedom.

God's call is mysterious. We don't know where he's taking us. We don't know how long the journey will be; it may take a week, a year, a decade, a lifetime. We don't know. The one thing we can know is that his ways are infinitely better than ours. The wise thing, then, is to allow him to guide you in this journey, and resign yourself to the fact that God tends to reveal things on a "need-to-know" basis.

Choosing Wisely

So, how can you choose which task you should devote your time to? Peter F. Drucker gives us some practical guidelines aimed at helping us choose priorities. He observes that "there are always more productive tasks for tomorrow than there is time to do them and more opportunities than there are capable people to take care of them – not to mention the always

abundant problems and crises.”³⁶ Drucker urges leaders to determine which tasks deserve priority rather than allowing the pressures to make the decision.³⁷

How can leaders make such choices? Drucker provides the following guidelines:

- Pick the future over the past.
- Focus on opportunities rather than problems.
- Choose your own direction – rather than climbing on the bandwagon.
- Aim high, for something that will make a difference, rather than something that is safe and easy to do.³⁸

Choosing our priorities rather than allowing the pressures to choose them is important in the marketplace. In the spiritual arena, it’s crucial. God had harsh words for the ancient religious, military and financial leaders who boasted about their wisdom, strength and wealth.

As we consider his advice we need to be sure to order our priorities according to the words of Jeremiah 9:23-24:

³⁶ Excerpt as submitted from *The Effective Executive* by Peter F. Drucker. Copyright © 1966, 1967 by Peter F. Drucker. Copyright renewed 1994, 1995 by Peter F. Drucker. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 632.

³⁷ Ibid., 633.

³⁸ Ibid., 635.

This is what the Lord says:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.

Their arrogant words revealed that their priorities were out of order. Perhaps they had allowed the pressures of their world to dictate their focus. God urged them to evaluate their lives and rearrange their priorities. They should have chosen to focus first on knowing and understanding God and pleasing him. A leader who applies Drucker’s guidelines to his or her spiritual and business life will discover he or she is choosing what’s important rather than allowing the pressures of life to make the choices.

The spiritual life involves risks. God frequently calls us to do things that seem uncomfortable, risky and downright painful. Generally speaking, the people we find in Scripture who were called by God did not feel up to their calling. Whether it was Abraham’s call to leave home, Gideon’s call to lead an army, Esther’s call to approach the king or Mary’s call to give birth to the Messiah, none of them responded, “Sure, I can do that.” The first response to a calling from God is usually fear. Henry Blackaby writes,

Some people say, “God will never ask me to do something I can’t do.” I have come to the place in my life that, if the assignment I sense God is giving me is something that I know I can handle, I know it is probably *not* from God. The kind of assignments God gives in the Bible are always God-sized. They are always beyond what people can do, because he wants to demonstrate his nature, his strength, his provisions, and his kindness to his people and to a watching world. This is the only way the world will come to know him.³⁹

³⁹ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994, 138.

Power and Influence

When there is a sudden power outage, people become incredibly desperate for alternate energy sources. Suddenly, batteries that were readily available and relatively inexpensive become scarce and overpriced. In a blackout, it doesn't matter how nice your stereo is or how many watts your flashlight has. If the power isn't there, they aren't going to work.

Similarly, it doesn't matter how modern your car is, if the battery is dead. It doesn't matter if your car has the best transmission, without battery power it is going nowhere. It doesn't matter if you have a full tank of gas, without battery power, you are not moving. It could have the best electrical system, all of the bells and whistles, it could be the most expensive of cars, but if the battery is dead, you won't be going anywhere. Everything else in life can be going well, but if you are powerless, you aren't going anywhere either.

If we were to compile a list of feelings that most people loathe, right up near the top would be the feeling of powerlessness. That is not to say there aren't other feelings we're not fond of, but when we feel helpless, we often cannot think of anything else until we can move through that situation as quickly as possible. This is simply the case for the vast majority of people, but for those in a position of leadership, power is essential.

Power is crucial to leadership. Without it, leaders can't lead. Unfortunately, power and influence are not always used to help others. If you're a leader, you have some share in these commodities. You have power over others; they listen to you, and you influence them. What you do with that power and influence matters more than you may realize.

In the Bible, there are four realms of power and authority. First, there is the authority of a man in terms of being a husband. Second, there is the authority of parents over their children. Third, God gives authority to the church. Elders or overseers have certain authority as they exercise their office in the arena of the church. Finally, there is the idea of human government. God uses and gives a measure of divinely ordained authority to human governments.

Clearly, all four of these realms of authority can and, unfortunately very often, are abused and distorted. When they go beyond their proper exercise of authority, they have strayed beyond their God-given intentions. But it has pleased God to establish these four realms of authority.

