

# WHAT REALLY MATTERS IN LEADERSHIP?

*Insights from the Life of Jesus*



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# **What Really Matters in Leadership?**

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**By Adrian Pei**

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*Scripture quotations, unless otherwise noted, are from the New International Version of the Bible.*

*While all stories in this book are true, some names and identifying information in this book have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.*

*Cover Design by Ryan Smith*

**To the Leader who gave us answers, before we knew what questions  
to ask:**

*Since you walked this earth...*

*Things haven't changed that much.  
The weak are still overlooked and oppressed  
Our streets are still filled with the tears of those who grieve  
Those who are loudest still get promoted  
And it's about who you know  
We still put on our best face  
As we fight to earn and prove our worth*

*Lord, I still long for a world  
Where those who mourn are comforted  
Where the meek inherit the earth  
Where those who hunger and thirst for righteousness are filled  
I still long for a world  
Where those who are broken, who are persecuted  
Where those who make peace, those who are pure in heart  
Will see You  
And be called Your children.*

*May Your Kingdom come.*

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## Preface

What really matters in leadership? Throughout my past decade of working in leadership development, I've benefited from countless books, seminars and articles on what makes a great leader. Over time, it seemed that much of the wisdom I was gathering came from two major camps of leadership. First, the Christian leadership material that taught me to be ethical, kind and loving — to be honest, not cheat or be too negative. Second, the business leadership material that encouraged me to work hard, stay disciplined in pursuit of my goals, and do what it took to get my name out there and move my agenda forward. I learned a lot from both camps, and found myself trying to live in both worlds, borrowing the best from each. But something always felt missing.

When I opened the pages of the Bible to see what Jesus Christ himself lived out, I discovered a different kind of language and vision. There was talk about "strength in weakness," "compassion in suffering," noticing people that others had overlooked, and doing things in secret when nobody else was watching. I read phrases like "the first shall be last, and the last shall be first." There were examples of people living for a bigger purpose than just their individual happiness. What I saw in the life of Jesus wasn't just about ethics or virtues in the classic sense of those words. And they also seemed to fly in the face of pragmatic thinking about ambition, aggression, and promotion.

However, the reality is that this vision and life that Jesus lived out caused a following of billions of people, whose heart he captured. This seemed to be far more than good teaching; it was as if Jesus could see into the depths of peoples' hearts, and knew what really mattered to them before they could even articulate it themselves. This was just as supernatural to me, as any miracle Jesus performed on earth. The Bible had been sitting on my bookshelf all along with these insights, and I was ready to dive in and read it in a new way.

So what was it about Jesus' life and leadership that was so unique and compelling? And what can we learn from it to apply to our own leadership today? This book contains eleven of the leadership insights that I keep coming back to during my own biggest challenges and trials — the lessons that have really mattered in my experiences of leadership!

As you read, you may discover some leadership insights that are very familiar and that instinctively "seem" true, such as leading with humility or grace. But *why* exactly are these so compelling and effective? How do they connect with the life that Jesus lived out, and how can we apply them in our leadership today? This book explores these questions.

You may also discover some leadership applications that haven't always been associated with Christian leadership or behavior, such as advocating for

justice or embracing conflict. We will cover some topics that are not talked about as often, such as leading out of our weaknesses, rather than our strengths. It is my hope that you will find some of these chapters refreshing; that it might even be a pleasant surprise to see the truths that Jesus affirmed and lived out.

This book is a collection of learnings from the life of Jesus Christ, and reflections from the most pivotal moments of my leadership journey. It is not a research paper, nor is it a theological treatise. There are many books that have addressed leadership from those angles better than I can. This book is based on my experience and conviction that the best leadership insights and principles I've gathered throughout the years do not conflict with the life and teachings of Jesus, but rather flow out of them. Although the Bible was not intended to be a leadership handbook, it contains truths that can help us navigate through the most complex and difficult situations we will face in leadership.

Why are these truths so effective in leadership? What new and rich insights can we glean and apply to our own leadership today?

This book aims to answer these questions and more. We will address how lessons from Jesus' life can impact and transform our leadership — whether we're Christians or not.

In this book, you will learn:

- **Why you must pay attention to pain as a leader**
- **The key difference between leading people towards happiness and towards purpose**
- **What it means to lead out of your weaknesses, not just your strengths**
- **How to recognize the difference between good and bad suffering and help others put suffering in the right perspective**
- **Why humility in leadership is more important than ever in this day and age**
- **How to confront people and problems with honesty and respect**
- **The necessity of seeing people and qualities that others have overlooked**
- **What it means to lead with grace**
- **The difference between peace and harmony**
- **Why sacrifice is essential to good leadership**
- **How to provide structure for people without micromanaging them**

The following chapters are short meditations on the life of Jesus, including his famous teaching of eight statements called the “Beatitudes.” Each chapter contains an important leadership lesson I’ve learned from Jesus, illustrated through some of my real life challenges and experiences as a leader. At the end of each chapter, I’ve included a brief summary of the content, along with practical suggestions to apply in your life. You may use this book for personal reflection, talk about it with a friend, or even use it with a leadership or small group.

This book is a work in progress, just as I am. It will continue to evolve as I learn more through my own experiences, and the wisdom of others. I invite you to join me on this journey of learning together!

Let’s begin by looking at the most important leadership insight I’ve gained from the life of Jesus.

# Chapter 1: Leading in the Midst of Pain: Engaging the Real World

*“When Jesus saw [Mary] weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked.” - John 11:33-34*

The most important leadership insight I’ve gained from the life of Jesus is how vital it is for leaders to be able to see and address reality — especially painful realities.

Any of us who live long enough learn that we cannot escape the reality of pain and loss, as much as we are tempted to do so. Pain can take many forms: from death and health problems, to breakups and betrayals, to failures and disappointments, and all the ways we must change and leave things behind.

Of course, life is also full of joy and happiness and many positive things! However, the experiences that really get our attention and change us are often the most painful.

We might know how to lead when things are going well and we’re experiencing success, but how do we lead when we encounter setbacks and failures, and things are confusing and falling apart? These are the moments when leadership is put to the test and when we see what people are truly made of.

When faced with pain and messiness, will we withdraw, become disengaged, and defer to others? Will we minimize and sugarcoat the situation? Or will we have the courage and ability to see and address reality?

## **A Desperate Friend: My Introduction to Pain**

I remember one of my first traumatic experiences in college, after I had just become a Christian. I was at a church event one Friday evening, singing songs and thinking about how the Christian life was so positive and uplifting. When I returned to my dorm room, a message on my answering machine was a rude awakening: “Adrian, please call me as soon as you can. I might kill myself. I need you to help me.”

I had no time to think, but after frantically dialing the phone, I got my friend on the line and he was distraught. He had already tried to hurt himself, but then became frightened and had just been sitting in his room, waiting in misery and isolation.

Over the next two hours, we talked on the phone, and I listened to him. I heard his guilt from all the self-destructive mistakes he had made. I heard his shame from being teased about his weight and appearance. I heard about his childhood that included physical abuse, and how he had been so estranged from his family that he called me, before he even wanted to call them! I listened to the depth and history of his pain.

I tried my best to reassure him and encourage him that everything would be okay. The truth was, I had no idea what to say or how things would turn out. I was just a college freshman... what did I know?

In desperation, I reached for the Bible on my bookshelf. I needed wisdom beyond my own, so I tried to find words to share with my friend who himself had a Christian upbringing.

*“The Lord is close to the broken-hearted, and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”<sup>1</sup>*

*“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me.”<sup>2</sup>*

And the words of Jesus:

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”<sup>3</sup>*

*“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”<sup>4</sup>*

As I read these words to my friend, it struck me how Jesus and the Bible didn't ignore or sugarcoat the pain and messiness of life. From the first pages of the Bible, you see numerous examples of murder and lies: brother killing brother out of jealousy and people being mistreated and deceived. I respected how it didn't minimize how dark and broken this world can be and how human beings are capable of the greatest good and evil.

Rich Mullins, a Christian musician, put it best:

*The Bible is not a book for the faint of heart — it is a book full of all the greed and glory and violence and tenderness and sex and betrayal that benefits mankind. It is not the collection of pretty little anecdotes mouthed by pious little church mice — it does not so much nibble at our shoe leather as it cuts to the heart and splits the marrow from the bone. It does not give us answers fitted to our small-minded questions, but truth that goes beyond what we even know to ask.<sup>5</sup>*

My friend didn't kill himself that night, and in the following months he got better as he was able to honestly talk about his pain with me and other friends. I continued to send him encouragements from the Bible because it didn't shy away from addressing the darker, messier parts of life. It didn't avoid talking about pain.

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 34:18

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 23:4

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 5:3-4

<sup>4</sup> John 14:27

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.kidbrothers.net/articles/thoughts-and-reflections.html>

## **The God Who Sees Us**

Jesus was a leader who was familiar with pain. From the time of his birth, he had to flee his home country as a persecuted refugee.<sup>6</sup> He endured consistent threats on his life throughout his public ministry from political and religious leadership. In the last weeks of his life, he was betrayed by one of his closest friends and left to be beaten and executed alone.

Perhaps this is why Jesus never overlooked others who were in pain. He saw and always made a point to stop for those who were sick or blind, to heal them or at least talk to them.<sup>7</sup> He healed lepers<sup>8</sup> and those that others had outcast from society<sup>9</sup> or forgotten.<sup>10</sup> Jesus went into the houses of those who were handicapped.<sup>11</sup>

The God of Christianity is not disengaged or passive in the face of pain. He is a God who “hears the groans” of those who are oppressed<sup>12</sup> and seeks out a single slave woman who has been abused.<sup>13</sup> He is described by this woman as a God “who sees me.”

## **Put Over The Edge**

Pain is difficult to engage. It’s often easy to ignore it, shelter ourselves from it, or disconnect and disengage when faced with it.

Sometimes we just don’t know what to think or say. When our coworker talks about his depression or marital problems, or our friend has a miscarriage, we’re not sure what to do with the news. So we might say a few words and then switch the topic to something more positive, or not talk about it at all.

Sometimes we don’t feel we have the capacity to deal with pain. The realities of life feel too much for us to handle, and when we have reached our own threshold for pain, it’s hard to have the capacity to even think about the difficult realities of others.

I think about one time I was leading an event for work and had invested countless hours making sure it went well. Through the grunt work of arranging logistics,

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 2:13-18

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 9:27-29

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 8:1-4

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 8:28-34

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 9:18-26

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 9:1-8

<sup>12</sup> Exodus 2:23-25

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 16:1-14

planning content, and sacrificing some of my weekends for last-minute meetings, I had finally reached the finish line.

As some of the attendees gathered on the last day, one young man started to bring up criticisms of the event. “Why did we even have the session on Monday? It didn’t really seem relevant. Why did I have to attend this in the first place? Do you know how hard it was for me to come to this?”

Needless to say, I didn’t take this so well. I immediately felt my defenses gearing up; I was ready to fight. “Well, why did you come then?” I responded. “All of us had to make sacrifices to be here, not just you.”

You might imagine that my response didn’t make things any better. And my exchange with this person put a damper on the event.

I learned a lot through this experience. While the attendee’s criticism wasn’t delivered very thoughtfully, I could see later how it was really an expression of frustration and pain. There was a difficult reality for this person that he needed others to hear, whether or not he delivered it well. However, I just couldn’t see or hear that at the time. Why?

My pain threshold was maxed out from thinking about my own reality of hardship and sacrifice in planning the event. Those criticisms put me over the edge, and I didn’t have it in me to engage someone else’s pain in that moment.

Since that time, I’ve encountered countless situations that have required me to engage others’ pain and realities when I feel maxed out myself. I’ve learned that this is life, and it’s not going to change anytime soon! So it’s what’s required in leadership, and what I must learn to build the capacity to engage.

It hasn’t been easy, but I’m slowly learning to see and hear other peoples’ pain, even when I feel I have more than enough to handle myself. Part of it requires the initiative to vocalize my own realities and pain to others, so I can receive the support and listening ear that I need. Part of it requires the patience to listen well first, knowing I will be able to share my own thoughts at a later time.

I’m still growing and learning in this area of my life, and it will probably be a lifelong journey for me. However, it’s worth it, as I want to be a leader with the ability and capacity to see and engage painful realities — even in the midst of my own pain.

**Pain and stress are the great tests of our leadership.** *When things go wrong, do you isolate and disengage? Or do you stay connected to people and lead them through painful realities?*

### **Leadership Beyond Ourselves**

When I think back to my college friend who called me in desperation, I now see that I didn’t know what to do with the pain and mess that he was describing to me — both inside and outside himself. But he was asking me to lead him through it. I realized that I needed leadership beyond myself in that moment.

In my moment of need I looked to the leadership of Jesus, who was able to engage others' pain in the midst of his own. He didn't avoid those in pain, but offered hope, healing and compassion to them.<sup>14</sup>

Now that I've seen what great leadership looks like, I know what I am working towards in my own leadership — to be a leader who doesn't disengage in painful realities, but engages with people and leads them through it with compassion and purpose.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- Painful and messy realities are part of life and will put our leadership to the test.
- Our first lesson from Jesus is to see (and not ignore) people in pain. It's as simple as acknowledging, "I see that you're in pain. That must be hard."
- To truly understand pain, we must experience it ourselves, and let it impact us. Don't be afraid to feel negative emotions.
- Great leaders don't just empathize with pain; they lead people through it.

### **Practical Ideas to Apply:**

- If you feel overwhelmed or maxed out with your own pain, be sure you're finding avenues to express that honestly with others and to get the support you need. If you don't, your pain will remain bottled inside and you will have less capacity to handle others' pain.

When you hear or experience pain from others...

- Don't disengage just because you don't know what to say. Instead, be honest: "I'm so sorry. I feel like I don't have the right words to say, but I do want to support you however I can."
- Ask, don't assume how to help: "What do you need right now?"
- If you can't handle being involved, maybe you can direct those in pain to other people or resources. Think of trustworthy sources that you can refer people to.
- People in pain usually don't need much more than your love, presence, and listening ear. Instead of trying to give advice, try to understand what they are saying and paraphrase. "I hear you

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<sup>14</sup> Luke 23:34-43

saying..." can be a helpful phrase to use (e.g. "I hear you saying how disappointed you are in your boyfriend. That must be so hard.")

- When the pain seems to be directed towards you, listen first and try to understand the heart behind what the person is expressing. Even if you don't agree and it doesn't seem rational or fair, there's always a reason why people feel the way they do. The pain they are expressing is their way of trying to share those feelings with you, even if they can't say it directly.
- For example: When somebody says, "I don't care if there was traffic, you're fifteen minutes late again and you should have gotten on the road earlier!" they might really mean, "*I feel devalued and wish you would respect my time as much as your own time. I also wish I could spend more time with you, without feeling so rushed every time.*" By trying to listen and understand, you can help others begin to express some of what's going on under the surface. Watch how it changes the entire tone of the conversation — from defensiveness to vulnerability.

## Chapter 2: Leading with Purpose: Connecting Others to Meaning

“What’s the meaning of life?” I used to joke about this question with my sister, as we both thought it was impossible to answer. As I’ve met and talked with people over the years, however, it’s struck me how we tend to think about this topic less and less as we get older. I suppose our lives get too busy, and we don’t have time to reflect about what we’re living for and why. It’s not bad or anyone’s fault necessarily; it’s just the result of human nature and how life seems to go.

As a result, it seems we tend to settle into the default or the path of least resistance. This is usually a lifestyle of priorities based on the culture around us (what our peers are doing), and based on our background and influences (what our parents and teachers have modeled to us).

Of course, many of these priorities are good and valuable. However, great leaders help us see intentionally beyond the defaults of our surrounding influences. They connect us to meaning — or a purpose greater than ourselves that can help guide our lives. They help us understand what we’re living and working for, and why.

### **“Work Hard, Pursue Your Dreams, Be Happy”**

As for my personal background, most of my childhood and education was influenced by American culture. The dominant mentality seemed to be work hard, pursue your dreams, and be happy. For my parents who immigrated to this country, this meant working to earn a lifestyle that would provide security, stability, and comfort for our family. My father and mother sacrificed a lot to achieve these things for my sister and me.

