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GOD
series

Keys to Effective LEADERSHIP

Developing Your Followership Skills

BILL MILLS



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Keys to Effective Leadership

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*Developing Your
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THIS MINISTRY IS DEDICATED TO

The Glory of God The Honor of His Word The Building Up of
the Body of Christ

The Heart of God series is also dedicated to our coworker Tom Hill, who for the past thirty years has brought the Father's heart of serving and encouragement to all of us on the staff of Leadership Resources International.

To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice.

John 10:3-4

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Keys to Effective Leadership

Do you want to be a leader? If you do, there is plenty of help available. Bookstore shelves are lined with excellent books, some from a Christian perspective, that have even made it to the best-seller lists in the trade industry. Seminars hosted by successful models of leadership abound. Principles, methods, and formulas are out there for anyone who dreams of success as a leader. Unfortunately, there is not much help available for those in our churches who want to learn to *follow*, and if we want to be fruitful in ministry, learning how to follow is far more important than learning how to lead.

During a recent teaching time at a church in California, the pastor asked if I would make myself available for anyone who might like to talk with me personally. Since I am a teacher rather than a counselor, and I believe that local pastors and leaders are best equipped to counsel their people, I was reluctant to meet with anyone concerning a personal or ministry situation. But I did agree to spend some time with Tom, who was praying about joining the leadership team in his church.

Tom was a relatively young man with a growing family. He had a heart for God and a desire to serve in his church in any way that might be helpful. He had done some teaching and had helped organize some events, and he greatly enjoyed

contributing to the ministry. Tom was also being mentored by one of the older men in the church and was growing as a disciple of the Lord Jesus. Now the pastor and the elders had asked him to serve on the elder board, and Tom was overwhelmed with the magnitude of that position and level of responsibility. He was not at all sure he was qualified and questioned whether he was ready for such a position. He was aware of his weaknesses and inadequacies and rather unsure about any strength he might bring to the ministry, but he definitely wanted to be a leader.

So, You Want to Be a Leader . . .

If you are a leader in any capacity of ministry, you may have felt the same way Tom felt that afternoon as we visited together: torn between his dreams and his weaknesses. I hope you have. I feel that way at least once every day—and I wish that were an overstatement. You may be a pastor or a youth leader. You may be an executive with a mission agency. God may have placed you on the board of your church or called you to serve as an elder or deacon. Maybe you lead a women's or men's ministry. In whatever role you serve, I know that you have taken on that responsibility as a significant stewardship before the Lord.

Your desire to serve the Lord with a whole heart and to make a genuine contribution to God's people has undoubtedly led to much prayer, introspection, and evaluation of your qualifications. Perhaps, like Tom and me, you have brought a sense of inadequacy or even unworthiness to your position. It

may be that you are overwhelmed in the face of your call. But that is the only place to begin a fruitful ministry that brings glory to the Lord because, truthfully, we are “in over our heads” serving the Lord every day, and no ministry takes place within our “comfort zones.”

As Tom and I talked, I asked if he felt that he met the qualifications of an elder or a deacon that the Apostle Paul lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 2. Tom is a genuinely humble man, and he was quick to point out his shortcomings. But it became clear as we talked that he was a man of character and integrity who desired to honor the Lord and to serve His people. He did desire the role of elder in his church, which is one of the basic qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1), and was grateful for the confidence of his pastor and elders.

Given those realities, I told Tom that he needed to focus now on developing his “followership skills.” My statement took Tom by surprise since for several years he had dreamed of a position of leadership in his church. In addition to the mentoring of one of the elders, he had read several books on “leadership” and had given himself to mastering the principles taught by the latest experts in that field. When I suggested to Tom that his primary identity must be that of a follower rather than a leader, he seemed confused. In his mind, he was ready for the “next step” in serving his church, and what I was encouraging him to consider now struck him as a step backward rather than forward. In the remainder of this booklet, I want to share with you what I taught Tom over several conversations.