The author of Psalm 82 describes a scene in which God chastises and challenges Israel's judges, men who exercised their authority in this final governmental realm. Because of their role as God's delegates and image-bearers, these men were referred to as "gods." However, they had begun to exert their power in ungodly ways, abusing and distorting their God-given arena of authority:

How long will you defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.... You are "gods"; you are all sons of the Most High. But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler.

Psalm 82:2-4, 6-7

Rather than defending the unjust and judging with partiality, they were accountable to defend the weak and fatherless and to protect the rights of the poor and oppressed. They were to exercise their power in a godly manner, a manner that would rescue the needy and deliver them from the domination of wicked individuals.

Though they were assigned godlike functions in their roles as judges, the psalmist predicted that they would fall like mere men. While their power may have given them a sense of invincibility, they would one day be called upon to answer to the Judge.

All power and influence is given to us from God as a stewardship; and he will hold leaders accountable for their use of power.. Our challenge is to be faithful and diligent stewards of what we have received. Since all leaders face the same fate, we must exercise our power and influence with grace and love.

The Subtle and Benevolent Power of God

It is an unfortunate but true fact that people are typically more impressed by human power and influence than they are by the ever-present, but generally overlooked, evidences of God’s limitless power and influence. A very simple example of this can be found in our near-reverence for human opinion polls and our lack of concern over God’s opinion clearly stated in the pages of the Bible. Yet we are surrounded by evidences of God’s wisdom and creative power. God may seem remote and invisible, but his fingerprints are everywhere to be found by those who have eyes to see and ears to hear.

We have an alarming tendency, as well, to live as though we will never die, as though we will never be called to account for our words and actions. Death, for many, is merely a philosophical construct, an idea that never becomes a reality but only haunts us in our increasingly rare moments of quiet contemplation. Still, the Bible is clear: “The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away” (Psalm 90:10). Even in our time of medical

advancements, no one has found a way to stave off death forever. Therefore, it would behoove us to have a greater fear of God than of men. The fear of men brings temptation; the fear of God, however, brings wisdom.

The book of Daniel underscores the temporary nature of earthly kingdoms in contrast to the everlasting kingdom that will be ushered in by “one like a son of man” who receives “authority, glory and sovereign power” (Daniel 7:13-14) from the Ancient of Days. The text goes on to say, “His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed” (v. 14).

Clearly, we live in the already/not-yet tension of a kingdom which has begun but has not been brought into its fullness. Even the greatest joy we can experience on earth is fleeting. As Alister McGrath observes,

The overwhelming sense of joy that comes with achieving something worthwhile can thus be seen as a hint of something even more wonderful that is yet to come. On earth, such joy is transient, fading away with a speed which can frighten us as much as disappoint us. It seems so transient and brief. If we were to pursue such earthly joy for its own good, we would be doomed to frustration and bitterness. But what if such experiences of joy are not to be seen as things to be captured before they fade away, but as hints of a joy which we have

yet to experience, something which awaits us?³⁹

The best we can experience here on earth is, in the words of an old hymn, but “a foretaste of glory divine.” And we wait with eager anticipation and work with all diligence to see God’s kingdom come and God’s will be done on earth as it is in heaven. History will have its culmination in God’s timing.

Yet even in the meantime, the God of Israel has authority over nature and nations; he changes times and seasons; he sets up kings and deposes them; he gives wisdom to the wise and knowledge to the discerning (2:21). The affairs of people and of nations may appear to be independent of God’s divine control, but regardless of how people rebel against the plan and purposes of God, “the Most High is sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes” (4:17, 25, 32). This prophetic book anticipates the day when “the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed, nor will it be left to another people. It will crush all those kingdoms and bring them to an end, but it will itself endure forever” (2:44).

Men’s kingdoms are temporary and fleeting; God’s power and influence are absolute. The kingdoms of men are pictured throughout the book of Daniel – one overtaking the other – from the Babylonians to the Medo-Persians to the Greeks and finally the Romans. All the kingdoms of the earth have their birth, growth, decay and death. Our current western civilization will not escape a similar fate, regardless of who is elected.

Far from being a pessimistic view, though, if we believe that God is who the Bible would have us believe he is, we can maintain a vital optimism. McGrath goes on to say,

All of us need something reliable, unshakeable and secure on which to build our lives. There is little point in building our lives on a set of values or beliefs which will go out of date in five years. God is precisely such an unshakeable and immovable foundation for our lives.³⁹

We know that when God chooses to bring history to a close, he will do so in a benevolent way. History will not end in a minor key. Rather, when history is consummated, everything that has been upside-down will be turned rightside-up. We must only remember that it will not be us who usher this into existence. We do not have the power and influence to accomplish it. Only God has that authority.

And yet this God who is so powerful and so influential is not some sort of cosmic tyrant. As Klaus Issler says, “God’s way of working is not always obvious or stunning. Much of the time, God is so subtle.”³⁹ Far from overpowering us, God most often chooses to walk among those who invite his manifest presence, to speak to those who will listen to his still, small voice.