When I left for college and my parents encouraged me to figure out what I believed for myself, I naturally took after them and their priorities. My goals were to get a good education, get married and have children, eventually buy a nice and spacious house in the suburbs, and try to find as much happiness in my work and extracurricular activities as possible.

I would have continued along this path and purpose, if it were not for my exposure to Christianity and Jesus, which shook up everything in my life. Two things in particular made me reconsider everything I had previously thought.

### **The Meaning of Life: Is It All Up to Us?**

***First, I learned that we must look beyond ourselves to find meaning and purpose.*** I noticed that Jesus had a vision for life and truth, beyond what people could think of on their own. One fundamental flaw I saw in the American mentality was that each person him or herself was expected to determine the meaning of life. While I valued freedom and ownership of one’s choices, it seemed that this was a very limiting way to look at the world. I didn’t want to assume that I could be the sole source of

knowing and seeing what was good and true in the world. I realized I needed to intentionally look beyond myself for meaning and purpose.

### **Do You Want to Live a Happy or Meaningful Life?**

In 2014, a study came out of Stanford University, exploring the difference between a “happy” and “meaningful” life. The results were full of insight: there was a vast difference between the two! Many experiences that are challenging, such as raising children or suffering through the illness of a close friend or family member, did not contribute to feelings of happiness, but were rich with meaning — which ultimately brought fulfillment. Here is an excerpt from the study:

*“The unhappy but meaningful life involves difficult undertakings and can be characterized by stress, struggle and challenges. However, while sometimes unhappy in the moment, these people – connected to a larger sense of purpose and value – make positive contributions to society.*

*“Happiness without meaning is characterized by a relatively shallow and often self-oriented life, in which things go well, needs and desires are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided.*

*“And so, the meaningful life guides actions from the past through the present to the future, giving one a sense of direction. It offers ways to value good and bad alike, and gives us justifications for our aspirations.<sup>15</sup>”*

The study concludes that a life of meaning is deeply tied to people’s connection to a sense of purpose and value larger than themselves. When we think about the meaning of life, we need a vision that comes from beyond just what we ourselves are able to envision and determine. Great leaders understand this and can point others beyond themselves.

### **Beyond What I Can See: A Foundation For Life and Growth**

I noticed that Jesus understood this, and so didn’t just tell people what they wanted to hear, but expanded their vision for life. He provided a foundation for how to see the world, and live in it, based on reality and truth. He told his followers that everyone who heard and put his words into practice was like a “wise man who built his house on the rock” as a foundation.<sup>16</sup>

Jesus used this language, because he knew people needed stability to deal with the harsh and changing realities of life. He was confident that he could provide that kind of stability for people, and truth that could guide and correct them along the path of life. I read in Jesus’ words and saw in his actions, things I would never have thought of myself. Some of his teachings even seemed strange or offensive at times, but over time I grew to understand them in new ways. It rang true to me to follow a leader whose

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<sup>15</sup> <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2014/january/meaningful-happy-life-010114.html>

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 7:24-25

teachings were sometimes hard to read or accept, because those teachings spoke of truths I had yet to learn and ways I still needed to grow. I wanted to follow somebody who saw what I didn't — or couldn't — and could help me to grow and learn in areas I needed to.

### **Just Do Whatever You Want!**

Of course, it's difficult to provide guidance for those we lead. It's much easier to make decisions that are more lenient and popular.

I remember one of my first experiences teaching a group summer class for a standardized test preparation center. I had a classroom full of high school students and immediately felt nervous as I got up front to teach. *What if they don't like me or don't listen to anything I say?*

In my anxiety, I rushed through the teaching lesson too quickly and ended the session with thirty minutes to spare — and no content left to cover! I tried to field questions from the students, but those had run dry, and I could sense the restlessness in the classroom. Finally I said, "Okay, now you can do whatever you want for the rest of class time!" Everyone seemed to enjoy that, and they talked or played games until the end of our time together. I felt relieved.

This ended up happening almost every day, and it was honestly easy to not have to tell people what to do but let them do whatever they wanted. Only after a week or so of this, I noticed that the students were feeling restless. I could tell they were wondering, *why am I sitting here in class when I'm not getting any teaching? Can't I just leave early if I'm not going to learn anything I need to know?*

At the end of the summer when evaluations came in, my marks for teaching were pretty low. It didn't feel good, but I realized that I had failed to lead the classroom and students well. They had signed up to receive teaching and guidance on a test they needed help with, and I spent large portions of time neglecting to provide that for them.

### **Don't Trust The Cheerleaders!**

I've seen this kind of dynamic in many situations since. I see team leaders and coaches who don't provide much guidance, but simply tell people to "go for it" and encourage them that "they're doing a great job." In many ways, this is an easy way to lead; it's like cheerleading. It's positive and encouraging, doesn't require or demand much at all from people, and minimizes conflict and effort for both coach and trainee. But is this really good leadership?

I don't believe so. Out of the great leaders I've known, all have had a vision of development in mind for the people they're leading. They've invested the time and energy to make a plan of growth, which has involved doing some things that aren't easy to do. Great leaders aren't afraid of speaking hard truths that people need to hear for the sake of pushing them towards long-term health and success. Over the past decade,

I've learned to trust leaders who aren't afraid to challenge my thinking and behaviors over leaders who only cheer me on and say what I might want to hear.

Jesus was the kind of leader who wasn't afraid to challenge his followers to grow, and that's been my daily experience as a Christian as well: I am continually learning about my shortcomings, areas where I need to improve or mature, and new ways to understand people and the world. While this is hard and unpleasant at times, it is refreshing to know that I am moving towards greater health as a person, as well as increased clarity and purpose in my overall life. This is far better to me than to rely solely on myself, or to follow a leader who has no vision for where and how I need to grow, but simply gives me permission to do whatever I want, whenever I want.

**Great leaders guide people toward a greater purpose.** *How often do you lead others to think about what matters in their jobs and lives, and why? How often do you tell people what they want to hear, compared to telling them what will challenge them to think differently and grow?*

**Following a Homeless, Single, Persecuted Man: Is that Really Such A Good Idea?**

***The second lesson I learned from the life of Jesus is that purposeful leaders envision a world worth living for.*** There was something radically different about the kind of vision that Jesus taught and lived, and it got my attention. Remember, my priorities were to buy a house, start a family, get an education, and find happiness in work and life. Well, Jesus never had a permanent home of his own and never got married or had children. Most of his twelve followers were uneducated and yet were entrusted with the highest responsibilities of leadership.

Their three years of ministry together were far from happy or comfortable; the first thing Jesus did was to spend forty days in the wilderness without food or company! He and his followers saw all measures of physical suffering in the numerous blind, crippled, and diseased who came to them for healing and comfort. They faced opposition from the government and religious leaders of the day who constantly threatened Jesus and sought to defame and discredit his ministry. Yet he taught and embodied a vision for life that captivated so many people of his time, as well as throughout the centuries until this very day. How was this possible?

Jesus taught and lived out a vision for life that was radically different from the priorities I grew up with. He invited people to join a community of others who dared to envision the world differently from the masses. He challenged people to not just wait around for an afterlife in heaven, but invited them to join a mission to bring wholeness and restoration to the world during this lifetime! Jesus called his followers to live with purpose and action — not for some abstract pie-in-the-sky ideals — but for a very rich, defined vision. This vision he called “the kingdom of God”: a new way of seeing people and the world, and living life.

As radical and new as this vision is, I personally have found it strangely familiar the more I have grown to see and understand it. It's almost as if these are things I've always believed or hoped would be good, true, and beautiful for all of my life. They ring

true to me, and I believe to many others as well. As I've learned more about the kingdom of God, it's completely changed my view of Christianity, Jesus, and life. It's a vision I'm able to get behind whole-heartedly.

Every leader has a philosophy of what they value, whether or not they're conscious of it. For Jesus, the kingdom of God was his philosophy and foundation; even more, it was the embodiment of his leadership that flowed from who he was. Great leaders have a clear vision for a world worth living for that can bring others along.

### **Jesus' Most Famous Sermon**

But what kind of world is this? Leaders like Hitler and Chairman Mao also had a vision for their ideal world, but those were built on dominance, oppression, arrogance, and material greed.

In the following chapters, we will discuss the kind of world that Jesus envisioned, through exploring the first "sermon" he gave, frequently called the "Sermon the Mount." He began this message with eight statements called the "Beatitudes," which read as follows:

*"Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.  
Blessed are those who mourn,  
for they will be comforted.  
Blessed are the meek,  
for they will inherit the earth.  
Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness,  
for they will be filled.  
Blessed are the merciful,  
for they will be shown mercy.  
Blessed are the pure in heart,  
for they will see God.  
Blessed are the peacemakers,  
for they will be called children of God.  
Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness,  
for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.<sup>17</sup>"*

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<sup>17</sup> Matthew 5:3-10

In these statements, I believe Jesus was introducing a grand picture of the “kingdom of God,” which outlines his vision for the kind of world he was leading others to see and embrace. Over the next eight chapters, we will explore eight unique leadership insights that flow from each Beatitude.

Each of them contain perspectives that clash with many of the approaches we experience in the world around us, and yet they support much of what’s being discussed in leadership circles today — because they speak to what really matters in leadership.

Let’s start with the first perspective and learn what it means to lead “in weakness.”

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- When it comes to purpose in life, our default is to follow what others around us are doing, or follow in our parents’ footsteps.
- In America, there’s a mentality that perhaps it’s all up to us to determine our life’s purpose and meaning.
- A happy life is not the same as a meaningful life. To live a life of meaning, we need a vision and foundation beyond ourselves.
- Great leaders don’t just tell people what they want to hear, but challenge them to grow in light of a bigger vision and purpose.
- Jesus provided a vision and foundation for life that was so different from the culture around him, and yet it’s drawn billions of people to follow him. He showed people a new way to see a world that was worth living and fighting for, which he called the “kingdom of God.”

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Make a list of the things in your life that you think make you happy, and also that are meaningful to you. Compare the two lists. What do you notice and learn?
- Based on your daily and weekly schedule and how you spend your time, write down what you think are the top 5 priorities in your current life. Where would you say they came from: society, your peers, your family, etc.?
- Consistently ask the question “why.” For your next work project, start your first team discussion by asking people the question: “Why are we doing this project? What’s the importance of what we are doing? Why is it important to each person on this team?”

- Think about the people with whom you have the most interaction. How many of them aren't afraid to give you hard truths and feedback? Seek to surround yourself with a fair number of people who can do that for you. Then ask them for honest feedback about once every 1-2 months, and see what happens.

## Chapter 3: Leading in Weakness: Finding Strength in Need

*“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” - Jesus<sup>18</sup>*

*At that time Jesus said, “I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this is what you were pleased to do. - Matthew 11:25*

In this world we hear “survival of the fittest” and “might makes right.” Life and leadership often don’t seem fair, and people seem to rise to the top based on their aggressiveness. Those who are quieter or weaker get left behind.

When we look at the life of Jesus, however, he seemed to lead very differently. He honored and entrusted great responsibility to those who seemed to be weakest, or seemed to be “least” in the eyes of others. He saw people that others overlooked or shunned. He lived out leadership that wasn’t about domination. The shocking result? He created one of the greatest leadership followings in history. How is leading in weakness actually the sign of an incredibly strong and effective leader? Let’s look at how Jesus approached weakness from the very moment he came into the world.

### **A Leader Who Was Born Into Weakness**

Jesus was born in some of the poorest, humblest conditions — his mother was forced to give birth in a barn with animals because there was no room for them in a local inn. He was immediately helpless and vulnerable to the schemes of strong leaders, as the King of Judea at the time (Herod) sought to kill him and all other babies under the age of two. His family had to flee to Egypt, and Jesus lived his childhood as a refugee. He spent his young adult years not in Jerusalem, the center of political and religious activity, but in a relatively obscure village called Nazareth.

When Jesus started his ministry as an adult, he consistently defended the weak and outcast of society, from women and children to those of other ethnicities (e.g. Samaritans) who faced prejudice in Israel. He showed physical affection to diseased lepers and the physically crippled. Jesus also chose those of lower regard to be his most trusted leaders: from fishermen who were uneducated, to tax collectors whose profession had come into disregard in society.

Jesus didn’t just empower the weak, but also criticized and was harshest on the strongest and wisest of society, from the teachers of the Jewish law, to the religious authorities of the day.<sup>19</sup> When his disciples competed for power amongst themselves, Jesus quickly rebuked them. He told them to not be like political rulers who gloat in having authority over other people. Instead, he taught: “whoever wants to become

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 5:3

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 12; 15:1-9; 16:1-12

great among you must be your servant”<sup>20</sup>. This is a great reminder even in our current world, where many religious and political authorities are corrupt and still abuse power and authority for gain, competitive edge, and self-preservation.

### **What’s Wrong With Strength and Power?**

Why did Jesus criticize the strong of society? It wasn’t that he didn’t love or care about people who were powerful, wealthy, or intelligent. Rather, he saw the spirit that often came with these things — arrogance, entitlement, manipulation, and selfishness. He saw that those who were physically or mentally more powerful tended to abuse their strength in ways that were disrespectful and unjust to those who were “weaker” in those areas. Who wants to follow leadership that exhibits these attitudes and qualities?

On the other hand, those who were weaker and poorer in the world’s eyes seemed to possess great humility because they were used to others overlooking them. They were grateful rather than entitled because they had less in their possession, and therefore grasped the value of what little they did have. They were often compassionate and more inclined to serve others because they had suffered more and had had to receive love and compassion from others because of their weak state.

These traits are true of great leaders today who demonstrate compassion and service with gratitude and humility. This is what Jesus saw centuries ago, and it’s why he said, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” It’s why the Bible says that God chose to honor the weak over the strong.<sup>21</sup> God knew that those who were strongest in the eyes of society were not necessarily the best leaders.

### **Less Than \$20 In My Pocket**

I’ve learned personally the strength that comes in times of great weakness and need. During my post-college years, I lived from paycheck to paycheck for over a year — and at one point was down to my last \$20. I remember seeking out restaurants where I could eat a meal for \$2 or less, and skipping meals when I had to.

Having grown up in a financially stable household and never having had to truly worry about money or food, this period of time changed the way I saw things. When a friend offered to pay for my lunch, I felt gratitude on a new level. When I offered to pay for a friend’s lunch, it was a sacrifice that really meant something to me — more than they could know. When I heard of others struggling through unemployment or poverty, I felt new empathy and compassion because I understood a small piece of what they might be going through.

This is how my experience of weakness in the area of money changed me. I don’t think I would have developed as much gratitude and compassion had I not experienced this amount of need. However, this has directly helped me to be a more

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<sup>20</sup> Matthew 20:25-28

<sup>21</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:21, 27

loving, empathetic and effective leader over the past couple of decades. My greatest strengths have come out of my greatest times of weakness. I now understand why the Apostle Paul wrote, “When I am weak, then I am strong”<sup>22</sup>.

### **I Can Boast About My Weaknesses?**

I want to emphasize that weakness does not mean passivity. Demonstrating compassion through service, or expressing gratitude and humility in leadership are not actions of a passive leader. They show initiative, and in a paradoxical sense require true strength.

In a way, Jesus redefined “strength,” so it’s not that Christians aren’t strong — they just see strength in a different way than others. For instance, in certain cultures (e.g. America), we can view strength as not admitting weakness and being self-sufficient rather than asking for help or support. But those who have problems admitting weakness and asking for support are often some of the most insecure people.

On the other hand, people who are secure aren’t afraid to talk about their flaws or admit that they need help. They have accepted that they are not perfect and that they cannot do everything themselves. This actually can give them a great deal of confidence as leaders since they are free to be themselves and involve others without as much anxiety about being perfect or in control. Maybe this is why a passage in the Bible says that we can actually *boast* in our weaknesses!<sup>23</sup>

How often do we admit our needs and vulnerabilities to those we lead? Do we ask for help just because we’re too busy, or because we recognize our weak points that need a boost from others? The answer to these questions is the difference between secure and insecure leadership.