We Are Sheep

The long tradition of the scriptures is filled with examples of people greatly used by God, and yet their primary identity was that of a follower rather than a leader. These include the Apostles Paul and Peter, Abraham, King David, Moses, and even the Lord Jesus. If by God's grace we can see ourselves through the Father's eyes like they did, we will share in the fruit of their labors, and God will glorify Himself in us as He did in them.

Jesus made it clear how He sees us in His teaching about sheep and shepherds: "Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber. But he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep" (John 10:1-2).

We can recognize a true shepherd from the way he comes to his sheep: a genuine shepherd will enter by the gate. Anyone who seeks to come in any other way is immediately recognized as an impostor. He is not a true shepherd; he is a thief or a robber. Jesus, the Son of God, came in the way prepared by the prophets in order to redeem God's people and lead them to their Father. He came to bring His sheep home.

Does your heart rejoice when God refers to you as a sheep? Do you see that reference as a strong affirmation of your potential as a leader and one who has great skills to offer the Chief Shepherd as He builds His Church? If you do, you don't understand sheep. Sheep are not noble creatures. They are not bold or strong; they are not aggressive or visionary. In fact, sheep are rather dumb. They are vulnerable and need their

shepherd's protection from their enemies, or they will be destroyed. Sheep need to be led to food and water. It seems that they cannot even find their daily sustenance by themselves. They depend on their shepherd for their very survival.

Why did God use the illustration of a sheep in describing His people? Are we really that helpless? Don't at least some of us rise above that miserable example? Aren't there at least a few of us who achieve the status of lions or eagles—or maybe of a great stallion that thunders across the plain as he leads his herd to higher ground? No, among even the finest of our leaders there are no lions, eagles, or horses. *We are all sheep.* That picture defines how we relate to God and to the people He has entrusted to us.

Sheep Listen for Their Shepherd's Voice

Sheep do have one quality that sets them apart from every other animal. God has given them an amazing ability to listen and to follow: “To him the gatekeeper opens. The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out” (John 10:3).

Once the gate of the sheepfold is opened, the sheep begin to listen for the voice of their shepherd. When he calls their names, they begin to follow wherever he leads them. How is it that sheep have this amazing gift of “listening?” Have they been to special training schools to cultivate their listening skills? Have they attended professional seminars where listening experts have equipped them for this remarkable

ability? Of course not. They listen *because they are sheep*. It is in their nature to listen because God has equipped them with ears to hear the voice of their shepherd.

After the shepherd calls the name of his sheep, he leads them out. If you are an “under shepherd” of God’s sheep, one who serves God’s people under the authority of your chief Shepherd, the Lord Jesus, this statement must resonate in your heart! You have been praying that you might lead your sheep out—out of their fears, out of the places where they have settled in this world, out of their tendency to feed on lesser things than the pastures of God’s abundance.

In order for us as under shepherds to “lead our people out,” we need to see ourselves as members of the flock, with all of the same characteristics and vulnerabilities as the rest of our sheep. The only way we will be able to lead at all is if we learn to listen to the voice of our Shepherd.

Sheep Hear Their Shepherd’s Voice

The reason the shepherd is able to lead his sheep out is that they are willing to follow him. They are free to follow because they know his voice: “When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice” (John 10:4).

There is a connection between listening and hearing, and that connection leads to responsiveness. We cannot hear without listening, but listening does not guarantee that we will hear. The shepherd teaches his sheep to hear his voice and gives them that ability to hear as a gift.

Remember that in the parable of the sower the seed fell on four kinds of soil: One was hard, another was rocky, still another was thorny, and one was good soil that produced an abundant crop (Mark 4:1-20). Jesus described the difference between the good soil and the other three this way: “But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold” (Mark 4:20).

People whose hearts are characterized as good soil “hear the word and accept it.” There is a “hearing” that stimulates a responsive heart. A key summary verse in the parable also shows us why the ability to hear the shepherd’s voice is a gift from Him: “And he said, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’” (Mark 4:9).