Though he possesses more power than we could ever imagine, he always uses his authority for the greatest benefit of those who serve him. His service

therefore equates to perfect freedom, because his desire is, regardless of what appearances may suggest, always to bless and enrich his people. He demonstrates his loving and merciful intentions toward them in his promise and plan in the coming ages to “show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7).

The most perfect example we have of one who is all-powerful and yet completely benevolent at the same time is, of course, Jesus. Here is the most powerful man who ever walked the earth, one who had the authority to say to the wind and the waves, “Hush; be still.” He could raise the dead and cast out demons. He could heal all manner of sickness and know the thoughts of a man. And yet how did he use this power? The word that comes to the biblically-informed mind is an odd one: gently. He used persuasion rather than coercion. He looked at people through the lens of compassion. In a word, he was a lover. He possessed authority and power such as the world has never seen, but he exercised incredible restraint.

Improper Stewardship of Influence

God frequently allows people to come to the end of their resources in order to get their attention. Tired of clamoring for our attention, fighting through all the noise with which we surround ourselves on a constant basis, it seems as if God hides himself from us, allowing us to come finally to a grinding halt. Richard Foster writes with great clarity and honesty about such periods of

dryness. He offers us insight into what God is attempting to produce in us:

Through all of this, paradoxically, God is purifying our faith by threatening to destroy it.... We know more deeply than ever before our capacity for infinite self-deception.... Our trust in all exterior and interior results is being shattered so that we can learn faith in God alone. Through our barrenness of soul God is producing detachment, humility, patience, perseverance. Most surprising of all, our very dryness produces the habit of prayer in us. All distractions are gone.... The soul is parched. And thirsty. And this thirst can lead us to prayer.³⁹

During such times of adversity, we are usually sufficiently humbled to get a better grip on the truth that life is not about us, but about the One who created us. Rarely will we learn this lesson apart from the pain and frustration of having come to the end of our own resources. Daniel 4 shows us a powerful man who lost everything until he learned the lesson that power is a trust, not a prerogative. Seldom has a man who possessed so much fallen so far.

King Nebuchadnezzar's list of accomplishments is nothing short of awesome. He was the son of Nabopolassar, founder of the Chaldean dynasty, and ruled the Babylonians from 605-562 BC. His was the most powerful and longest reign among the Babylonian

kings during the Neo-Babylonian period (625-539 BC). Under his capable rule, he consolidated the empire and brought Babylonia to the summit of its influence and prosperity.

As crown prince, Nebuchadnezzar successfully campaigned against the Assyrians, Egyptians and Syrians. When he captured Palestine in 605 BC, he brought Daniel and other Judean leaders to Babylonia. After ascending to the throne in that same year, he began an extensive rebuilding program in his capital city. His engineering accomplishments included the ziggurat, two defense walls, the gateway to Ishtar, new canals, many shrines and new temples dedicated to Bel-Marduk and other deities. He also restored and constructed buildings and temples in other key Babylonian cities. Some of his architectural accomplishments were so impressive that they are listed among the seven wonders of the ancient world.

Nebuchadnezzar enjoyed years of dazzling military and economic achievements. He was at the zenith of power and influence. From a worldly perspective, he had it all. Even when God attempted to speak to him through a terrifying dream, Nebuchadnezzar shut out the voice of God's spokesman, Daniel.

When Daniel interpreted Nebuchadnezzar's dream, he warned the king that God would soon humble him unless and until he acknowledged that the Most High alone is "sovereign over the kingdoms of men and gives them to anyone he wishes" (Daniel 4:25). Notice

especially Daniel's urgent counsel to King Nebuchadnezzar: "Therefore, O king, be pleased to accept my advice: Renounce your sins by doing what is right, and your wickedness by being kind to the oppressed. It may be that then your prosperity will continue" (v. 27).

But the king ignored Daniel, and one year later we find him strutting on the roof of his royal palace, filled with pride because of his many accomplishments (Daniel 4:30). That's the point at which the worldly perspective was eclipsed by the heavenly one. We read that while he was boasting, "a voice came from heaven" (v. 31); God came to this powerful ruler and showed him the Source of all power, both in heaven and on earth. Like so many other influential leaders who preceded and followed him, Nebuchadnezzar fell prey to the illusion that it was he who had accomplished these great things. Tragically, he failed to recognize that God had allowed him to rise to power.

Any leader can learn an essential lesson from this great and powerful ruler. Any leader, no matter how accomplished or successful, is at any given time only a moment away from destruction. King Nebuchadnezzar lost everything and became like an animal. He was functionally insane for seven years. This image of the great Nebuchadnezzar eating grass like a cow should be a vision every leader fixes firmly in his or her mind. God graphically reminded this leader that, compared to Almighty God, he was like a beast in the field.