Current leaders and experts are on to this. Author and researcher Brene Brown has brought worldwide attention to the importance of vulnerability in leadership. Her TED talk<sup>24</sup> on this topic is one of the top-five most watched of all time.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, there is something powerful about vulnerability and needs that resonates with us. We see that the greatest leaders are internally secure enough to admit their imperfections and ask for help. They empower and build teams to accomplish things they cannot do alone.

**True strength is not about being self-sufficient, but secure enough to admit needs and limitations, and to ask for help. *Are you strong enough to let others see you when you’re most vulnerable?***

### **Leading Out of Weakness, Not Strength**

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<sup>22</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:10

<sup>23</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:9

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability?language=en)

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the\\_most\\_popular\\_talks\\_of\\_all](http://www.ted.com/playlists/171/the_most_popular_talks_of_all)

These days, it's quite popular to talk about our strengths and how we can lead out of them. In many contexts, this is very helpful and appropriate. We wouldn't want to avoid talking about strengths during a job interview, for instance!

However, let's not overlook our weaknesses and how those can make us better leaders in other situations. Consider what it might mean to "lead out of weakness, not strength" as you lead your team or manage a project.

Perhaps you can ask for help in areas of weakness, and empower others to contribute. You might be amazed how simply recognizing your limitations can open up doors and opportunities for others to grow in their skills and leadership! We all have weaknesses, but we can choose to use them as a way to help others discover their strengths.

Perhaps you can open up with your team about areas you're seeking to grow in, and ask for their support and feedback along the way. Perhaps you can make it a practice to start every day or work meeting with a time for everyone to share what she is grateful for. These ideas may not come naturally and may feel like a risk, but they will go a long way in cultivating trust with those you lead.

Jesus was the ultimate example of a secure leader. He lived with his twelve disciples, opening his thoughts, feelings, and entire life to them. He entrusted the highest responsibilities of leadership to the most uneducated and common people of his day. Jesus lived out weakness from his childbirth, to his livelihood as a humble carpenter, to his rejection and execution at the end of his life. He embraced it, and in doing so, led others with constant humility and compassion.

Jesus led in weakness, and in doing so showed people what true strength meant, and what God really cared about. I want to learn to lead in weakness, just as he did.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- Jesus honored and uplifted those considered to be "weakest" in society, because their spirit of humility, gratitude and compassion were close to God's heart.
- Jesus criticized those considered to be "strongest" in society, because their spirit of arrogance, entitlement, and manipulation was far from God's heart.
- True strength comes from inner security, not a show or performance of "strength" on the outside.
- Those who are secure can admit needs and weakness, and ask for help.

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- What are your biggest weaknesses? Come up with a list, and share it with friends or family that you trust. Ask them to support you as you work on these areas.
- When working on your next project, think about the aspects that you're not so good at. Ask someone for help, to help coach and teach you in that area. Afterwards, express your gratitude and appreciation.
- Think about the hardest times in your life, when you were in the most need. Who came alongside you during those times? Write an e-mail to them to express your gratitude, or give them a call. Notice not only what it does for your relationship with that person, but what it does inside you.

## Chapter 4: Leading in Suffering: Navigating Change and Loss

*“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” - Jesus<sup>26</sup>*

*“Life is suffering.” — First Noble Truth of Buddhism*

The second perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership isn't about avoiding suffering, but embracing how it can change us and deepen our capacity for love.

Many people seek to eliminate or insulate themselves from suffering whether that takes the form of discomfort, hardship or loss. Julius Caesar said, “It is easier to find men who will volunteer to die, than to find those who are willing to endure pain with patience.” That's why many of us pursue money and careers that we hope will increase our comfort and sense of security in life. That's why so many of us don't like negativity, or are discouraged from crying or talking about topics like death and grief.

### **Good and Bad Suffering**

Suffering isn't always good. Sometimes it's appropriate to avoid or move past suffering, when it becomes an endless fixation for someone, when it's motivated by a desire to punish oneself, or when it isolates a person from others. However, Jesus did teach that those who mourned were “blessed.” What did he mean?

I believe that Jesus knew that suffering, while unpleasant, is one of the most important realities in life that we can't and shouldn't ignore. In his kingdom, Jesus actually saw suffering as one of the main things that helps leaders to grow, and ultimately makes us more loving people.

### **The Worst Day of My Life**

There's no question that suffering can change us deeply. It forces us to evaluate our lives and priorities, and what really matters. I'll never forget the day I got the phone call from my mother. My father had fallen and was unresponsive when the paramedics came. In the emergency room, I listened in shock as the doctor told my mother and me that my father had suffered a massive hemorrhagic stroke, and his chance of survival was only 10%. “Now is the time to call your relatives and close friends to fly out here,” the doctor said. “We don't know how much time he could have left.”

I felt numb inside, and helpless as I hugged my mother. I stayed overnight at the hospital, waiting in agony for the nurses to check every hour to see if my father would

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<sup>26</sup> Matthew 5:4

respond. I fought to stay awake, knowing that any minute could be my last moment with him. It was the longest night of my life, and the worst day of my life.

In the span of a couple of hours, my entire life turned upside down. I immediately thought about the last conversation I had with my father. What had I said? Did he know that I loved him? My mind and heart were swimming with emotions, memories, and regrets. Right then, I determined that if he were to be granted more years of life, I would do things differently.

Why does it take experiences of immense suffering and loss to provoke change? It just seems we fall into the status quo of taking things for granted without something to jar us into perspective. British author and theologian C.S. Lewis, who lost his wife suddenly to illness, wrote that “pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”

Suffering leads to change, but not all change is good. So what is good change?

### **So How Is Suffering Good For Us?**

First, good change (that comes by way of suffering) strengthens our leadership. This message is all over the Bible:

*Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.<sup>27</sup>*

*We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope.<sup>28</sup>*

Christianity teaches us that trials and suffering are not only to be tolerated, they are to be embraced. This may sound a bit unexpected or odd. However, many of us can probably relate to how our biggest challenges and setbacks teach us patience and resilience (e.g. bouncing back from rejection in our careers or relationships).

Second, good change (that comes by way of suffering) can make us into more loving leaders. Suffering isn’t something you endure just to gain strength or skill; it’s something you embrace because it can expand your capacity for love and compassion. People who have battled through a life-threatening illness or advocated for a special needs child, often discover that they emerge from these challenges with deeper gratitude for life, and greater empathy towards people.

Jesus understood this about suffering and taught about it during his ministry. When visiting a religious leader’s house, Jesus was criticized for letting a “sinful” woman touch him. He responded by telling this parable:

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<sup>27</sup> James 1:2-4

<sup>28</sup> Romans 5:3

*“Two people owed money to a certain moneylender. One owed him five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. Neither of them had the money to pay him back, so he forgave the debts of both. Now which of them will love him more?”*

*Simon replied, “I suppose the one who had the bigger debt forgiven”<sup>29</sup>.*

Jesus concluded by emphasizing that those who have sinned and suffered deeply often experience forgiveness even more, and in turn have greater capacity to love. In contrast, “whoever has been forgiven little, loves little”<sup>30</sup>. Jesus then honored the woman through appreciating the love she had shown to him. He wanted his followers to know when our sins and suffering deepen our gratitude and compassion, it actually pleases and honors God deeply.

### **An “Ideal” Year of Leadership**

This perspective on suffering has changed the way that I lead. For example, I’ve learned to adjust some of my expectations of how I see “success.”

Consider this: what is your picture of an “ideal” year in leadership? Is it a year that runs smoothly and efficiently, with no surprises or roadblocks for you and your team? Is it a lack of conflict or tension along the path of your objective or mission? Is it a year without change or loss?

My first year leading a team at my workplace was filled with stress, mistakes, unmet expectations, and the drama of unexpected personnel changes. After the year, I remember asking an older teammate of mine, “Is leading a team always *this* hard?” Behind my question, I was thinking that this level of suffering was not the “ideal” of what I would hope for in my leadership, or for my team’s leadership.

Since that time, I’ve been learning to readjust my picture of an “ideal” year of leadership. My new ideal year is not devoid of suffering, but seeks to learn and grow from it. It’s a year of having honest conversations about challenges as a team, and allowing setbacks to draw us closer together. It’s a year of allowing my heart to expand and grow with love and compassion.

**Suffering can be bad or good.** *Can you identify the difference, and lead others to become stronger leaders through their darkest moments?*

### **Suffering Out of Love: Why Jesus Wept**

Jesus is a leader who did not avoid suffering, but paid attention to it. When his good friend Lazarus died, and he went to visit his family, he saw the people mourning and was “deeply moved in spirit and troubled.” He wept, compelling people around him so much that they said, “See how he loved him!”<sup>31</sup>. He vulnerably let others see his own

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<sup>29</sup> Luke 7:41-43

<sup>30</sup> Luke 7:47

<sup>31</sup> John 11:33-36

grief at the death of his friend, and was moved by compassion when he saw the suffering of others.

Jesus himself lived a life of deep suffering, as described earlier in this book. But his suffering had deep purpose behind it. Six hundred years before Jesus was born, the Old Testament prophet Isaiah wrote about a “servant” who would come and save people. This servant would be “despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.” Isaiah goes on to predict that this servant will bear his peoples’ pain and be “pierced” for their transgressions.<sup>32</sup>

This is what Jesus lived out through his life: he suffered not only physically through flogging and death by crucifixion, but emotional and social rejection as leaders mocked him and his own friends betrayed and deserted him. All along, his suffering was motivated by love and a desire to heal and forgive people as predicted centuries before: “By his wounds we are healed”<sup>33</sup>.

My father is now on a slow road to recovery from his stroke. When I think about suffering, I don’t just think about what he has endured, but also about how much my mother has suffered from seeing her soul mate in such pain and helplessness for so long. However, I see in my mother an amazing example of how her suffering has deepened her capacity to love, as she has been by his side every day and step of the way. She has tirelessly advocated for him, encouraged him, and believed in his ability to get better. Not only that, but my mother seems to have gained even more empathy and compassion for other people in her life. Through her, I see a love deepened by suffering... the love that Jesus modeled through his sacrifice and life.

This is the kind of leadership I want to live out — to not avoid suffering, but embrace it so it can change me and deepen my love for other people.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- Our instinct is to avoid suffering, but Jesus taught us to embrace it to help us change and grow.
- Suffering can be bad when someone uses it as a reason to isolate or avoid necessary growth.
- Good suffering can change us and increase our capacity for love and compassion.

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Make a list of the biggest times of suffering in your life. When do you feel you responded well, and not so well? What was the

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<sup>32</sup> Isaiah 53

<sup>33</sup> Isaiah 53:5

difference? If you want to take a risk and be vulnerable, you can also ask your trusted friends for feedback on this.

- Think about your life, family, or work situation. What is an “ideal” year for you? What do you want to be true of how you respond to the challenges and surprises that may come? Write this down, and discuss it with your team or family.
- Notice how other people handle suffering in the public spotlight, from celebrities to athletes. Who handles it well and who doesn’t, and why? What can you learn from this for your own life and leadership?

### **Reflection: “You Aren’t Worthy to Suffer”**

*From Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven:*

*“Someone once asked Mother Teresa if she thought that we didn’t suffer in the United States like other people did because we were a righteous nation, and Mother Teresa said, “Oh, no, I’m afraid you’re so wrong.”*

*They said, “What do you mean?” She said, “I don’t think you suffer because I don’t think you are worthy to suffer.” This story prompted Rich to conclude, “Don’t resist the work of God by asking for an easy life.”<sup>34</sup>*

I love these quotes and this story, because it illustrates the different ways that people view suffering. According to the person who talked to Mother Teresa, suffering is negative and a punishment that God inflicts on sinners. According to Mother Teresa, suffering is an honor and blessing that God places on those whom He loves. Throughout Mother Teresa’s ministry among the poor in India, she frequently talked about how much those who suffer have great dignity and much to teach us. She said, “Only in heaven will we see how much we owe to the poor for helping us to love God better because of them.” Suffering increases our capacity to love both people and God.

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<sup>34</sup> James Bryan Smith, *Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven* (B&H Books, 2002), 144.

## Chapter 5: Leading in Humility: Removing the Noise of Promotion

*“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” - Jesus<sup>35</sup>*

*“The final key to the way I promote is bravado. I play to people's fantasies.” - Donald Trump*

The third perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership isn't about self-promotion, but about humility.

The world is full of those seeking fame and celebrity — those who put their own interests first, and pursue their own agendas without considering others. But Jesus taught his followers how to serve and empower others, and valued things done quietly and in solitude, when nobody was watching.

Times have changed, and with the explosion of the Internet and social media, it seems that many leaders are trying to “be heard” among all the millions of YouTube videos and channels, Instagram pictures, Facebook and Twitter feeds, and links on Google. There's a mindset that if you don't focus on promoting your work or your brand, you will be lost and irrelevant among the masses, and much of that is true and important to heed.

When we refer to self-promotion, we're more discussing a certain *spirit* and *attitude* that Jesus criticized even in his day and age. In one of his first teachings, Jesus mentioned people who pray or give charity in public, making sure to be seen by other people, in order “to be honored by others.” In these cases, he was bothered by the motivation to do good things in order to receive praise and recognition, rather than simply out of love for God and to serve other people. He was troubled by the hypocrisy of those who teach humility and selflessness, but make such a show of things that they end up the center of attention anyway. He challenged people to do things in “secret,” which would lend itself to more pure motives.

### **Rivalry and Competition: Who's the Greatest?**

Jesus also saw that self-promotion is often associated with attitudes that are insensitive or even disrespectful of others, because one's own personality and agenda takes front stage, often pushing consideration of others aside. One example is the rivalry and competition for status, fame, and power that comes from environments of self-promotion.

In the New Testament, the mother of two of Jesus' disciples asked him if he would grant her sons special leadership status, above the other disciples.<sup>36</sup> Jesus

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<sup>35</sup> Matthew 5:5

<sup>36</sup> Matthew 20:20-28

denied her request, but the interesting thing is that the mother's request immediately caused anxiety among the disciples as they debated who was the "greatest" among them. The spirit behind the mother's request for promotion led to a competitive rather than cooperative mindset. It led to the disciples each thinking about what they could get for themselves, rather than how they could serve each other and their common mission.

That's why every time Jesus noticed a spirit of rivalry and competition among the disciples, he responded by reminding them that "the greatest among you is the servant of all"<sup>37</sup>. He knew that self-promotion and seeking status and power were often in opposition to the heart and spirit of loving leadership.

Another example of how self-promotion leads to insensitivity and disrespect of others can be seen in a parable that Jesus told, addressed to those "who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else":

*"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'*

*"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted"<sup>38</sup>.*

The contrast between these two people is clear: the Pharisee (religious leader) thought so highly of himself and all that he did and gave that he looked down on the tax collector.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, the tax collector didn't compare himself to the Pharisee at all, but simply admitted that he needed mercy.

### **Why is Humility Healthy?**

Beyond insensitive and disrespectful attitudes, however, Jesus also knew that self-promotion simply wasn't a healthy model for living a happy and fulfilled life. It seems that we also suspect this to be the case. After all, how often do arrogance and self-obsession simply rub us the wrong way, and make us not like leaders who exhibit these things?

Of course, when we use the word "arrogance" we don't mean a healthy sense of confidence — which is a good thing to have. When we use the word "humility," we don't mean an unhealthy sense of self-deprecation or self-hatred.

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<sup>37</sup> Matthew 20:26; Mark 10:43; Luke 22:26

<sup>38</sup> Luke 18:10-14

<sup>39</sup> Also note the intended audience of the parable in Luke 18:9.

But *why* does arrogance bother us and make us feel distant from leaders who seem to demonstrate it? *Why* are humble leaders often more likable and approachable?

I would suggest two reasons. First, leaders who are humble tend to show more vulnerability and imperfection, and that is something most people can relate to. As a result, humble leaders can connect on a deeper, more intimate level than those who self-promote.

None of us are perfect, and failures and imperfections are an integral part of the experience of being human. Sometimes we fantasize about perfection, as Donald Trump's quote speaks to, but leaders who boast and promote a larger-than-life image are limited in how deeply they can connect with people. We can impress people with our performance and self-promotion, but in the end vulnerability and humility is what will draw others and their hearts close to us.