Not everyone has ears to hear God. The ability to hear His voice and respond to Him is a gift of the Holy Spirit. If we have received that gift from our Shepherd, He has entrusted us with a great stewardship. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of that very truth in reference to Israel’s rebellious past: “As it is said, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion’” (Hebrews 3:15). If anyone hears God’s voice, that person has a responsibility to respond with a heart of obedience.

Sheep Follow Their Shepherd

Because God has given sheep the ability to listen and by listening they learn to discern their shepherd’s voice, they are able to respond—to follow—when he calls their name: “A

stranger they will not follow, but they will flee from him, for they do not know the voice of strangers.’ This figure of speech Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them” (John 10:5-6).

Since sheep are trained to listen, hear, and respond to the voice of their shepherd, they will not follow strangers. This offers the sheep great protection. The sheep know that their shepherd will lead them to places that are filled with the provisions of his goodness. Strangers may lead them to places of great vulnerability or even destruction.

There are many voices calling out to us and to our people today. Some of these are the voices of strangers. Sheep need our protection because those voices may bring strange ways, goals, and dreams that are not consistent with our Shepherd’s Word or His heart. Strange voices come from those who would build themselves up at the expense of the sheep; true shepherds lay down their lives for their sheep.

Often the voices coming at us become a cacophony of confusion rather than the clear voice of a shepherd who leads us with truth and love. The voices of our feelings will betray us; the voices of our culture will lead us away from the Shepherd, and the voices of our enemy will always lie to us about our Shepherd and ourselves. In order to follow the Shepherd, we need to learn to distinguish His voice from all other voices.

Sheep Know Their Shepherd

There is a level of intimacy that develops between a shepherd

and his sheep. I believe this is one of the primary reasons that our Lord used the picture of sheep and shepherds to describe His relationship with us. The time they spend together, the shepherd's loving care, protection, and provision, and the responses of the sheep to the shepherd's ministry all contribute to the sheep's knowledge of their shepherd: "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me" (John 10:14).

If there is anything that we truly hunger for in our relationship with the Lord, it is intimacy: We want to know Him! But knowing our Shepherd is the fruit of a process. It begins with listening for His voice, then hearing Him when He calls our name, and finally, following where He leads. The more we listen, hear, and respond by following, the more we will know our Shepherd. The intimacy for which we hunger in our relationship with Him flows from that wonderful process.

If we want to be leaders, we first must learn to follow. Learning to follow our Shepherd is far more important than learning to lead His people. In fact, this is the root of credibility and authority in ministry: people will follow someone who is following the Shepherd. The Lord Jesus modeled this for us in His own relationship with the Father.

Jesus Was a Follower

There is no question that Jesus was the greatest leader in all of history. His teaching and His life, death, and resurrection changed the world. Christ's pattern of preparing His disciples is the example for any of us who desire that God would use us

to help equip workers for His kingdom. But Jesus' primary identity was not grounded in His position as a leader; it was rooted in His role as a *follower*. We find this incredible truth in the same context of the shepherd and his sheep: "But Jesus answered them, 'My Father is working until now, and I am working'" (John 5:17).

Jesus had just healed a lame man at the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath day. The Pharisees and teachers of the law continually looked for opportunities to discredit Jesus before the people and to persecute Him. His act of healing on the Sabbath was a perfect opportunity because the law was clear that no one could work on that day. But our Lord's answer is based on His relationship of response to His Father. Jesus knew that His Father was always working to fulfill redemption and to build His Kingdom, and so He must be "always working," too: "So Jesus said to them, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. *For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise*'" (John 5:19, emphasis added).

Christ opens more fully for the religious leaders and for us the relationship He shares with the Father. The Father is working, and the Son is watching. Whatever the Son sees the Father do, He does also. Jesus makes it clear that He can serve in no other way, for He came to do the Father's will.

Now Jesus reveals why He can relate to the Father this way in ministry. It is because the Father shows the Son what He is doing: "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater works than these will he show him, so that you may marvel" (John 5:20). Two great

assumptions are revealed in this Scripture. The first is that the Father would show the Son what He is doing. There was no pressure on the part of our Lord to figure out what the Father was doing. He was able to walk with the Father with incredible freedom and confidence because the Father revealed to Jesus the work He was doing. Secondly, Christ knew that what the Father was doing was what He ought to do also. It is interesting that the text does not say: “The Father loves the Son and shows the Son what the Son ought to do.” Jesus knew that He was called to enter into what the Father was doing.