At the end of the seven years, God restored his sanity and providentially returned him to power that easily could have otherwise been usurped by others. The lesson was costly, but Nebuchadnezzar never forgot the truth that the Most High alone does as he pleases. In fact, the words of Nebuchadnezzar are all the more enlightening considering the journey God took him on:

Then I praised the Most High; I honored and glorified him who lives forever. His dominion is an eternal dominion; his kingdom endures from generation to generation. All the peoples of the earth are regarded as nothing. He does as he pleases with the powers of heaven and the peoples of the earth. No one can hold back his hand or say to him: “What have you done?”

Daniel 4:34b-35

God never bestows positional and personal power as an end in itself, but always as a trust to be exercised with stewardship for the benefit of others. Those who misuse this trust by squandering it on extending their own egos through oppressing and manipulating others will ultimately give an account to the One who gave them their power in the first place.

Daniel advised King Nebuchadnezzar to use his positional power in the service of others through acts of kindness. Leaders today must use their God-given influence in the same way.

The Influencing Power of Information

Without influence, there is no leadership. But how do we influence others? We can learn a great deal about this subject by understanding the manner in which God exercises his own influence. An event recorded in Acts 10:9-22 demonstrates how God influenced Peter to do something that he, on the basis of a deep conviction, was adamantly opposed to doing:

About noon...Peter went up on the roof to pray. He became hungry and wanted something to eat, and while the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. He saw heaven opened and something like a sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat."

"Surely not, Lord!" Peter responded. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean."

The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

This happened three times, and immediately the sheet was taken back to heaven.

While Peter was wondering about the meaning of the vision, the men sent by Cornelius found out where Simon's house was and stopped by the gate. They called out, asking if Simon who was known as Peter was staying there.

While Peter was still thinking about the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Simon, three men are looking for you. So get up and go downstairs. Do not hesitate to go with them, for I have sent them."

Peter went down and said to the men, "I'm the one you're looking for. Why have you come?"

The men replied, "We have come from Cornelius the centurion. He is a righteous and God-fearing man, who is respected by all the Jewish people. A holy angel told him to have you come to his house so that he could hear what you have to say."

Peter was influenced by God through various streams of information. Through all of this, he was caused to re-think some things – namely, what/who is clean and what/who is unclean – from a new perspective. By leading Peter in the right direction, God facilitated Peter's own discovery that eventually resulted in a major paradigm shift – both in Peter's life and in the life of the early church.

God employed a powerful strategy to influence Peter. He moved him from deep opposition to committed willingness within a short span of time. A brief look at how God exerted his influence will be beneficial in demonstrating how today's leaders can bring a positive influence to bear in their own situations.

Attempts to better understand how people influence each other have resulted in helpful classifications of power types. Most frequently cited are French and Raven's five types of power: reward, coercion, expert, referent and legitimate.³⁹ While illustrations of all five types of influence are found in Scripture, God most heavily draws on a sixth type of power: informational power. God has revealed his will in Scripture. From Genesis through Revelation, the Bible portrays God speaking with people – teaching, explaining, reasoning, debating, asking, answering.

Psalm 119, for example, includes statement upon statement of God's influence on the psalmist through revealed truth. God uses his word to reveal information to us. This information causes us to shift our thinking and begin the process of renewing our minds. Apart from a new perspective, permanent and lasting change is difficult if not impossible. Our decisions are a result of one of three factors: our emotions, wrong thoughts or right thoughts. If we base our decisions solely on our emotions, we will have instability. Our choices will seem right or wrong depending on our prevailing mood of the moment. If we fill our minds with wrong thoughts, based on bad information, we will make wrong decisions. But if we make our decisions on the basis of sound thinking

and wise understanding – being patient enough to gather sufficient supplies of both – then we will make good choices in a stable environment. Psalm 119 tells us that such thoughts come ultimately from God and not from ourselves.

Leaders can promise, threaten, model, draw on expertise and use the power of their office to influence followers. But God, who has a deeper reservoir than any human leader for all of these types of power, spends enormous amounts of time using information to influence his people. Not only does he give us this information in the Bible, but he also calls specific individuals as his agents, those who know his Word and are willing to make that knowledge known to others.

Leaders, like God, can draw upon at least six types of power when they want to influence followers. But God models an important principle. People are most powerfully influenced when they have a clear, logical understanding of “what” and “why.” Without the right information, achieving the desired result is next to impossible.

The Proper Use of Power

The early church faced a problem when Gentiles were being asked to submit to Jewish rituals. Seeking a definitive answer, Paul and Barnabas met with the apostles and elders in Acts 15 to give an account of their missionary journey. From their testimony, it was clear that God was doing a marvelous work among the Gentiles; the only question was how these Gentile

Christians would relate to their Jewish brothers and sisters. Must they obey the Law of Moses in order to be followers of Jesus?