### **Perfect Is Not Real**

I am a perfectionist, especially when it comes to speaking and writing. Before I deliver a talk, I'll draft pages and pages of notes, and refine and rehearse it until I'm confident in every slide and point I'm making. Granted, I'm often happy with the quality of the final product. However, I remember one talk that went as smooth as could be, but I really struggled to connect to the audience. Afterwards, I was dying to know if I had said or done something wrong.

So I asked a friend who had been in the audience for some feedback, and I'll never forget what she said. "Adrian, that was a good talk you gave, but you were so polished in your presentation that what you were saying didn't feel real. I just couldn't relate to it."

I had tried so hard to impress people that I failed to connect with my audience, which was far more important. How many lectures or sermons have you seen given to a bored and disengaged audience, and the speaker just seems to have no clue? We can become so focused on promoting our points and image that we lose our very connection to the people we are trying to reach.

How concerned are you with impressing people with your leadership? Maybe during your next talk or presentation, scale back your PowerPoint a little and engage your audience more. Before you lead your next meeting, ask the people around the table, "What would be most helpful to you to discuss in this meeting?" before jumping right into your plan or agenda.

Keep in mind, we're not talking about discarding our standards of quality here. This is not about self-deprecation, or intentionally making our products or presentations worse. Rather, this is about avoiding a fixation on perfection or impressing others, such that we lose sight of connecting with the people we're leading.

**Leaders who promote well are great at impressing people, but humble leaders connect with people.** *Are you more of an impresser or a connector?*

## **Self-Sufficient Leaders are Lonely Leaders**

This leads to my second reason that self-promotion isn't a healthy model for fulfilled living or leadership. Humble leaders tend to see themselves as part of something bigger than themselves, and as a result are able to build more mutually rewarding relationships.

Who among us is truly self-sufficient? When we were born into this world, each of us was completely helpless and unable to feed or care for ourselves. It's the nature of life and families that we were forced to depend on others to even survive. As independent as we may feel as we grow older, we still rely on other people every moment of our lives — whether it's people who provide the food that we eat, build the roof over our heads, or provide laws and order so that we can live in a stable society.

This is a good thing, as we all have a deep need to both give and receive in our relationships with others. People who are self-obsessed often are unbalanced in receiving more than giving, and fail to see a picture bigger than their own interests and agenda. This is a sad reality. One story that illustrates this well is the Greek legend of Narcissus, who infamously was so fixated on his own beauty that he died staring at his image reflected in a pond. This tale has a lesson: self-focus and promotion can become unhealthy and even self-destructive.

Leaders who try in vain to promote themselves and their interests wind up tired, lonely, and unhappy in a small-minded vision of just themselves. It's like the parable described earlier: the tax collector in his vulnerability saw his needs and weaknesses so clearly, while the Pharisee in his self-obsession didn't see a need for anything but himself and his good deeds. Why would we be drawn to a leader who doesn't need anything, including us? Why would we want to have a relationship with someone who looks down on us?

In contrast, Jesus lived and demonstrated humility throughout his ministry. In one of the most humble acts of his culture, he washed his disciples' feet as only a lowly servant was supposed to do.<sup>40</sup> He then went on to call them "friends" in a very intimate way, saying he had revealed to them everything a friend could.<sup>41</sup> Jesus connected to his followers through his humility and vulnerability.

### **"If You Want Something Done Right..."**

How much mutuality do you have in your relationships? Are you both giving and receiving from those you lead?

Do you take pride in being able to do most things yourself? Do you ever think, "If you want something done right, you've got to do it yourself!" If so, those statements may reflect a leadership approach that could lead to loneliness, frustration, and burnout.

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<sup>40</sup> John 13:1-7

<sup>41</sup> John 15:15

Instead, look for the skilled people around you — of which there are many — and let them run with their ideas and methods. Consider how much more you can accomplish with a bigger vision than just what you would think to do, and you'll find even more success than you could have imagined.

Humble leadership may be frustrating in the short term, as we must give up some of our control. However, it is incredibly rewarding in the long run. That's why Jesus said that "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted"<sup>42</sup>. That's why he said over and over again, "So the last will be first, and the first will be last"<sup>43</sup>. When we lead with humility, we gain God's reward of receiving the respect and affection of people who will relate to us, lead with us, and join a vision that's bigger than any of us.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- Jesus warned people who do things for "show" and reminded people of the value of doing things in private. How many things do you do that nobody else can see?
- Humility is attractive because imperfection is something people can relate to.
- Self-sufficiency is a myth. Humble leaders realize that everyone needs others, and so they deflect and give credit where it's due.
- Humility is healthy, because we all have a deep need to both give and receive.

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Try to do a few good things each week in private that nobody can see. When you experience a funny or touching moment, resist the urge to post it on social media and instead write in a journal, or tell the person you're with how much you're enjoying the moment.
- Scale back your next talk or presentation and build it more around engaging the people in your audience. Incorporate more Q & A, or even start the session by asking them to write down questions or thoughts related to the central topic on index cards, and go through some of them during the session.
- At the beginning of your next meeting, start by asking the group, "What would be most helpful to you for us to talk about during this meeting?" Listen and incorporate this input into the agenda for that

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<sup>42</sup> Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14

<sup>43</sup> Matthew 20:16

week, and the following weeks if there's not enough time to cover it all.

- Make a list of the main people you interact with every week. Do you have a balance of people who are mentoring you and those whom you are mentoring? Move towards greater balance and mutuality in your relationships as a leader.

### **Reflection: Was Jesus Really Humble?**

Jesus is a perplexing example of humility as a leader because he said certain things that seem pretty self-inflated. For instance, he said, "I am the resurrection and the life... everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die."<sup>44</sup> This is a pretty bold, seemingly pretentious claim! Yet very few people think of arrogance when they think of Jesus. Why is that?

The reason is that Jesus sincerely believed himself to be God in the flesh, but didn't use that ultimate power to neglect or take advantage of others. Rather, he was sensitive and considerate of others. Jesus wasn't self-absorbed, but spent his life serving other peoples' needs. He didn't act with entitlement, but made the ultimate sacrifice of power in laying down his own life.

Jesus may have made a pretty audacious statement about being the "resurrection and the life," but consider how he lived it out in the narrative that follows. He comforted his friends with his love and presence. He used his power to raise Lazarus from the grave, even though doing this motivated his opponents' plot to kill Jesus. Later when people did put him to death, he didn't resist but used his remaining power to heal, forgive, and save.

Jesus lived out a humble leadership that reached out and connected with people. He spent his life focused on healing and ministering to people, and made the ultimate demonstration of humility in sacrificing his very life for others.

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<sup>44</sup> John 11:25

## Chapter 6: Leading for Justice: Working for the Right Things

*“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” - Jesus<sup>45</sup>*

*“Equal rights, fair play, justice, are all like the air: we all have it, or none of us has it.” - Maya Angelou*

The fourth perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership isn't afraid to stand up *for* justice, and stand *against* injustice.

We know when something just isn't right. We feel indignant when somebody lies blatantly to our face, or betrays our trust after they gave us their word. It bothers us when the wrong person is punished, and the guilty person escapes without consequences. In the workplace, we might be turned off when leaders take credit for someone else's work or idea, or when someone is granted a promotion or exemption due to favoritism or nepotism.

Whether major or minor, these experiences tap into our sense of justice. It doesn't even take seeing the worst of abuse and corruption — from child sex trafficking to genocide to abuse of political and religious power — to know that injustice exists in our human experience. And leaders of today don't want to stand idly by, but do something about this! Numerous causes and organizations like International Justice Mission<sup>46</sup> are growing and thriving, in light of our generation's desire to make a difference in the world.

But how should we respond to injustice, or seek to do justice as leaders? The answers aren't always straightforward. After all, we often get blinded by our own prejudices and agendas. The United States has been criticized both for getting over-involved in other countries' matters, and for not getting involved when it should have. Some cynics have grown to regard America's involvement in matters of worldwide justice as a quest to impose its own culture and government upon the world.

This suspicion only reveals our longing for real justice rather than false justice! We long for leadership that knows how to address matters of injustice appropriately. What can we learn from the way that Jesus dealt with justice as a leader?

### **3 Ways Not To Approach Matters of Justice**

Let's look at three common approaches to justice that fall short, and how Jesus led differently in each instance:

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew 5:6

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.ijm.org>

## **1. One approach is to be passive or permissive about injustice.**

Some deny that injustice exists, or simply allow it to happen under a “laissez faire” philosophy. But Jesus knew that this would mean ignoring people who had been mistreated and marginalized. So the first thing he did was to notice and bring attention to people who had been recipients of injustice. As mentioned before, Jesus made a point to acknowledge women, children, and minorities who had been disregarded. He taught about justice: one of his most well-known parables was about a Samaritan who helped a man who had been beaten by robbers, when other religious leaders passed him by without helping.<sup>47</sup>

### **Will Anybody Stand Up To the Bully?**

I still remember one of my biggest regrets from high school very clearly. I was at the baseball bleachers when I saw one of my classmates, Johnny, getting taunted with racial slurs. A group of bullies threatened and even threw debris at him.

I knew what was happening was wrong, and my heart was racing as I pictured going up to the bullies and giving them a piece of my mind. But I froze up. I did nothing, and Johnny just walked on by, his eyes fixed on the ground.

Although nobody got hurt that afternoon, this incident has haunted me over the years. Maybe I didn't react because I was afraid of becoming involved and getting bullied myself in the months to come. Maybe it was my Asian American upbringing that taught me to not get involved in trouble, to avoid “making waves.” Regardless, I continued to see the bullies pick on Johnny for the rest of the school year. I felt his pain, but I also made a choice to not speak up for him.

How many of us have failed to say or do something we know was right? Or speak up against something that was wrong? I look at my own leadership and see many shortcomings in this area. I know that as a leader, I cannot just sit and watch people be taken advantage of.

This was not Jesus' approach. He spoke up for people who had been mistreated or disregarded and wasn't afraid to confront injustice, even at great personal risk to himself.

## **2. A second approach to justice is to let our biases prevent us from seeing corruption and abuse clearly.**

As mentioned earlier in the case of the United States, sometimes justice is looked upon with suspicion. People see initiatives that seem guided by self-interest and self-righteousness, such as the Crusades and *jihad*, that use the language of “justice.” Each of us can fall into the trap of seeing only the causes of our own country, political party, or religion.

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<sup>47</sup> Luke 10:25-37

Jesus, too, could have let favoritism or nationalism blind his treatment of his disciples, Jews, or even people in his religious tradition. Instead, he answered to a higher notion of justice that transcended his own friends, ethnicity, and religious label.

Jesus wasn't afraid to rebuke his disciples whenever they were out of line<sup>48</sup>, and he was harshest on the Jewish religious leaders. When people were using a religious building (the Temple in Jerusalem) to sell items for profit, Jesus got so angry that he made a whip out of cords, and drove everyone out of the area. He even scattered their coins and overturned their tables and shouted, "Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father's house into a market!"<sup>49</sup>. Jesus was not passive — even when it was his own people, culture, and religion that he had to confront.

This is a great challenge and model for our leadership. Instead of blind loyalty based on our political preferences or social pressures, do we have the courage to call out injustice and corruption even among our "own people?"

### **3. A third approach to justice is to take a hardened, merciless stance.**

We see this all the time in rulers of government who try to lay down the law without mercy, such as Joseph Stalin of Russia or Kim Jong-il of North Korea. A perfect example from literature is the policeman Javert in Victor Hugo's Les Miserables, who becomes blinded in his obsession to track down convict Jean Valjean. Javert believes in the law and wants to make Valjean pay for his crimes so much that he fails to ever see Valjean's humanity, nor the mercy that the convict shows even to him.

Jesus found a way to take a stand against what was wrong, without losing mercy and compassion in the process. One famous example is when he encountered a woman who had been caught in adultery and was about to be stoned to death by a crowd of people. Jesus never excused the woman's wrongdoing, and even told her to "leave [her] life of sin," but he also showed mercy by saving the woman's life. He presented a challenge to the crowd: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her"<sup>50</sup>. Jesus demonstrated mercy and justice at the same time.

**Great leaders are able to be angry and loving at the same time.** They don't excuse wrongdoing but are able to show support even while confronting or holding someone accountable. *Which is harder for you: holding people accountable or loving a person who's done you wrong?*

## **Longings and Laments: Jesus' Heart for Justice and Wholeness**

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<sup>48</sup> Luke 9:51-55

<sup>49</sup> John 2:13-16

<sup>50</sup> John 8:1-11

One of my favorite chapters in the Bible encapsulates Jesus' approach to justice perfectly. In Matthew 23, he delivered a long speech that harshly criticized the Pharisees. He said:

*“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”*

But Jesus concluded his speech with these words:

*“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing!”*

Without reading the whole speech in context, it may feel like Jesus was simply angry and unloading curses upon the Pharisees. But in reading the end of the speech, it becomes clear that he was more likely in a state of grief. He lamented that many of the Jewish people killed the messengers that God had sent them.

Here is the key, though: Jesus expressed his longing for a relationship with these people, even using a motherly analogy of a hen desiring to gather chicks under her wing. In another part of the Bible, Jesus is described as weeping over the city of Jerusalem and its failure to recognize who he was. He was not angered with a hardened sense of justice. His confrontation of the Jewish leaders came out of a heart that was pained and longed for wholeness for the people he loved. Jesus wanted to be in a restored relationship with people who were able to recognize and love him for who he truly was!

This is the heart of leadership that longs for true justice. Just leadership is willing to see and confront a person's wrongdoings, but with an accompanying desire for what is best for that person. Just leadership is firm but never disconnected from a loving motive and hope for relational wholeness. One of my friends once passed on a piece of advice that I remember to this day: “Don't criticize someone or something unless you are also praying for them.”

If we have a healthy sense of justice in our leadership, we will inevitably be critical of behavior and attitudes that are unhealthy or misguided — in leaders and situations around us. However, are we driven by condemnation or by sincerely wanting what's best for a person or situation? That is a question I use to check myself whenever I become critical of people or situations.

Jesus lived out true justice as a leader, and I want to emulate this in my own leadership. We need more leaders in this world who don't disengage or shy away from addressing the wrongs in the world, but who also know how to treat people with mercy and compassion.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- There are some bad views and approaches to injustice, whether ignoring or excusing it, or losing one's sense of compassion.
- Jesus wasn't passive about injustice, but allowed it to anger him, and he confronted people in the wrong.
- Jesus didn't lose his compassion for the unjust, but forgave his enemies and longed for a better relationship with them.

**Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Out of the 3 ways listed to NOT approach injustice, which is closest to the stance you've taken in your leadership? Write out what you hope to do differently and why.
- Make a list of the people in your life of whom you're most critical. What aspect of true health and better leadership would you want for them? Write that down, and pray for them once a week.

## Chapter 7: Leading With Grace: Moving Beyond Grudges

*“Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy.” - Jesus<sup>51</sup>*

*“I’d be in big trouble if Karma was going to finally be my judge... I’m holding out for Grace. I’m holding out that Jesus took my sins onto the Cross, because I know who I am, and I hope I don’t have to depend on my own religiosity.” — Bono, U2<sup>52</sup>*

The fifth perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership isn’t about an “eye for an eye,” but about forgiveness and grace.

There’s no escaping that there are consequences to our actions and decisions. Each of us has made mistakes, done things we regret, and caused others harm or pain — whether intentionally or not. By the simple law of cause and effect, we impact others by what we’ve done. In many cases, this leads us to feel guilt in our conscience, and know that we need to apologize or try to make things right. In other cases, we know that we need to be held accountable for our actions and even punished. As discussed in the last chapter, we know that justice must be served.

Perhaps because we know that actions have consequences, there are few things sweeter than hearing the people we’ve wronged tell us, “I forgive you.” There’s a sense of relief and restoration when they approach us and tell us they value their relationship with us, even more than the wrongdoing that put strain on it. We’ve gotten a small taste of “grace” — we are accepted as we are, with all our mistakes and shortcomings.