This is also true for you and me. We are made out of dust; we have a very difficult time hearing, seeing and responding. God is not depending on us to figure out what He wants us to do. He has given us His Word and His Spirit. God will show us what He is doing, and enable us by His Holy Spirit to enter into His eternal work.

The Father’s Initiative and the Son’s Response

As Jesus continued with this theme through the book of John, He opened for us more fully how He saw the Father and how He lived in relationship to Him: “So Jesus said to them, ‘When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me’” (John 8:28).

Jesus had been teaching here about God as His Father and how the Father had sent Him into this world. The religious

leaders were incredulous! How could this man call God His Father and therefore make Himself equal with God? When you lift Me up, you will know that I am the One I claim to be, Jesus said. Then He described the Father as the initiator in His life and ministry and Himself as the responsive one in the relationship.

Nothing in Jesus' teachings or works began with Him. The Father was the "starting point" for all that Jesus said and did. He did nothing in all of His life and ministry "on His own." The Father taught Him, and Christ spoke the Father's words: "And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him" (John 8:29).

Are we saying that the one leader we exalt as our model above all others had no initiative of His own? That is an interesting thought! Isn't initiative one of the key qualities we look for in a leader? We seek leaders with big dreams; we want them to set high goals; we expect them to be aggressive and to work hard to accomplish their goals and dreams.

A follower does not need dreams, goals, or initiative. A follower gets those from someone else. What a follower needs far more is the ability to see what the leader is doing and a heart to respond to the leader's initiative. That is what Jesus is modeling for us here. He was a successful leader because He followed the will of His Father. We will be successful leaders also when we learn to follow the will of our Lord.

Our culture has created great vulnerabilities for us when we study these truths. We have learned to equate leadership with bold and aggressive personality traits, and we have learned to equate "followership" with passivity. But Jesus destroys those

images in both His Word and His example. Jesus is aggressive but not in His initiative; He is aggressive in His response. When we walk with God in ministry, we are not called to passivity, but to an aggressively responsive lifestyle. God is at work everywhere around us. We enter into what He is doing with a whole heart, and with every resource He has entrusted to us.

Our Lord listened and watched to see what the Father was doing, and the Father showed His Son what He was doing. Jesus then responded aggressively, with a whole heart to all that the Father set before Him. Christ's explanation for His level of obedience is that He always does what pleases His Father. Do we need leaders and shepherds like this in our churches and missions? I think we would do well with fewer human goals and dreams, fewer bold and aggressive personalities, and more listening, watching, and following. Perhaps then we would be less trapped in what *we* are doing and more caught up in what *God* is doing.

In Following We Learn the Father's Heart

If God is gracious to us and allows our primary identity to change from being a leader to a follower, we will be transformed and three incredible things will happen in our lives and ministries. The first is that God will build into us the heart of His Son as we follow our Shepherd. We will become more and more like Jesus, and then be able to bring His heart to those God has entrusted to us.

Jesus summarized His life and ministry in a wonderful way

just before He went to the cross: “For I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak” (John 12:49).

Again Christ made it clear to His disciples, and to you and me, that the Father was the initiator in all that took place. The words that Jesus spoke didn’t come from Him; they came from His Father. The Father sent Jesus into this world and told Him what to say while He was here. Jesus faithfully fulfilled the Father’s will, doing and saying everything the Father set before Him.

We see here an even more gripping statement than only Jesus’ revelation that the Father told Him what to say while on this earth. The Father even told His Son *how* to say what He told Him to say! The New International Version translates verse 49 in this way: “For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it.” The Father revealed not only His words to His Son, He also revealed His ways: Jesus said, “And I know that his commandment is eternal life. What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me” (John 12:50).