When they finished [speaking], James spoke up: “Brothers, listen to me. Simon has described to us how God at first showed his concern by taking from the Gentiles a people for himself. The words of the prophets are in agreement with this.... It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God. Instead we should write to them, telling them to abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. For Moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every Sabbath.

Acts 15:13-15, 19-22

In other words, once the case had been heard, James, the half-brother of Jesus and leader of the Jerusalem church, made a judgment. He said that the church wasn't about to make salvation difficult for the Gentiles. This decision put into place the resources needed to communicate this message to the rest of the church.

James and the other church leaders used their power to accomplish something positive for the kingdom of God. They got the job done cleanly and quickly – they

made their decision and considered the issue resolved. Then they recorded that decision (good documentation doesn't allow for misinformation) and delegated to others the responsibility for communicating it abroad.

Problems provide leaders with opportunities to exercise their power constructively. Such a statement may cause some leaders to back off a step or two. Why? Because the word "power" is one that is seldom used by those who are politically adroit. According to Rosabeth Moss Kanter, "Power is America's last dirty word.... People who have it deny it; people who want it do not want to appear to hunger for it; and people who engage in its machinations do so secretly."³⁹

Research indicates that the "bad rap" power has taken is largely undeserved. Most people prefer to work for a boss who has power because he or she will be more likely to delegate, reward talent and build a team that places subordinates in significant positions. Weak leaders, on the other hand, tend to create frustration and failure because they lack the resources needed to get the job done.

Kanter concludes that "power can mean efficacy and capacity.... Power in organizations is analogous in simple terms to physical power: it is the ability to mobilize resources (human and material) to get things done. The true sign of power...is accomplishment."

God is the ultimate source of all power and influence. He gives it to various human leaders for a season, and he warns us that he will hold us accountable. Thus, we are called to use power and influence with

Think about that: The only way the world will come to know God is if the people he calls actually take him up on the challenge to live the life of faith! God calls us to a grand adventure, a life of trust and risk and fulfillment, a life whose priorities are shaped by God's divine agenda. But if we allow ourselves to be distracted from pursuing God's best plans and, instead, chase after myriad "good" things, we will fail to display the nature, strength, provision and kindness of God to the world. And our world will suffer for it.

grace and truth and to exercise power and influence in service to him and for the good of others.

Integrity

After surveying thousands of people around the world and performing more than 400 written case studies, James Kouzes and Barry Posner identified those characteristics most desired in a leader. In virtually every survey, honesty or integrity was identified more frequently than any other trait.⁴⁰

That makes sense, doesn't it? If people are going to follow someone, whether into battle or in business or ministry, they want assurance that their leader can be trusted. They want to know that he or she will keep promises and follow through with commitments.

⁴⁰ Kouzes, James M., and Posner, Barry Z. *Credibility: How leaders gain and lose it, why people demand it* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 14.

The Integrity of Samuel

In light of this research, Israel's high regard for Samuel comes as no surprise. Samuel was a man who exuded integrity. Nowhere is this best illustrated than in 1 Samuel 12:1-4:

Samuel said to all Israel, "I have listened to everything you said to me and have set a king over you. Now you have a king as your leader. As for me, I am old and gray, and my sons are here with you. I have been your leader from my youth until this day. Here I stand. Testify against me in the presence of the Lord and his anointed. Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated? Whom have I oppressed? From whose hand have I accepted a bribe to make me shut my eyes? If I have done any of these, I will make it right."

"You have not cheated or oppressed us," they replied. "You have not taken anything from anyone's hand."

During his farewell speech, after having led Israel for decades, Samuel promised to repay anything he had unjustly taken from anyone. What a promise! Even more impressive was the people's response. Not one person rose up to make a claim against Samuel.

Samuel's honesty and personal integrity permeated every area of his life. These two characteristics directed how he regarded his possessions,

his business dealings and his treatment of those who were weaker than himself. Samuel held himself accountable to the people he led. He opened himself up to the scrutiny of everyone with whom he had ever had dealings. As a result of this practice, Samuel's leadership has become legendary as this story has been told and retold throughout the centuries.

People want to know that their leader can be trusted. They want to know that leaders will keep promises and follow through on commitments. Promises and commitments are significant, though, in our day of Machiavellian ethics, it seems that they have become optional. We often seem more concerned with convenience and performance. We give lip-service to the importance of character, but we have the idea that when things get tough, the rules can be changed and commitments and covenants may be discarded at will.

But the Bible makes clear just how important our covenants are. Throughout the Scriptures, God focuses on the fact that he is a God who makes and keeps his covenants, that he can be trusted (1 Chronicles 16:15; Psalm 105:8). God can be trusted because he is trustworthy. That's the point: it always comes down to the issue of character, not just words. Biblical integrity is not just doing the right thing; it's a matter of having the right heart and allowing the person you are on the inside to match the person you are on the outside. This is how God is. This is how his people should be.