However, we don’t always experience this response from leaders when we’ve wronged them. Sometimes we get the “cold shoulder” or silent treatment. There are leaders who hold grudges against us, for days or even years. We’re all capable of harboring bitterness and resentment, especially when we feel hurt or violated.

There are two mentalities that help explain why we are so tempted to hold grudges. They are “you get what you deserve” and “what goes around comes around,” and we’ll discuss each and how Jesus countered them with a radically different approach.

### **“You Get What You Deserve”**

One of the oldest laws of human conduct is “an eye for an eye.” When people wrong you, you have a right to wrong them back.

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<sup>51</sup> Matthew 5:7

<sup>52</sup> From Michka Assayas, *Bono: In Conversation with Michka Assayas* (Riverhead Books, 2005), also <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/augustweb-only/bono-0805.html?start=2>

I'm often tempted to lead with this kind of mindset. Many times, I've worked hard on projects, only to have the work seemingly ignored or overlooked without much acknowledgment or appreciation from my leaders. When this has happened, my first reaction is usually, "Why should I keep doing what I'm doing? My leaders don't deserve the effort I'm putting into this." Moreover, my next reaction is sometimes, "If I'm not appreciated for what I do, why should I appreciate what other people do?"

However, Jesus taught about a kind of conduct that was radically different. He said:

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.' But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also. And if anyone wants to sue you and take your shirt, hand over your coat as well. If anyone forces you to go one mile, go with them two miles"<sup>53</sup>.*

He went on to teach:

*"You have heard that it was said, 'Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... if you only love those who love you, what reward will you get?"<sup>54</sup>.*

Jesus challenged the mindset that we should only treat others the same way they treat us; we should only be good to those who are good to us. Rather, he taught that we should show love even to people who don't show love to us. He wasn't advocating staying in abusive relationships: he spoke out against abuse throughout his life and ministry. Jesus was simply teaching people about how to live out grace, much like a parent who loves his or her child unconditionally, though the child may not show love back.

Over time, I've learned to move beyond my initial reactions to bad leadership and not lead with a "you get what you deserve" mentality. I've learned to remind myself in those moments that I need to lead according to what I believe, not just according to how I've been treated. I want to provide the people I'm leading — and the people who are leading me — with a different (and better) leadership experience than I've had myself.

As frustrating and lonely as it can feel, good leadership must start with us, and our willingness to extend grace to those who've wronged us. The good news is that as we extend grace, it is contagious. As we break the cycle of bad leadership and the "eye for an eye" mindset, we will experience more grace from others in the long run.

### **"What Goes Around Comes Around"**

Another mentality common in this world is your bad (and good) deeds will come back around to you. This is an idea that some like to call "karma." Although the term originates from Hinduism, our intention here is not to judge the good and bad of that religion. We're simply discussing a particular concept or code that many leaders live by.

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<sup>53</sup> Matthew 5:38-41

<sup>54</sup> Matthew 5:43-44, 46

Karma isn't just the mere law of "cause and effect." It's the idea that the universe keeps track of our deeds and eventually will pay us back according to what we've done, even if that means in a future life. This belief can influence how we view things day to day: we might be tempted to keep track of how many good things we've done for our spouse. Or in keeping with the idea of grudges, we might remind them of how many bad things they've done when arguments arise! Or when things don't go well in our lives, we might ask, "What did I do to deserve this?" We "keep track" and feel this is the way God or the universe must be.

Jesus confronted this idea with a very different notion: that God doesn't keep track and then pay us back, but rather knows our wrongdoings and has "wiped them away" through forgiveness and grace. The Bible consistently uses this kind of language when it comes to our sins and God's mercy, whether it's that God will make a covenant with his people where he will "remember their sins no more<sup>55</sup>," or that God has removed our transgressions from us "as far as the east is from the west"<sup>56</sup>.

Jesus told a parable that speaks to this dynamic. He taught about a landowner who hired workers to tend his vineyard for a wage of one denarius for the day. Throughout the day, he then hired other workers who also agreed to work for the same wage, but started their jobs later in the day. At the end of the day, the landowner gathered the workers and paid them each their wage — one denarius. However, those who had been working since the beginning of the day complained that those who started their jobs later were getting paid the same amount.

Doesn't this complaint ring true? It's so tempting to feel like we deserve more for what we've done, whether it's work or our good deeds.

However, the landowner in the parable responded, " 'I am not being unfair to you, friend. Didn't you agree to work for a denarius? Take your pay and go. I want to give the one who was hired last the same as I gave you. Don't I have the right to do what I want with my own money? Or are you envious because I am generous?' "<sup>57</sup>.

Jesus made a point about grace through this parable. We are tempted to "keep track" of how much we deserve, and even be bothered by leaders who have done horrible things and still receive forgiveness and love. We wonder, *how can they be treated as well as those who haven't done as many bad things?* Jesus taught that God's grace is abundant and extends to all equally, regardless of how many bad things they've done. God sees clearly the difference between leaders who have done more evil than others, but in the end, he offers forgiveness and grace to all. He has "wiped away" all of our wrongdoings because of His goodness and grace, not because we have done more than others to earn it.

**It's tempting to keep track of all the bad things people have done to you and others.** *How often do you communicate acceptance to others rather than*

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<sup>55</sup> Jeremiah 31:31-34

<sup>56</sup> Psalm 103:12

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 20:1-16

*condemnation? How much do you seek to include people in leadership rather than exclude?*

### **Leading When We're Right... and Wrong**

None of us is perfect as a leader, and we don't live in a perfect world. At some point in the course of our leadership, we will be wronged by others, and we will wrong people ourselves. We should expect both. The question remains, how do we respond and lead when this happens? From what we've seen and discussed already from the life and teachings of Jesus, here are some suggestions:

- Discern the wrongdoing: what was done, and why did it hurt the person? Seek to understand.
- Acknowledge the wrongdoing: discuss it and get it out in the open.
- Ask how the wronged person would have wanted to be treated instead.
- Move towards forgiveness on a timeline that honors the person who's been wronged.
- Persist in respectful dialogue and relationship in this whole process. If the process is revealing one side's inability to engage with respect, you'll know the relationship might not work out in the near future. Otherwise, affirm the value of the relationship and your commitment to work on it.

This last point speaks to perhaps the most important aspect of grace — that it's more than just an idea. Grace is instead woven into relationships between people.

### **Grace is Not An Impersonal Force**

The idea of karma is seen as an impersonal force that governs the universe, but Jesus taught grace as intimately tied into relationships, whether among people or with God. That's why almost every time Jesus told somebody that they were forgiven or accepted, he did it in a personal, relational way — whether while he healed their illness<sup>58</sup>, physically touched them, or spent quality time with them.<sup>59</sup>

Great leadership is relational. According to Jesus, grace is manifested through intimate relationships. In one of his most well-known parables, he taught about grace using the analogy of a parent's unconditional love for their child.

In the parable, a son came to his father and asked for his share of his inheritance, and then ran off and squandered all the money with self-indulgent decisions. When he hit rock bottom, the son decided to come back to his father and beg him to take him back into his household. The parable continues:

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<sup>58</sup> Luke 5:17-26

<sup>59</sup> Luke 7:36-50

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*“The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

*“But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found’<sup>60</sup>.*

The father in this parable is intended to represent God, who demonstrates that His first response to wrongdoing is inclusion, rather than rejection; the father accepted his son with open arms when his son expected condemnation. Again, great leadership is relational. Consider the intimacy and warmth of this picture of leadership that the father demonstrates, compared to an impersonal “law of the universe” that pays us back according to what we’ve done! This is Jesus’ picture of the grace that God extends to each of us.

### **Grace is About More Than Forgiveness**

In the book *How People Grow*, Dr. Henry Cloud and Dr. John Townsend clarify that grace is not just about forgiveness, and they define grace as “unmerited favor.” This means that God is on our side, desires good for us, and freely gives us things we cannot provide for ourselves.<sup>61</sup> We cannot earn this favor, but have a constant “standing in grace”<sup>62</sup> by which we can have confidence that God is always for us, rather than against us.<sup>63</sup>

As leaders, it feels nearly impossible to lead with this kind of grace. It’s easy to hold grudges, and often the last thing I want to do is to work through difficult issues with people.

The life of Jesus challenges me to continue to desire what’s good for those I’m leading, even when there are mistakes and wrongdoings. This doesn’t mean forgetting or minimizing the severity of wrongdoings, but working through the hardest issues with people, rather than holding judgment inside my heart. As leaders, we can’t extend or receive grace without relationships. We must find ways to keep engaging with people.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

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<sup>60</sup> Luke 15:20-24

<sup>61</sup> Henry Cloud & John Townsend, *How People Grow* (Zondervan, 2009), 67.

<sup>62</sup> Romans 5:1

<sup>63</sup> Cloud & Townsend, *How People Grow*, 69; Romans 8:31-39

- Actions and decisions have consequences, but karma is the idea that there is a law that keeps track of our good and bad behavior and pays us back for what we've done.
- Grace and karma are very different in three major ways, and Jesus taught about all three, and about how God is full of grace.
- Grace is about more than forgiveness. It's about inclusion rather than rejection. It's about acceptance rather than condemnation.

**Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- The next time you hear the word "karma" or a manifestation of it ("what goes around comes around") make a note of it. Write down how handling the situation with grace would be different. What would change, and what could happen as a result?
- Who was the last person who hurt or wronged you? Write down how you could intentionally engage this person about your hurt. Ask your friends for counsel, and pray about doing this.

## Chapter 8: Leading with Heart: Valuing the Overlooked

*“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.” - Jesus<sup>64</sup>*

*“Let’s put it this way, if all the people in Hollywood who have had plastic surgery, if they went on vacation, there wouldn’t be a person left in town.” - Michael Jackson*

The sixth perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership doesn’t just value appearance or the “outside,” but the heart and “inside” of a person.

It’s not all about our physical beauty, height, or eloquence — it matters what we do and think that nobody sees. God values what most of us tend to overlook in leadership.

We’ve all been on the receiving end — maybe we were the last person picked for a team during gym class because we looked the weakest or most un-athletic. Or maybe we were made fun of because of our height or weight or even an awkward comment we made in front of our classmates or work colleagues. Most of us have, at some point or other, been judged solely based upon some aspect of our external appearance.

We’ve also probably been guilty of this ourselves! We’ve already formed an opinion about an overweight woman, an elderly man, or a young man with darker skin color. We’ve assumed that people without a formal education aren’t intelligent or that those who are more educated must be more trustworthy. The list goes on and on.

### **Wait... We’ve Already Committed Murder and Adultery?**

It’s only human to look and judge based on appearance, but Jesus consistently taught his followers to see more deeply into people’s hearts. In fact, in one of his first sermons, Jesus put a huge emphasis on the importance of what goes on inside a person’s heart:

- Jesus taught that being angry, or looking lustfully at somebody, are the same as committing murder and adultery within one’s heart.<sup>65</sup>
- He taught people to pray and do good deeds in secret for the right motives, not in order to receive more praise or recognition.<sup>66</sup>
- Jesus warned people to watch out for people who say one thing and do another, who appear one way but inwardly are very different: “A good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and an evil man

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<sup>64</sup> Matthew 5:8

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 5:21-30

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 6:1-8

brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For the mouth speaks what the heart is full of<sup>67</sup>.

### **God Is Not Impressed With Our Looks**

Jesus highlighted people who exemplified these values. When his disciples were in front of the treasury at the temple where people were putting in their offerings, Jesus saw rich people who were throwing in large amounts of money. When he noticed a poor widow who put in two very small copper coins, he called his disciples to him and said: *“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on”*<sup>68</sup>. Jesus went out of his way to bring attention to the heart of a humble woman, whose two copper coins nobody would have seen as impressive. When everyone else was noticing the bigger and flashier offering gifts, Jesus saw someone that everyone else had overlooked.

Jesus also condemned those who only seemed to care about external appearance, such as the Pharisees (religious leaders). He said: *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people’s bones and all uncleanness. So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”*<sup>69</sup>.

One of the most famous leaders from the Bible, King David, was initially overlooked in a leadership search. God’s own prophet, Samuel, went to go meet seven sons of a man named Jesse to judge who might be a worthy leader. Samuel was immediately impressed when he saw the appearance of Jesse’s eldest son Eliab.

However, God intervened and told Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart”<sup>70</sup>. After rejecting the other brothers as well, Samuel discovered that Jesse had an eighth son who wasn’t even there but was tending sheep. That son turned out to be David, the next king of Israel, whose heart God saw when all men — from spiritual prophets to David’s own family — had overlooked him!

### **Who’s The Quietest Person in The Group?**

I’ve overlooked many people in leadership. I remember one of my classmates who sat in front of me in my French language class, who was one of the quietest people

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<sup>67</sup> Luke 6:45

<sup>68</sup> Mark 12:41-44

<sup>69</sup> Matthew 23:27-28

<sup>70</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7

I had ever met. For a competitive group project we each had to pick people to work with, and I passed him over thinking he wouldn't have much to contribute. Well, it turned out that he was one of the biggest contributors to the group that eventually won the competition. I remember looking at him differently after this and making a mental note to look beyond the surface next time around.

Since that time, I try to build in a few questions when leading a group so as not to overlook people as often:

- ***Who are the quietest people in the group? The most unassuming?***
- ***Who are the people I would consider least likely to be a leader in this group? What are my criteria as I evaluate leadership, and are they good criteria?***

What do you look for in your friends and leaders — image, charisma, and eloquence? Or are you more guided by “heart” qualities like emotional maturity and security? *Who might you be overlooking based on your current criteria?*

### **Our Tell-Tale Hearts**

Why should we value what's on the inside more than the outside as leaders? For one, appearances can be deceiving and fleeting, while the heart reveals the true nature of a person and what will last for much longer. The Bible says: “Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day... so we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal”<sup>71</sup>. When we look beyond the surface of a leader, we get a fuller picture of what to expect from their actions and decisions in the long run.

After all, the makeup or character of a person is not determined by a single action or motive by itself, but by the countless decisions over a lifetime that engrain values and beliefs into one's heart. When he taught that looking at a woman lustfully was like committing adultery with her in one's heart, Jesus was emphasizing that lustful attitudes develop inside of a person and can shape one's heart in significant ways. As one of my friends pointed out, people who have lust or anger in their hearts are more likely to act upon those attitudes when given the opportunity. The heart matters because it guides our actions and decisions. And our hearts are being formed every single day that we make choices about what we value, what we choose, and why.

I saw this truth firsthand when I volunteered at a local nursing home during my high school and college years. I met elderly men and women who mostly fit into two categories: they were either bitter and cynical about life or humble and grateful for the life they had lived. As I talked with them and heard their stories, it struck me that the state of their hearts had been molded by countless years of experiences and how they chose to respond to them. After eighty or ninety years, they had made so many choices that these had shaped them into the kind of people they were, and it seemed that much more unlikely that they would ever change. Their hearts had been “solidified” in a way.

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<sup>71</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

It's almost like if you could have seen their hearts, you would have been able to know exactly what each of them had chosen to care about (and not) during their lives.

Mahatma Gandhi described the significance of what happens inside of us: "Your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, your values become your destiny."

This is why Jesus highlighted the importance of the heart and taught so often about internal principles and perspectives. It's also why he focused such little attention on superficial matters and details.

### **Change Comes Through The Heart**

I've worked for a decade in cross-cultural leadership development, and our organization puts a huge emphasis on inner growth and matters of the heart. During the first few months of a training course for our new employees, we have staff focus on being in touch with their own cultural identity and their heart posture towards people of other ethnicities. Do they view cultural ministry as an obligation? Do they see the people to whom they're ministering as simply projects? We've learned that how people view these kind of fundamental things in their hearts will shape their behavior and experience for the rest of the year. So it's crucial that we all address these deeper issues right away.

Most of the time, change of any significance is on the heart level rather than on a cognitive or skill level. We will see the most meaningful and lasting change and growth in our leadership when we focus on what's going on inside of us.

### **Jesus: An Attractive White Male?**

Have you ever seen movies or television specials that physically portray Jesus? I've always had a hard time when I see an attractive Caucasian actor playing Jesus. First of all, we know that Jesus was Jewish, and thus was likely darker skinned. Even more importantly, though, we do not know how physically attractive he was. Clearly he was charismatic and drew a lot of people to him, but was that because of his appearance or other things?

It's notable when you read the Bible just how little attention is given to Jesus' physical appearance. We just don't know what he looked like because it's never described! The closest we ever get is the prophecy in the Old Testament book of Isaiah which says about the coming savior: "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him"<sup>72</sup>. Isn't it interesting that this prophecy makes it a point to describe the coming leader as unattractive and undesirable? Our instinct to make Jesus appear physically beautiful only reveals our temptation to value appearance more highly than we should.

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<sup>72</sup> Isaiah 53:2

So why were so many people attracted to Jesus and still follow him today? Maybe it's because they knew what was on his heart and were drawn to that. What do people see when they look at our hearts? Do they see passionate leadership that would inspire them to care about something greater and grander? Do they see evidence of ongoing change and growth?

As leaders, it starts with us paying attention to matters of the heart — and it starts with us looking inside our own hearts. As we do so, we will see change and growth in meaningful and lasting ways. As we look more deeply than external appearance, we will notice leaders in places we wouldn't have before and recognize the incredible value they can bring.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- It's human nature to judge based on external appearance.
- Jesus taught people to look deeper into peoples' hearts because they reveal a person's character and values. Can you discern and recognize good and bad leadership, whether in your family, workplace, or church?
- Our hearts guide our everyday thoughts and actions; what's inside of us inevitably overflows to the outside.

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Make a list of your biggest stereotypes based on external appearance. What assumptions do you tend to make about what kinds of people?
- In your next group setting, try to notice the quietest and most unassuming people in the group. Think about what contribution or strengths they might have. Ask them if they'd be willing to lead in those ways, and get their thoughts or input.
- In another group setting, ask yourself who you would consider to be the "least likely" leader, and think about why. What are your criteria for judging that? What about your criteria might be fair and unfair?
- Try to start your meetings with an exercise that allows people to address heart issues: "What's the one part of your job, and how you approach it, that you care about the most... and why?" or "How would you like to change and grow as a leader in the coming year? Why is that important to you?"

## Chapter 9: Leading in Peace: Growing Through Conflict

*“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” - Jesus<sup>73</sup>*

*“If you want peace, work for justice.” — Pope Paul VI*

The seventh perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership isn't about superficial harmony or unity, but a dignity that restores wholeness and health in relationships.

Try to remember the last fight or argument you had, whether with your spouse, friend, boss, or parent. How did it feel? What did you do: work it out or sweep it under the rug?

There are so many different approaches to conflict, but we tend to know when something isn't right in a relationship. It doesn't feel good, and it certainly doesn't feel peaceful. However, too often we operate under the mindset that peace is the absence of conflict. As leaders, we think conflict or disagreement might reflect badly on our leadership and the happiness of the people working for us. So we are tempted to avoid tensions and do whatever it takes to smooth over feelings, to create what appears to be a state of harmony. We mistake peace for harmony.

### **Short-Term Harmony and Long-Term Peace**

However, when we have the courage and perseverance to work out conflict with people, we often find that we're able to come to a better understanding moving forward and heal any hurts or mistakes that have been experienced. Through dealing with tensions and problems, we actually create a healthier relationship and leadership environment. It's more peaceful in the long run.

The same applies on a bigger scale. So many people talk about wanting world peace, but consider the world leaders who have worked for this, and how they've gone about it. Whether it was Martin Luther King, Jr., Gandhi, or Nelson Mandela, they all adopted non-violent methods. However, they certainly did not avoid conflict, but advocated in the face of fierce opposition for a vision of peace that wasn't yet realized.

In his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King wrote: "I must confess that I am not afraid of the word 'tension.' I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth."<sup>74</sup>

Leaders like Dr. King saw the oppression and strife that existed and courageously fought for dignity for the causes and people they represented. They endured suffering and great discomfort, in leading towards true peace.

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<sup>73</sup> Matthew 5:9

<sup>74</sup> [https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)

When Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” I believe he understood that true peace is not about avoiding conflict for the sake of short-term harmony. Rather, peace is about working *through* conflict to achieve long-term health. That is why Jesus himself was not passive and confronted the wrongs he saw in the world.

### **If We Saw True Peace, Would We Recognize It?**

Jesus knew that many people couldn't recognize true peace, and that is why he expressed grief over the city of Jerusalem. He mourned that the city's people did not recognize who he was and what he came to do. He said, “If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace — but now it is hidden from your eyes... you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you”<sup>75</sup>. Throughout the Old Testament as well, God expressed a similar grief at peoples' inability to see what true peace meant.<sup>76</sup>

For many years, I don't think I understood what true peace looked like in leadership. I thought keeping the peace meant not bringing too much negativity or tension into situations. For instance, during one of my first jobs my coworker would sometimes bring up something that was upsetting to her, and I felt uncomfortable talking about it for very long. “Don't dwell on it” was one of the messages I heard growing up in this society. So I answered in a curt manner and changed the subject quickly. After all, we had work to get to and hearing everyone's feelings would be a massive time commitment and distraction.

However, whatever was upsetting my coworker didn't magically disappear — how could it? Instead, it festered and built up inside of her. While externally things felt more peaceful to me, internally there was no peace for her. And over the coming months and years, I heard statements like “I don't know who I can talk to” and “Do we have the time to share how we feel about this?” I felt the frustration of unresolved issues that had no outlet, and so had been bottled up inside my coworker. Eventually, the bubble burst and all these emotions came out — and in ways that were not at all peaceful.

As I saw and realized this, I learned a huge lesson that being a “peacemaker” did not mean smoothing things over by shutting conflict down. Instead, it meant identifying the real issues behind unhappiness and tension, and working to help people address these issues constructively. It often meant drawing out negative emotions and conflict in order to move them towards resolution and reconciliation — words I learned to associate with true peace.

It's not easy to lead through conflict, and we will always be tempted to take the path of least resistance. We'll naturally want to avoid getting into arguments in front of our coworkers or children. But if our coworkers never see us lead through conflict, they

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<sup>75</sup> Luke 19:42, 44

<sup>76</sup> Jeremiah 6:13-14; Ezekiel 34:11-31

also may not learn the importance of compromise and reconciliation. *If our children never get to hear our arguments, they may never experience the power of hearing us say, "I'm sorry."* Our willingness to work for peace impacts not just us, but everyone around us.

So do you view peace and harmony? **Many are uncomfortable with conflict and seek to preserve harmony at all costs, but great leaders see conflict as an opportunity to grow and become healthy.** *What's your first reaction when you see conflict?*

### 3 Kinds of Wholeness and Peace

When we think about what it means to be a "peacemaker" in God's eyes, I believe it means fighting for this picture of long-term health. However, it happens on a few different relational levels:

- **Relationships between people.** Whether it's working to resolve conflict in a friendship or marriage, or giving an employee some honest feedback to help them grow, we work towards peace through building healthier relationships and developing greater "wholeness" in people.
- **Relationships between people and the world.** There are large-scale attitudes and systems that are broken in the world, from abuse and racism towards entire people groups to irresponsibility and cruelty towards animals and the environment. God calls us to fight for dignity and peace by confronting these things and working towards making them whole again.
- **Relationships between people and God.** Finally, the message of Christianity is that God wants us to become the most fullest, healthiest version of who we were intended to be. He wants us to thrive! Part of that is being connected to God in an intimate relationship, and so Jesus invited people to know God and follow him as a main part of his ministry.

Jesus lived out all three aspects of this peace-making. He healed people, confronted dysfunctions and injustice, and worked to restore people's understanding and relationship with God. The New Testament book of Ephesians describes how Jesus not only brought peace between God and men<sup>77</sup>, but peace between Jews and non-Jews.<sup>78</sup> It even says later in the book, "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus"<sup>79</sup>.

Peacemaking was Jesus' purpose and mission, and he involved and invited his followers to join him in that work.

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<sup>77</sup> Ephesians 2:13

<sup>78</sup> "Gentiles," Ephesians 2:14-16

<sup>79</sup> Galatians 2:28

This is a huge part of what we can bring as leaders to those around us. Starting in our families, we can encourage working through conflict, not avoiding or minimizing it. In our workplaces or churches, we can make regular and honest feedback a part of what our leaders do so there's a culture of openness and growth rather than secrecy and shame.

On a broader level, we can cultivate greater awareness of the importance of issues that impact the entire world rather than just our individual lives. We can encourage safe and respectful conversations about God and spirituality that allow people to think about more than just the material and physical world. The work of peace involves leaders who aren't afraid to engage difficult but important topics.

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- Peace is not the absence of conflict; it's not harmony.
- Peace is about working through conflict for the sake of long-term health.
- Jesus taught about three kinds of important peace: in relationships between people, in relationships between people and God, and in relationships between people and the world.
- Jesus lived out a mission, and invited his followers to join this mission of bringing peace to all three of these important relationships.

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Write down the way you learned to deal with conflict during your childhood. Share it with a good friend or coworker and ask them about their own experiences.
- The next time you have a conflict in your family, debrief afterwards and ask, "What did we learn from this conflict? How did we handle it, and are there better ways? How do we want to handle it moving forward?" Come up with a plan together.
- Model the value of honest feedback by asking your team to send you some of their thoughts on how you can improve and grow as a leader. Take some time to reflect on what you learn from this and share your learnings with the team.
- Provide a regular system of annual feedback where people are able to share honestly and safely with one another. Stick to it.
- Have a "norms" conversation with those you lead about valuing respectful and open conversations about spiritual topics and beliefs.

Discuss peoples' background in this area and their feelings about it.  
Listen and affirm where they are in their spiritual journey.

## Chapter 10: Leading in Love: Sacrificing for the Greater Good

*“Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” — Jesus<sup>80</sup>*

*“I have found the paradox, that if you love until it hurts, there can be no more hurt, only more love.” — Mother Teresa*

The eighth perspective based on the Beatitudes is that leadership is about a love so deep that it is willing to sacrifice things dear to the heart.

What is love? There are many thoughts and ideas on this portrayed in books, movies, and throughout society. For some, love means having positive or happy feelings towards somebody else. For others, love means being intimately connected to another person, whether physically or emotionally.

Jesus taught a lot about love. But one aspect he highlighted quite often was the sacrificial aspect of love. He said, “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends”<sup>81</sup>. He himself was persecuted and willingly sacrificed his life out of love for others.

We do seem to admire leaders who demonstrate sacrificial love: from those risking their lives in the military and fire department, to parents who give of their time, money, and energy to ensure that their children are safe and provided for. In the media, countless movies contain superheroes and protagonists who come to the point of death while trying to save others. We can follow leaders who are willing to sacrifice for a cause they believe in.

### **Are You Willing to Live and Die For What You Believe?**

Jesus himself sacrificed his life to save other people — he was persecuted to the point of death — and we will discuss the significance of this a little later. But he also took the idea of sacrifice to a whole new level. When talking to his disciples, he told them:

*“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”<sup>82</sup>.*

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<sup>80</sup> Matthew 5:10

<sup>81</sup> John 15:13

<sup>82</sup> Matthew 16:24-26

Jesus challenged his followers to not just be willing to die, but to sacrifice every day of their lives!

### **Dying to “Good” Things: The Hardest Sacrifice**

So what does that mean, to live out a life of sacrifice? The Bible describes it in many places, but this doesn't just mean giving up things that are considered evil or bad, like murder, illicit sex, deceit, and so on. It also means giving up things that are considered “good!”

For instance, it could include sacrificing some of our own needs and desires, whether it might be comfort, money, or food. It could include sacrificing our opportunities for power, status, and respect. It could include sacrificing our time and energy that we would have used for ourselves. It could include sacrificing our preferences for how we like to do things. For leaders who are busy and whose time is a premium, sacrifice can be more difficult than we might first assume.

However, Jesus didn't give his followers (or us) the option of claiming that sacrificial love is for “other people” who nobly risk their lives. He expanded the challenge to every single one of us who are called to show sacrificial love in countless everyday decisions!

### **A Time I Was Unwilling to Sacrifice**

One of my biggest regrets involves a sacrifice I was unwilling to make in my leadership. I was giving a talk at a conference and wanted to involve some other people to share their insights in front of the audience. However, time was running out and I faced a choice between letting these people complete their sharing and finishing the remaining points of my talk. Under pressure, I decided to cut them off.

As I concluded my presentation, I saw the confused and deflated looks on the faces of the people I had asked to share, and I felt awful. I apologized to them, but this experience showed me my unwillingness to sacrifice.

I've learned that in projects and presentations, it's hard for me to sacrifice control over the process and content when I have a vision for how I think things should be. However, this is controlling and short-sighted leadership, as I jeopardize partnerships and collaboration with others. I learned through this experience that I was the one who really missed out — on an opportunity to empower others who were growing in leadership and on benefiting from their ideas and approaches that could have made my talk even better!

**Great leaders consistently feel the cost of sacrifice.** *What are the hardest things in your life to sacrifice and why? To what extent are you sacrificing your time, energy, and opportunities to uplift others?*

### **Without Love, Sacrifice Doesn't Mean Much**

What is the motivation behind sacrifice? Jesus didn't teach his followers to sacrifice just for its own sake, or in order to show how impressive or tough they were. He taught that true sacrifice is done out of love for the sake of wanting the best for another person. When Jesus talked about laying down one's life for one's friend<sup>83</sup>, the motive was described as love — to save another person. Perhaps the most famous verse in the New Testament says: "For God so loved the world that He gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life"<sup>84</sup>. Jesus' sacrifice came out of God's love for the world.

Another famous passage about love in the New Testament describes sacrificial love in this way: "If I give all I possess to the poor and give over my body to hardship that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing"<sup>85</sup>. This is quite a statement! It's claiming that a leader could sacrifice all his material possessions to help the poor, and even sacrifice his own body and life, and yet not be motivated by love. And in that case, the Bible says that the sacrifice is of little value! Love in Christianity isn't just "icing on the cake" of sacrifice. Love is so foundational to everything that without it things like sacrifice, skill, and knowledge lose their value and meaning.

### **Coward or Sacrifice? My Biggest Test**

Why are we drawn to sacrificial love? After all, we live in a culture in which self-interest and self-preservation are influences on how people think and act. Some people may even think it's foolish to sacrifice for others. Others may admire it, but find it hard to do themselves.

I got a glimpse of this when I saw a man almost die next to me. I was overseas and taking a hike by a cliff near the ocean. My nature guide was an elderly man, and as we walked on the beach, the rough weather conditions caused the waves to sweep both of us off our feet. One wave was so violent that it actually buried him into the sand and debris next to the cliff so he couldn't get out. As the waves kept pounding upon him, my guide struggled to breathe through the water.

I was trying to do my best to stay on my feet, and I immediately went towards the man, trying to get him free. To make matters worse, he was gasping and wheezing, "I have a heart condition... I need to get to my medication!" Using all my strength, I was finally able to lift him out of the debris and carry him out of the path of the waves. As he took his heart medication, it dawned on me that this man could have died. He wouldn't have been able to unbury himself from the debris and could have easily drowned. Also, if he had had a heart attack, there's not much I could have done, as we were alone and well out of cell phone range.

This experience was both sobering and introspective for me. I had always wondered what I would do in a life-threatening situation: would I step in to help or freeze

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<sup>83</sup> John 15:13

<sup>84</sup> John 3:16

<sup>85</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:3

up? What I discovered was that I didn't even think twice about the danger to myself but acted instinctively to assist a man I didn't even know that well. I'm not saying that I saved him because of any courage or nobility on my part, but rather that I acted sacrificially out of instinct. I got a tiny glimpse in this moment of what lifeguards, firefighters, and soldiers must experience on a regular basis — there is something natural about caring so much about others that we overlook the danger to ourselves.

I believe that Jesus knew that there was something pure about sacrificial love that considers others even more highly than oneself, and that deep down, we long to have this kind of love inside us. We are built to give love away, not just receive it for ourselves.

I've been blessed with many mentors who have invested hours in helping me grow in my leadership, and at times I wondered why they would take the time. Over the years, I've come to understand that they find it rewarding to give and see other people grow. I see this because I feel the same way about investing in younger leaders myself. We are incomplete without this kind of generous and sacrificial love.