Perhaps a good word to think of is "consistency." There must be consistency between what is inside and what is outside. God is totally consistent. His actions

and behaviors always match his character and nature. And his goal for us is nothing less. Christ's objective for his disciples is to make us disciplined people. In the words of John Ortberg, "Disciplined people can do the right thing at the right time in the right way for the right reason." Just like God.

The God Who Never Changes

Is there anyone we can trust? People let us down again and again, because there is often a discrepancy between what they claim to believe and how they actually live. But God will never let us down, because he never changes. His promises are as good as his unchanging character: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Jesus does not change. The Living God does not change. His love, his truth and his goodness are not governed by external circumstances or conditions – they never vacillate. Therefore, God's character and the promises he makes are supremely worthy of our trust and commitment. He does what he says, and his covenant love is always dependable.

This is fundamental. What can I lean against? What can I trust in? What can I pursue with reckless abandon? So many of us have been burned by relationships, by people going back on their word, claiming that they said something when they did not say it. It can make you cynical if you're not careful. But when we come back to the character of God, we realize, "He is the unchanging standard."

Because it is impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18; Titus 1:2), he is the ultimately reliable source of hope. His changeless character is the foundation of all of his promises. Whatever he says he will do is as good as done, and when we hope in his promises, this hope becomes an anchor for the soul, both firm and secure (Hebrews 6:19). Unlike many parents, God's yes is always yes, and his no is always no (James 5:12). When God says yes, it stays yes; when he says no, it stays no. This has both negative and positive ramifications. Negatively, there is no getting God to change his mind through bribery or whining. Positively, when God makes a promise, he can be counted on to fulfill that word.

The sting remains of broken promises from parents – ballgames missed, trips never taken. The writer of Proverbs accurately diagnoses much of our present malaise when he says, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick” (Proverbs 13:12a). Much of the heartache we experience is directly related to the unreliability of people.

But God's actions flow perfectly out of his character: “He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change his mind; for he is not a man, that he should change his mind” (1 Samuel 15:29). There is no possibility of manipulating or bribing or bargaining with God, because he will never compromise his perfect integrity. God himself has testified, “I the Lord do not change” (Malachi 3:6). God's perfect and constant character allows us to trust in his promises and timing.

God *is* integrity. He does not merely act with integrity; integrity is his character. But what about us? The biblical virtue of integrity points to a consistency between what is inside and what is outside, between belief and behavior, our words and our ways, our attitudes and our actions, our values and our practice.

The Dis-integration of Isaiah

When the prophet Isaiah had a vision of the glorious and awesome Creator of the universe, he was overwhelmed by the holiness of God.

In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”

Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Isaiah 6:1-7

R.C. Sproul comments on Isaiah’s encounter with the holiness of God:

To be undone means to come apart at the seams, to be unraveled. What Isaiah was expressing is what modern psychologists describe as the experience of personal disintegration. To disintegrate means exactly what the word suggests, “disintegrate.” To integrate something is to put pieces together in a unified whole.... The word integrity...[suggests] a person whose life is whole or wholesome. In modern slang we say, “He’s got it all together.”⁴¹

Isaiah says, “I’m undone. I’m torn apart,” which is just the opposite of integrity. To have integrity is to be integrated, to be whole, to have it all together in a sense, to be consistent. Isaiah finds himself torn apart, and this forces him to realize his own deficiency. When faced with the awesome holiness of God, Isaiah becomes

⁴¹ Sproul, R.C. *One Holy Passion* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1987).

aware of his own uncleanness. Throughout the Bible, man's encounters with God are very consistent in this way.

For example, when Peter realizes the power of Jesus he falls to his knees and says, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8) Peter knows that what has just happened is not natural; it is, in fact, supernatural. This is not the way things work, but instead of saying, "How did he do that?" he says, "Depart from me, I'm a sinful man." Peter is not only aware of Jesus' power, but of holiness and his own sinfulness. An encounter with holiness is traumatic. The holiness of God becomes a standard to which we can never measure up, and this is traumatic for people who so desperately want to fool themselves into thinking they are self-sufficient.

In John 18, a cohort of 600 armed soldiers comes to arrest Jesus and have their own traumatic encounter with holiness:

Jesus, knowing all that was going to happen to him, went out and asked them, "Who is it you want?"

"Jesus of Nazareth," they replied.

"I am he," Jesus said. (And Judas the traitor was standing there with them.) When Jesus said, "I am he," they drew back and fell to the ground.

John 18:4-6

Six hundred soldiers fall to the ground, and the word that is used implies that they were sort of held there, pinned to the ground. There are many speculations as to what exactly happened, but it appears as if the veil of his flesh lifted, and that pre-incarnate glory that he had before the foundation of the world was opened up for a microsecond. It was sufficient to overwhelm them. R. Kent Hughes, in his commentary *Behold the Man* suggests:

Jesus' answer was one of his last uses of the power by which he calmed the seas, stilled the winds, and healed the sick. The cohort didn't arrest Jesus – he arrested them. His words were a gracious warning that they were in over their heads.⁴²

They must have known something wasn't quite right. Six hundred armed men are now more afraid than the one they came looking for.

Throughout the Bible, men discover just how traumatic an encounter with holiness is. The transfiguration scared Peter so much he didn't know what to say (Mark 9:6). John, on the isle of Patmos, sees Jesus and is so overwhelmed he “fell at his feet as though dead” (Revelation 1:17). This is the same John who had leaned on Jesus in the upper room (John 13:25). John would often sit next to Jesus. There was an intimate bond between them. But when he saw that

⁴² R. Kent Hughes, *Behold the Man* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books), 129-130.

holiness, he was overwhelmed. The conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus (Acts 9:4), Moses' reaction to the burning bush (Exodus 3:6), Joshua's interaction with the commander of the army of the Lord (Joshua 5:14), Jacob's response after his dream at Bethel (Genesis 28:17), Gideon realizing he's been interacting with the angel of the Lord (Judges 6:22). The list goes on and on of people who are absolutely terrified and overwhelmed by the awe-inspiring holiness of God.

God's holiness is truly awesome, and our natural reaction to him is one of fear. But there is another side of his nature, his closeness to us, that somehow allows us to have this relationship with him. Jesus, the mediator between God and man, makes it possible for us to avoid being consumed by his awesome holiness, and instead to be declared righteous. That is amazing. The Living God is willing to say that you are righteous. How is that possible? It's because Christ himself is in us.

When we live our entire lives before the face of God (*corem deo*) and practice a constant abiding in his presence, we realize that being people who do not manifest integrity is inconsistent with the dignity and destiny we've been called to. We have been called to live on a higher plane than that, to "live a life worthy of the calling [we] have received" (Ephesians 4:1), because, now, Christ is in us. He wants to live his life through us (Galatians 2:20); we are not only his representatives (2 Corinthians 5:20), as members of his church we are, in some mysterious way, his body (Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:24).

Now, that's impossible unless he dwells in us, but therein lies the solution. In fact, this is the genius of the Christian life. Christianity is not a religion; it's a relationship. Christianity is not about rules and regulations. Instead, it is the presence and power of a person who indwells us and promises to never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5).

As fallen men and women, we realize how disintegrated we are when we come face to face with God's perfect integration. And, like Isaiah, it forces us to recognize our deep need for personal reconstruction. Isaiah realized the depth of his own sin in the process of catching a glimpse of God's perfect holiness, and he acknowledged those areas in which he had turned from his commitments as a priest and a prophet. But his commitment and his life as a faithful prophet demonstrate for us the possibility of framing a life of integrity with God's help.

The Hypocrisy of the Pharisees

If we fail to face up to our inadequacy, we fall into the trap of the Pharisees: hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is the opposite of integrity, and this is precisely what Jesus accuses the Pharisees and teachers of the law of in Matthew 23. Six times in this sermon, he uses the stinging word "hypocrites" (vv. 13, 15, 23, 24, 27, 29). Originally, a hypocrite meant an actor who put on a mask to assume a false identity while he played for the audience. This accusation would be particularly offensive to the Pharisees who hated all forms of

Hellenization, including the Greek theatre. In essence, Jesus was calling them the very thing they hated.

Anyone who has ever labored under the false notion that Jesus was some kind of quiet, nice man will have trouble with these verses:

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when he becomes one, you make him twice as much a son of hell as you are....

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of dead men’s bones and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness....

“You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”

Matthew 23:15, 27-28, 33

This is not, to use Philip Yancey’s expression, “Mr. Rogers with a beard!” Jesus’ language reveals the depth of his righteous anger. Notice that each verse that includes the word hypocrite begins with the words: “Woe to you.” This word “woe” (*ouai*) can contain pathos, anger, warning and derision; and may include all of these at the same time. In this passage, Jesus

lambasted the Pharisees for saying one thing and doing another. Their lack of integrity was not only substandard for those who would follow Christ, as religious leaders they were guilty of misrepresenting God the Father.

We have already discovered that integrity – the direct opposite quality of hypocrisy – is the quality that people want most in a leader. Clearly, the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jesus’ day failed to live up to that standard. When we talk about integrity today, we generally use other, closely related terms such as *ethics* and *morality*. But a clear understanding of the concept of integrity requires clear thinking about all three words. Each has a distinct meaning. When properly used, they bring clarity to a crucial but often misunderstood leadership essential:

- *Ethics* refers to a standard of right and wrong, good and evil. It’s what the Pharisees *said* they believed was right.
- *Morality* is a lived standard of right and wrong, good and evil. It’s what the Pharisees actually did.
- *Integrity* means “sound, complete, integrated.” To the extent that a person’s ethics and morality are integrated, that person has integrity. To the extent that a person’s ethics and morality are not integrated, that person lacks integrity.