### **Love Increases in Us the More We Give It**

Christian musician Rich Mullins writes in one of his songs, "Love is bound more in the things we've given up, than in the things that we have kept." Think about the last time you sacrificed your money, time, and energy to give somebody a meaningful gift. How did it feel to do that? Was it rewarding, and if so, why? For those who have raised children, why do parents undergo such huge sacrifices for their kids? We have a deep desire and need to serve and give love to others, even if we don't always realize it.

The night before my wedding, my father-in-law wrote me a letter reflecting on his years raising his daughter — the woman I was to marry. He expressed gratitude and love to me, and encouraged us as a couple to love each other sacrificially. He described love as one of the few things in the world that "actually increases in us, the more we give it away." It was one of the most meaningful letters I have ever received. Sacrificial love defies math and logic. When we give love, we somehow gain more than we lose.

### **Death + Love = Life**

Indeed, there's something profound about the nature of sacrifice, in that when it's motivated by love, it somehow brings about new and greater life — even in death. Jesus observed this truth in nature itself, as he described the importance of his own impending death and sacrifice: "Very truly I tell you, unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds"<sup>86</sup>. Jesus knew his death would give many other people life.

Who in your life and leadership can you give something of deep value? What opportunities or positions do you have access to which could bring new life to younger

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<sup>86</sup> John 12:24

leaders around you? What kind of new life and capacity for love might you gain through your sacrifices?

One example of a man who both lived and died sacrificially in service to other people is the priest Father Damien. He answered a call to minister to a leper colony on Molokai, one of the islands of Hawaii. He decided to live with the lepers and help with their physical and spiritual needs. Eventually, Father Damien contracted leprosy himself and died on Molokai.

Some people might pity him or say that he “got what was coming to him” for working with lepers, but I believe that Father Damien got exactly what he wanted. He said, “I make myself a leper, so that I might gain all to Jesus Christ.” His death from leprosy was a perfect reflection of the love Father Damien had for the lepers, which was so deep that he had become one of them in body and spirit. His sacrificial love brought life and hope to so many lepers who lived in despair and isolation, and his sacrificial death has inspired countless people since. Death and love together somehow lead to life.

The same is true for Jesus, in that God lived among us (as Father Damien did in the leper colony) when he took on human form as Jesus, and his life and death brought life to people throughout the world. In Jesus, God wanted to show that He was with us.<sup>87</sup> In Jesus’ life, God wanted to show what it meant to serve others. In Jesus’ death, God showed the ultimate example of sacrificial love — as he gave his life for even those who hated and killed him.

Jesus embodied the purest form of love known: sacrificial love for others to the point of death, even for those who don’t return that love back.<sup>88</sup> This is the ultimate standard for leaders in love because it is the hardest kind of love to live out. Yet it is perhaps the strongest force in the world, one that can transform people and bring new life. It’s the kind of love that compels others to devote their hearts and lives to someone or something. As a leader, I want to keep growing in this kind of love!

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

- There are many views of love, but Jesus highlighted that the greatest kind of love involves sacrifice.
- Sacrificial love doesn’t just mean giving up one’s life, but about giving up many things in our everyday lives for others.
- Sacrificial love means giving up not just “bad” things, but “good” things like our time, energy, and opportunities — to help others succeed.

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<sup>87</sup> Matthew 1:20-25

<sup>88</sup> Romans 5:8

- When love and sacrifice are together, it leads to life. Jesus taught that this is true not just in this world, but in the world to come.

### **Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- Think about two of your favorite movies. What is the clearest demonstration of love in each movie? What does this tell you about what love means to you? Is there any sacrifice involved, and if so, what?
- Think about 2 things that would be hardest for you to sacrifice in your daily life, out of love for others. Tell those you love about this, and try sacrificing one of them for a week.
- Try giving something up during the next Lent season, in solidarity with your family or a community of friends or coworkers. However, choose something that is connected to a loving cause and communicate that to others during your 40 days of sacrifice.
- Think of one younger leader whom you want to see grow. Offer to meet up monthly and to be a support and resource to them. Give of your time, energy, and opportunities.

### **Reflection: *Sacrificing Too Much***

While sacrifice is a huge part of great leadership, many people sacrifice without paying attention at all to their own needs and desires. As a result, they burn out and become exhausted or resentful, and this is not helpful for either themselves or the people they are serving. I've made this mistake far too often, and what I find helpful is to think of sacrifice not as a short-term project, but a long-term commitment. It's less about making an all-out effort for a few days or weeks and then burning out, but about looking at my major priorities in life and adjusting them to be more giving to other people and causes.

For instance, I look at my work, family, and friends and ask how much I'm available to give to people who may have needs. Am I able to initiate and respond to the people I love? Am I able to offer my time and resources to support the causes I believe in? Sacrificial love should stretch us out of our comfort zone, but it must also be sustainable to be most meaningful and effective.

## Chapter 11: Leading in Freedom: Honoring the Choices of Others

*When Jesus saw [the disabled man] lying there and learned that he had been in this condition for a long time, he asked him, “Do you want to get well?”<sup>89</sup>*

*“I can’t make you love me, if you don’t...” - Bonnie Raitt*

“Which is a more effective motivator in leadership — fear or love?” Recently I’ve enjoyed asking people this question just to stimulate discussion. An argument can be made for both, and certainly leaders throughout history have attempted both approaches. Dictators like Stalin and Hitler ruled by fear, threatening and killing those in their way, while others like Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi led entire movements based on the love of a common cause. Machiavelli wrote in *The Prince*, “It is better to be feared than loved, if you cannot be both.” Influential football coach Vince Lombardi said, “Win your players’ hearts and they will follow you anywhere.”

To me, the big difference between the two approaches has to do with freedom and choice. Leaders who rule with fear attempt to remove the freedom of choice from their followers — they want people to believe that they must join their cause or group at any cost. When Hitler began his invasion of Europe, he effectively forced those from other countries to join his army through domination and threat of violence. This is one way to lead, and it can be very effective.

### Jesus Didn’t Force People

However, Jesus didn’t use intimidation or sheer force to motivate his followers. When some of his followers found his teachings offensive and left the group, Jesus never forced them to stay.<sup>90</sup> When a Samaritan village rejected him and his message, Jesus simply moved on. His disciples asked if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy the village, but Jesus rebuked them and said, “[I] did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them”<sup>91</sup>. When Jesus’ own disciples and closest friends left him, He did not fight or resist. In a moment that lives in infamy, Jesus knew that Judas would betray him, but he still let it happen.<sup>92</sup> He even affirmed Judas’ choice, saying, “Do what you came for, friend.”

Why did Jesus not interfere or intervene more in situations like this? One reason (among others) is that he valued the freedom of people to choose. Jesus knew the freedom to make our own choices is an essential part of what makes people human.

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<sup>89</sup> John 5:6

<sup>90</sup> John 6:66

<sup>91</sup> Luke 9:51-56

<sup>92</sup> Matthew 26:47-50

This is similar to how many parents may feel towards their children. They do everything they can to help their kids, and even express their hopes and desires to them. However, as time goes on they learn they must let their children make their own choices — even when they are painful or destructive ones. That’s because parents recognize that their children have distinct identities and lives to lead.

### **Freedom Involves Loss of Control**

A similar principle applies to us as leaders. When I entrust the organization of a project or event to someone else’s leadership, it’s often hard for me to let go of some control. The decisions they make, from their overall approach to the people they choose to work with, to the logistics and content and design, will not always be what I think is most effective. When they make mistakes, it’s hard for me to not want to step in and solve problems for them, especially in areas where I have experience.

However, if I were to micromanage every project and event — always going with whatever decisions I think are best — how many other viewpoints or approaches would not be included or experienced? What all would be missing that I simply can’t see because of my limitations? After all, I’m just one person.

If I were to step in and fix all issues that arise, how would the people running these projects ever learn from the experience, and grow? On the other hand, if I am able to allow them to lead and make their own decisions, they are free to benefit from the successes of things they did well and claim them as their own. They are free also to benefit from the failures and mistakes of things that they didn’t do so well and feel the pain and disappointment that can lead to change and growth.

As we lead in freedom, we honor the unique contribution of others. We honor their dignity to make and live with their own choices.

Remember, granting freedom doesn’t mean we have to stop caring or being involved. We should do what we can to set people up to succeed and stay engaged with them during and after their project or event. However, truly granting freedom does mean giving up a large measure of control and knowing when it’s time to step back and let people succeed or make mistakes — for their benefit.

### **What Kind of Freedom Do You Want?**

Of course, the word “freedom” has many connotations and associations, so it may be helpful to distinguish between helpful and unhelpful freedom.

In my ministry work, sometimes I hear people express their fear that becoming a Christian will remove their freedom, and this is unappealing to them. My question to them is, “What kind of freedom do you fear will be taken away?” There are the kinds of freedom that are of indispensable value: for instance, the freedom to be unique in our diverse personalities, cultures, and giftings. God does not desire to take away our uniqueness and individuality!

However, there also exist types of freedom that aren't helpful when taken to an extreme. For instance, there's the freedom to do whatever we want or feel at any given time, and the freedom to live without any kind of overall purpose or values. I believe these freedoms may appear at first to be quite appealing to some people. However, they eventually realize that a complete lack of structure and standards often leads to confusion, aimlessness, and isolation.

Again, parents understand this as they raise children who desperately need structure and boundaries so they can learn how to interact and relate to people and their environment. I believe that humans simply were not built to live apart from any kind of a bigger picture — that is one reason that we cannot help but form societies and communities and work in jobs to fulfill our need for purpose. Everybody needs an appropriate balance of “guiding purpose” and freedom in order to function optimally.

**Great leaders provide people with the right balance of freedom and structure.** *Are you leading others with too much structure, or not enough?*

### **No Dessert, TV, or Video Games?**

When I was growing up, my parents enforced a few strict rules in our household. First, in terms of diet, we did not eat dessert after dinner other than fruit. Once a week (or during special occasions), we were allowed to have a small amount of a treat, whether ice cream, cookies or cake.

Second, in terms of entertainment, we were not allowed to watch television or play video games at all during the week so we could focus on our schoolwork. On the weekends, we were restricted to two hours per day of television and games (which you better believe we pushed to the limit, and sometimes beyond).

One summer after high school, I lived at home by myself while my parents were traveling the world. I had complete freedom. Well, you can imagine that I ate whatever I wanted, whenever I wanted. Fast food, potato chips, soft drinks, cookies — the sofa and coffee table were littered with crumbs and sugar. I also watched all the television my heart desired, and stayed up until all hours playing video games. I went to bed at 4 am and woke up at noon.

The first two days and nights, I had the absolute time of my life. By the third day, however, I started feeling sick. All the sodium, fat, and sugar made my stomach hurt, and staring at the TV screen all night gave me a headache. I found myself in a fog of sleep and laziness. I began to feel mildly depressed.

Can you believe what happened next? I actually wanted to eat healthier foods like vegetables and fruit. I actually wanted to start waking up earlier and developing a sense of routine and purpose throughout the day. I looked into job and even volunteer opportunities to do something meaningful with my time. I began to appreciate the limits and structures that my parents provided thoughtfully for me while I was growing up.

When granted complete freedom, I realized it wasn't what I really wanted or needed. The key was having a balance of “guiding purpose” and freedom. As we lead others, whether in our family or work settings, honoring people's freedom and choices is

of utmost importance. However, we must remember that “letting people do what they want” is not necessarily the answer, nor is it truly freedom. Helpful freedom stems from intentional leadership, not from a lack of thought or engagement.

### **Our Freedom in God’s Kingdom**

When Jesus taught about his kingdom — as we’ve discussed throughout this book — he gave vision to a bigger picture of life and purpose that people can be part of. However, one thing I appreciate about life as a Christian is that there is also incredible freedom and diversity within that vision for people to be their unique selves. There’s not a huge set of rules that we must follow, but instead a relationship we can build with God. The brilliance of this is that as we get to know God better, we do receive guidance and correction — but it’s relational and through our real life experience!

This is a great model for us as leaders. Sometimes we are tempted to micromanage others, or people at other times might actually want us to tell them what to do! What if we instead focused on building great relationships with those we lead and influencing them as they get to know our hearts and observe our lives?

### **You Can’t Force Somebody to Love You**

Ultimately, the most important motivation for giving us freedom and choice is God’s love. At the heart of love is respecting peoples’ freedom, and that’s why relationships can be so heartbreaking. When we invest and give our hearts to people, we open ourselves up to the possibility that they might reject or leave us. That is also what makes relationships so rewarding when people do choose to accept and love us in return. That is the power of choice.

A passage about love in the New Testament states that “love doesn’t insist on its own way”.<sup>93</sup> Throughout the Bible, God and Jesus used the word “if” over and over again — the ultimate word of choice (e.g. “If you believe, you will see the glory of God”<sup>94</sup>). He didn’t assume that people will follow him, but understood it was their choice. Jesus isn’t a leader who insists on his own way. In love, he expresses his desire for us to be with him, but also ultimately lets us choose our way. That is the love of a leader who is worthy of being followed.

Can we lead in a freedom that respects the choices of other people and gives them space to learn, grow, and be themselves? Can we love in a way that doesn’t seek to control, but draws out the unique and special contributions of each person?

### **Leadership Take-Aways:**

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<sup>93</sup> 1 Corinthians 13:5

<sup>94</sup> John 11:40

- Leaders can motivate by removing freedom and choice, or providing it.
- Jesus respected choice and didn't force people to listen to him or follow him.
- There is good and bad freedom. Good freedom frees people to be themselves, while bad freedom gives people permission to do whatever they want, whenever they want.
- Respecting peoples' freedom to choose is ultimately about love. The Bible teaches that love doesn't insist on its own way.

**Practical Ideas To Apply:**

- During your next project, go around the group and ask others what their approach would be. Seek to incorporate elements of each approach in the project. Ask someone to lead the project moving forward. After the project, write down what you learned about each person's contribution and what they brought.
- Seek whenever possible to give choices to those you lead. If you need them to learn a skill, and they don't want to do the suggested training, give them a couple of other ways they can acquire that same skill.
- Make it a goal to build a good relationship with each person you lead, and to get to know their unique background and gifts. Ask them to show you something they're good at, or to go somewhere that's meaningful to them.

# Leading Like Jesus: Seeking the Impossible But Necessary

*“No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.” - John 1:17-18*

As I've reflected on the life of Jesus, it strikes me how difficult it is to lead in the way that he modeled. After all, recalling some of the leadership lessons of this book, how many of us can consistently:

- **See and address the realities of life and the world, in all its pain and messiness?**
- **Connect others to purpose and meaning in life, in ways they cannot see themselves?**
- **Find strength in weakness and compassion in suffering?**
- **Advocate for what's right with humility and grace?**
- **Think differently than people around us, and see those who are overlooked?**
- **Sacrifice what's most important to us, out of love for others?**
- **Grant freedom that empowers others and honors their choices?**

We as humans have limitations. However, that doesn't mean we should stop pursuing this kind of leadership. Learning to live out these things will not only make us into leaders that other people want to follow, but it will equip us to succeed and endure. We must continue to seek to lead like Jesus — an endeavor that is impossible, but necessary.

## **Grace: A Source From Outside Of Us**

However, we aren't on our own as we grow in our leadership! Jesus knew that people needed a source of wisdom, strength, and love from outside of themselves — which the Bible calls grace.

Leadership can be a lonely journey, especially when we feel nobody understands or really knows our challenges and realities. During these times, we can know that there is someone who has gone before us and experienced the struggles and pains of leadership. We can have confidence that God is not distant or detached, but our source of grace.

## **The Gift of Presence**

After all, Jesus wasn't a leader whose biggest asset was a product, book, or seminar. The amazing thing about Jesus is that he never separated his teachings from himself as a person. At the heart of his life and ministry, he offered his followers the gift of his own presence in their lives. His leadership was relational, and even when he died, Jesus promised his followers that he would be with them always.

Over the past few years, I've been learning that all the content and projects I develop in leadership simply do not compare to the value of "being present" with people. Last year when I was with my parents, I was hustling between one task to the next, stressing about whether I was doing enough to help out. My wife stopped me and said, "Adrian, look at your father! He's not asking you to do anything at all. Maybe he's just happy to have you around." Sometimes the greatest gift we can provide as leaders is to be available and present in the moment. This is what Jesus offers to us — the gift of his presence.

### **Giving Credit Where It's Due**

When I reflect on my life today, it's not devoid of suffering or pain or hardship. However, it's filled with meaning and strength and peace. Following Jesus has been an incredibly transformative journey. My life is not guided or dominated by seeking to obtain and maintain my childhood dreams like a house, family, and job anymore. Instead, I wake up with a clear sense of purpose — I know what I'm living for and why. I know what kind of leader I want to be. I wake up knowing that I don't have to go it alone.

As we seek to lead wherever we are — in our families, businesses, churches, or schools — my hope is that you find inspiration and great wisdom from the life of Jesus. He's the one who gave us answers, before we even knew what questions to ask. Jesus showed us what really matters in leadership. I hope you can take away a few principles and apply them to your leadership today.

May you experience great focus and fruitfulness in your leadership. May you know the gift of Jesus' presence as your mentor and guide as you continue to pursue what really matters in leadership.

## **Appendix: If You Are Not a Christian... (How Do I Follow?)**

If you aren't a follower of Jesus, thank you for your interest in this book and for reading to this point. First of all, let me say that wherever you are on your spiritual journey — whatever amount of faith or doubt you have — you are welcome here. I have been through many stages of belief and doubt over my lifetime and did not grow up believing in God. I'm still learning what it truly means to follow Jesus. If you'd like to read more about my journey that led me to where I am now, you can visit [www.adrianpei.com/faith](http://www.adrianpei.com/faith).

When I first started looking into Christianity, I was bothered by a lot of what I saw in the church and Christians around me. I couldn't relate, and I felt different. I saw a lot of hypocrisy, judgment, and other things that conflicted with many values that were dear to my heart. I couldn't compromise those or leave them behind.

Over the years, I've been pleasantly surprised to discover that I didn't have to leave all my values behind. In fact, I've seen how many of them are supported by Jesus, not contradicted by him.

So much of leadership is based on trust, and trust is earned. I encourage you to continue asking honest questions and staying open to learning. If you can, spend some time reading the New Testament in the Bible and look at the way Jesus led and treated people. Consider the things he cared about, and get to know his heart. Does it speak to the most important questions and issues of life? Does it address the realities of the world around us? Does it resonate with you, challenge you, and inspire you?

I myself was driven by a curiosity to know. Every time I discovered something in the Bible that surprised me or didn't make sense, I would read more, or research more. I would ask more questions. Over the years, I was pleasantly surprised that these questions were being answered, but even more that I was gaining trust in Jesus' vision and leadership. Things began to make more sense, and I saw how the good, true, and beautiful things in the world were not inconsistent with Christianity. I could live an incredibly meaningful and fulfilled life in following Jesus, and there was also the incredible promise of life after death. What did I really have to lose? My list was growing shorter and shorter.

When I finally decided to make a commitment to follow Jesus, I discovered a lot of different thoughts out there about what that meant. So I thought I'd share some of what's helped me to sort through all that.

### **What Is The Main Message of Christianity?**

**Through the Eyes of Parents and Children**

There are many ways to explain the message of Christianity, from God forgiving our wrongs like a judge, to Jesus paying the price for the debts we owed. These all help to paint a picture of God's heart towards us.

I'd like to add another way to look at Christianity through the analogy of parent and child — something all of us can relate to in some fashion:

Like parents who decide to have children, God created us so we could experience the joy of life in a world full of beautiful things, and so He could share in that joy with us. God wants to be in an enduring, meaningful relationship with us.<sup>95</sup>

But many people don't see the need for this in their lives. Or even if they do believe God exists, they don't listen, talk to, learn from, or spend time with Him. As children grow older, they sometimes prioritize their parents less, take them for granted, or even reject them. They might even make decisions that are self-destructive, harmful to others, or damaging to the world.

This is painful for parents, and so it is to God, who grieves when we shut Him out of our lives, and only turn to Him when we need something, or want somebody to blame. But many parents continue to love their children despite bad choices, disobedience, or even complete rejection — because they see to the core of the child they know and love.

God may love His children like parents do, but forgiveness is needed to truly restore a broken relationship. Forgiveness isn't about overlooking or forgetting what happened. A parent doesn't just forgive without feeling the pain of the previous hurts and rejection. He or she must be willing to absorb the pain to extend forgiveness.

To forgive people, God needed to absorb the pain of all the wrongs and rejection of everyone in the world. He did this in a way that was public and clear to everyone, through coming to earth as a man, Jesus, and sacrificing his life. Jesus died as God's sign that He offered forgiveness for the wrongs and rejections of the past. Jesus then rose from the grave as God's sign that He was alive and ready for a restored relationship with anyone who wants it.

You can't force someone to love you. Even a parent forgives her child, the child doesn't always accept it. Restoration of a relationship is not possible if one side is not interested. That's why God offers us a choice — to accept His offer of this new relationship and kind of life, or not.

Just like our parents have influenced the core of who we are, letting God into our lives is an inner change that impacts our every thought, word, decision, and action. As our Creator, God knows us more deeply and personally than anyone else. As we grow and invest in our relationship with Him, God brings out the purest form of who we are. It is a process of growth, just like any relationship.

And it's not just about our individual relationship with God. As we follow God, we learn to love and grow alongside others who are committed to living out the active,

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<sup>95</sup> James 1:18

ongoing mission of God in the world. We join a community and a mission that's bigger than ourselves.

Each of us has a choice to join God's family and mission at any time, and begin a new life with Him.

## How Do I Follow?

So how can we follow a person who lived thousands of years ago? The good news, as described in various parts of this book, is that Christianity is based on the belief that Jesus is actually not dead, but living and with us! Because he is God Himself, he can be present with us and has power and wisdom and guidance for today — not just in the past when Jesus walked on the earth.

Although Jesus is not a leader that you can physically see and touch, it doesn't mean that he is any less real. He used the analogy of the wind to explain this nature of some "spiritual" things (John 3:8). The wind cannot be seen, but it's still very real, and its effects can certainly be seen!

So how does one actually go about following Jesus? Here are some of my thoughts on what it means and doesn't mean.

### Following Jesus means that you:

- **Commit & Verbalize Your Belief:** Whether you think the amount of faith you have is small or large, you exercise that faith by committing to a new life with Jesus. While a big part of that happens internally, it's equally important to tell others about this, as this keeps it from just staying in our heads, or in the realm of abstract ideas.
- **Become Transformed Internally:** As you do that, you are transformed from the inside out, and are given Jesus' eyes to see how God sees, and Jesus' heart to understand what God really cares about.
- **Live With Renewed Vision:** You begin a journey of renewal as you learn and grow every day to understand the details of God's heart and kingdom, and how to live that out in your life. Some of this happens through reading the Bible and praying, some of it happens through talking to other Christians who can help you to grow, and some happens through just living in the world with new eyes to see. This impacts everything from your thinking and values to your priorities, decisions, and actions. It impacts the way you treat people, and the way you look at the world.

- **Live With Renewed Purpose:** You join in a mission and purpose to restore God’s kingdom, in all the ways listed in the chapters in this book: to advocate for the weak, find strength in suffering, serve other people above ourselves, fight for justice and dignity, live out sacrificial love, and so on.
- **Join a Community on a Mission:** You join in this mission with countless others who also have been transformed by Jesus. You join in a community that teaches you, refines you, and supports you along the path of life. You learn how you are uniquely different and learn to appreciate and work with those who are different from you. You don’t live your life isolated or alone.

### Following Jesus does NOT mean that you:

- **Recite a “Magic Prayer” Formula:** You simply say a prayer reciting some magic words, and then don’t have to do anything else, or change anything in your life. That’s cheap magic, not the kind of spiritual transformation that following Jesus brings!
- **Go to Church and That’s It:** You go to church, without any kind of inner transformation in your heart. Christianity isn’t about image or joining a social club; it’s about a new way of living and joining others in that.
- **Imitate Christians Around You:** You start acting like all the Christians you see on television or around you. Following Jesus isn’t about just being nice and cordial to others, living a clean-cut life, or aligning yourself automatically with politically conservative agendas and issues. Following Jesus means becoming closer to his heart and kingdom, as you learn what that means through your life and in community with others. As you get to know God and His heart better and better, you will learn what matters to Him and what doesn’t.

## Why is a Change Necessary?

Before I became a Christian, I remember telling a friend, “I don’t necessarily feel that I’m unhappy with my life, or that there’s something huge that I’m missing.” Part of me wondered if I really needed to change something big in my life. I’ve since learned why *change* is so necessary to becoming a Christian.

Christianity isn’t about us just saying or doing a few things in order to get what we want, like the happiness or strength or wisdom that come from faith. It’s not about us “working the system” for self improvement — or even worse, just so we can get into

heaven. I remember a friend once remarking, “It’s like you Christians are just signing a list to get into the afterlife!”

Christianity is also not just about being a nicer or more ethical person, or trying harder to follow a set of rules or traditions. *True faith begins when we understand that we are incomplete and broken, and that we need something outside ourselves in order to be whole.* A change is necessary because we do not have all the answers nor all the strength. *We cannot be Christians by sheer intelligence, insight, willpower, or discipline.* Only something or someone outside of us can change us.

Becoming a Christian is a fundamental change that happens inside of us as we make an expression of faith or belief and commit our lives and hearts in action. The Bible describes how our hearts are changed, and we actually become a new person. This is the idea of a spiritual transformation, or a conversion.

The crazy thing about this is that Jesus says that it can happen in an instant and for anybody. It’s not something that takes five steps or five years to earn, or an offer only for people with certain skills, backgrounds, or qualities.

Although this seems simple, it’s not so easy. That’s because in order to be truly transformed, we have to come to a point of humility and need that acknowledges that we need something other than ourselves to determine truth in the world and to guide our lives. This is hard to do! It often involves us acknowledging that we are flawed and are not as wise, loving, and trustworthy as God. It challenges our pride and self-sufficiency.

However, when we take this step with sincerity and commitment, the door opens to an exciting new world of resources and possibilities.

### **Gaining the Eyes and Heart of Jesus**

From the moment that Jesus transforms us, an amazing thing happens. We care about new and different things because we have the heart of God — not just our own. We see new and different things because we have the eyes of God — not just our own. We don’t need other people to convince us about what’s important in life or how to treat people — because that knowledge and wisdom are now inside of us. (Of course, it takes time for this all to develop and mature!)

There is a cost and sacrifice to living as a Christian. Jesus reminds his followers repeatedly that they must “die to themselves” and “count the cost” of what it means to truly follow him. Part of this is recognizing our flaws, limitations, and needs — some of which the Bible call “sin.” We must also be willing to change and sacrifice some things that are hard to give up. The Bible calls this “repentance” or turning away from old ways of living and embracing a new approach.

For me, I didn’t necessarily think that I was bad or evil at the moment that I decided to follow Jesus. I wasn’t totally desperate. However, I did realize that I knew less than I had thought, and over time, I came to see all the darker and uglier parts of

myself that needed to grow and be healed. Fortunately, I wasn't on my own to figure those out, but was gifted with a God who promised to grow and heal me over the course of my life!

Following Jesus is not a self-improvement step that was intended for you to add to your life. According to Jesus himself, it's a commitment that radically changes your heart and life. It's not easy — it involves internal humility and sacrifice, as well as external hardship, as described in various chapters of this book. However, as also described we gain a source of strength and vision beyond anything we've ever known.

## A Few Practical Thoughts

### Why Pray, Read the Bible, and Go to Church?

Many Christians will tell you to pray, read the Bible, and go to church — but may not ever explain why. We pray because God values our communicating with Him, and uses prayer to deepen intimacy and connection with Him. We read the Bible because it is the fullest resource for connecting with God's vision and heart. We go to church to join a community of people where we can grow and live out a mission bigger than ourselves. All of these are vital, and not optional if you want to truly follow Jesus.

Here are some thoughts as you do these things, based upon my learnings and mistakes:

1. **Don't try to follow Jesus by yourself!** It's so tempting in an individualistic American culture to try to tailor and control Christianity to suit one's preferences and life. This approach is fundamentally opposed to what we've learned about Jesus' leadership, which calls us to a vision and purpose bigger than us, and compels us to learn and grow in ways we wouldn't have imagined ourselves. Find a church and meet Christians you can trust. Churches are flawed (just like people), but they are a vital part of God's work in the world. If we neglect or overlook the church, we will rob other people of the perspective, gifts, and diversity that we each bring. Moreover, we will miss out on much of what God wants to do, and to show us about Himself.
2. **Find the *right* kind of church, not just *any* church.** Join a church where you experience the freedom to be yourself, yet also are challenged to grow. Make sure it is a place that lines up with God's heart and kingdom, in many of the ways we've discussed in this book. Is it the kind of community that values and lives out the kind of leadership that Jesus showed? Does it center on Jesus, rather than just teaching ethics or taking a particular (e.g. conservative or liberal) stance in society? And beyond even finding a good church, it's vital to build relationships with Christians with whom you feel safe, and whom you can trust to tell you the

truth. Preserve and build your relationships with those who aren't Christian too, of course! We can miss out on learning and growing without diversity in our friendships — across ethnic, socio-economic, generational, and spiritual lines.

3. **Don't just read the Bible and pray alone.** Find a healthy balance of doing those things by yourself and doing them with other people. Some reflection and internalization happens best when we are in solitude, but most growth and learning happens in community and relationships with other people. Don't isolate yourself! Also, read other books about following Jesus that supplement what you read in the Bible. I've read some excellent books about growth that have really helped me to make connections between the Bible and relationships, work, and life. One example is Dr. John Townsend's book *Loving People*<sup>96</sup>, which is accessible and practical.

4. **Don't be afraid to "skip around" when reading the Bible.** If you get stuck or confused, move on and read another part of it. Write down any questions you might have, and discuss it with other people. Make sure you read more than just a single verse here or there, but try to read whole chapters and books in their full context, even if you only read it gradually. The shortcoming of sermons at church is that they often only focus on a short verse without much context. Don't just rely on listening to sermons at church to understand the Bible. There's so much more that you'll be missing!

5. **Don't feel like you need to pray the same way every time.** Pray whenever you think of it. If somebody asks you to pray, or if you say you will, take a few seconds to just utter a quick prayer right then. Don't wait to see if you will remember. In other times, you may feel the need to pray in a more focused way for a longer period of time. Sometimes you may be moved to pray as you're listening to music or watching a movie. None of those are wrong ways to pray! Be honest, and be intimate in your prayer. If you have trouble knowing where to start, you can learn from people who pray in the Bible, from writings like the Book of Common Prayer, and from people in your life who pray.

6. **Always keep learning as you follow Jesus.** The idea of following Jesus is that we have an active, living guide as we go through life, who is always teaching us. Don't ever assume you know all there is to know! Growth doesn't occur in a straight line, and it takes time. **One practical idea: find a mentor and ask them to meet up with you regularly so you can ask them for support and prayer and any questions about the Christian life.** Throughout my years following Jesus, I've been blessed with numerous mentors who have been some of the biggest influences in my life! Almost never were these mentors "set up for me" —

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<sup>96</sup> John Townsend, *Loving People: How to Love and Be Loved* (Thomas Nelson, 2010)

I had to seek them out and ask! There are some amazing people out there that we can learn from, so be proactive, and God will guide your steps. Remember that with God, He is not aimless but is weaving together the events and themes of our lives like a master storyteller, with purpose and intentionality in all we go through — even when we can't see or understand it at the time.

Following Jesus is a process — and a relationship — that lasts a lifetime! Enjoy it, as it's the greatest thing that will ever happen to you. And if you ever need someone to talk to along this journey, my line is open.

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## About the Author



**Adrian Pei** is a writer, speaker, and innovator who works in leadership development and ministry. His name in Chinese means "honest scholar," and he tries to live up to it. Adrian lives in southern California with his family. You can connect with him more at his website [www.adrianpei.com](http://www.adrianpei.com) or on Twitter [@adrianpei](https://twitter.com/adrianpei).