Let’s look at this another way. If your friend John tells you he will lie, cheat and steal, he has a low ethic. If he does business that way, he also has a low morality. John is unethical and immoral, but he has integrity – twisted as it may be – because the morality is

consistent with the ethic. If John claims to cheat and steal but doesn't cheat and steal, he is moral in practice but lacks integrity, because his morality doesn't match his ethic.

You can have a high or low ethic. You can be moral or immoral. The choice is yours. But if you want to have integrity, you must choose your ethic and live to match it. Anyone who wants to lead at least owes it to prospective followers to let them know what they are getting into.

The Bible teaches a high and holy ethic. A person who claims to be a Christian and to live by biblical standards makes an ethical statement. He or she has committed to a certain morality. For that person to have integrity, then, he or she must live by the biblical ethic. Jesus makes it unequivocally clear that the worst choice is the hypocritical one. This is serious business. When we find our walk not matching our talk, the probing question of Jesus should echo in our hearts: "Why do you call me, 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say?" (Luke 6:46). If we imagine the holy eyes of Jesus Christ, Lord of the universe, as he asks this question, we ought to be at least a little frightened.

The Process of Integration

It's self-evident that a hypocrite is unqualified to guide others toward attaining higher character. No one respects a person who talks a good game but fails to play by the rules. What a leader does will have a greater impact on those he or she wishes to lead than what a leader says. A person may forget 90 percent of what a

leader says, but he or she will never forget how the leader lives. This is why Paul tells Timothy:

Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your progress. Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 4:15-16

In this life, we never attain perfection. But there should be progress toward the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. We will never attain it this side of eternity, but there should be visible progress, evident to others. Notice the two things Paul exhorts Timothy to watch: your life and your doctrine. In other words, give careful attention to your behavior and your belief. Make sure they match. Constantly examine yourself to see whether or not your walk matches your talk.

Bill Hendricks encountered an illustration of this principle in the go-go days of the real estate market of the 1980s. He met a developer who claimed to have woven what he called “biblical principles of business” into his deals. But when the market went south, he skipped town and left his investors to pick up the pieces – and the debts.

Another of Bill’s friends stands in sharp contrast to the first. He too was a land developer. He too talked of integrating biblical principles into his business. And when the market crashed, so did his empire. But unlike the man who ran away, this land developer, as a matter

of conscience, worked out a plan to pay back his investors.⁴³

Money tends to bring out what's really inside, doesn't it? When it comes to financial matters, you really discover what a man is made of. Which of those two men would you rather follow? Which one demonstrated integrity? David writes about the man "who keeps his oath even when it hurts" (Psalm 15:4b). He is the man who "will never be shaken" (v. 5b). There is simply no substitute for a man or woman of consistent Christ-like character.

That doesn't imply that any of us will be perfect. In fact, the New Testament doesn't call for perfect leaders; it calls for those who are *models of progress in their faith*. We will all stumble in many ways, but our desire is to see progress toward the integration of our claims and our practice.

Secrecy and Small Things

The best way to discern whether or not we are making progress is to ask ourselves, "How do I live when no one's looking?" It's easy to look like a person of integrity when people are watching, but do I live my private life with the same level of consistency as I live my public life? So much of our lives are consumed with what might be called "image maintenance." We spend

⁴³ Adapted from Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks, *As Iron Sharpens Iron* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 67-69.

vast amounts of energy trying to get people to think about us the way we want to be thought about. John Ortberg suggests, “Human conversation is largely an endless attempt to convince others that we are more assertive or clever or gentle or successful than they might think if we did not carefully educate them.”⁴⁴ Jesus’ words in Matthew 6:1 are hard to get around: “Be careful not to do your acts of righteousness before men, to be seen by them. If you do, you will have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

It’s possible to live one life publicly and another life privately. That’s not integrity; it’s an invitation for God’s discipline. We are to live with consistency in public and in private, because our Father “sees what is done in secret” (Matthew 6:4). Since this is the case, being faithful in small, secret things is a big deal. It may be the case that God is far less concerned with your public persona than he is in your private character. He may be more concerned with how you manage your personal checking account than how well you administer the books on a big business deal. It’s in the small, secret places of self-evaluation that God’s grace changes you and shapes you into the image of his Son.

In the end, we become what our desires make us. Who we become reveals what we really desire. If you desire the praise of men, then you will become a certain kind of person. But if you desire the praise of God, then integrity will need to become a priority. As you sense

⁴⁴ John Ortberg, *The Life You’ve Always Wanted* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 164.

the overwhelming holiness of our Creator, you will understand how unraveled you are. But as you focus on the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, you will recognize that even though you may feel undone, you are not undone because he has made you whole. His grace is sufficient, for his power is made perfect in your weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).