In this scripture passage, the relationship between God’s words, the Messenger’s faithfulness to God’s words and ways, and God’s life being poured out to people is crystal clear. Jesus served at His Father’s command in just that way. He knew that a ministry of the Father’s words with the Father’s heart brings the Father’s life to His people. This is why ministries that are fruitful flow from faithfully teaching and preaching the scriptures.

God's Ways Reveal His Heart

The ways of a shepherd with his sheep are wonderful to behold. The way he calls and leads, the tenderness with which he cares and provides for them, and the manner in which he protects and feeds them are beautiful in our eyes. God created shepherds so that He could reveal Himself as a Shepherd, and now His children can understand who He is and what He is like. In this way, God also shows us how He desires the leaders that He raises up for His Church to give themselves to His people.

King David told us this secret about Moses and his ministry in Psalm 103: "He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel" (v. 7). God made His acts known to Israel. They saw His wrath poured out on Egypt in the ten plagues. They saw His power when He parted the Red Sea. Israel heard the voice of God thunder from the mountain when He gave the Ten Commandments. Jewish history is filled with recorded deeds of their God.

Jesus taught us that the sheep know their shepherd. That intimacy moves us to hunger for a deeper knowledge and a fuller relationship with our Shepherd. If God's heart is revealed in His ways, and our people need to experience the Father's heart, then we must pursue Him for the knowledge of His ways. That is precisely what Moses did.

Moses Was a Follower

Moses was the greatest leader in Israel's history. God used him

to deliver His people from slavery in Egypt to the freedom of the Promised Land. But Moses did not seek this position of leadership. In fact, Moses was so overwhelmed with his weaknesses and inadequacies that he resisted God's call on his life. In fact, God's anger burned against him when he said, "Oh, my Lord, please send someone else" (Exodus 4:13).

We find hope in our God who fulfills all that He purposes, and He was not threatened by Moses' lack of heart. God promised His presence and His provision for all that Moses needed, and Moses followed Him. There were many disappointments and much confusion along the way, but God's mercies enabled Moses to endure. After the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32), God told Moses that He would no longer go with His people because of their hardened hearts. Moses pleaded for God to forgive His children, and then he pleaded for greater intimacy with his God: "Now therefore, if I have found favor in your sight, please show me now your ways, that I may know you in order to find favor in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people" (Exodus 33:13).

David told us that God revealed His ways to Moses. This passage from the book of Exodus was surely in David's mind as he wrote. Moses had just experienced intimacy with God for forty days on the mountain as God was writing the character of His heart on those tablets of stone and giving us the Ten Commandments. Moses had just spent time with God in the "tent of meeting" (Exodus 33:7-11). But Moses was not satisfied. He wanted more of God!

God's Glory and His Face

Moses knew that he would find “more of God” in knowing His ways. Moses’ prayer was, “Show me your ways, that I may know you.” After God told Moses that He was pleased with him and knew him by name (Exodus 33:17), Moses made the boldest request in history: “Please show me your glory” (Exodus 33:18).

Moses’ passion for intimacy with God now transcended all human bounds. He had been on the mountain. He had communed with God. Now Moses wanted nothing less than to see the face of God: “And he said, ‘I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name “The LORD.” And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,’ he said, ‘you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live’” (Exodus 33:19-20).

No one can see God’s face because God is invisible. And if we were able to see Him, we would be immediately consumed by His holiness. God could not permit Moses to see His face. But God humbled Himself and allowed Moses to see His glory: “And the LORD said, ‘Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by’” (Exodus 33:21-22).

When Moses hungered to see God’s *face*, God revealed His *heart* to His servant. Who God is and what He is like became the vision that Moses saw as he stood in the cleft of the rock. The wonder of God’s goodness, the beauty of His Name, and the fullness of His compassion filled Moses’ eyes and heart as God put His glory on display before him.

The people God has entrusted to us in ministry need the things that come only from His heart. They need to know His awesome Name because it is the “strong tower” to which we run for shelter and protection. They need to know His mercy and compassion in a world where they experience more pain than anyone can bear. They need to know the goodness of the Lord because the enemy of their souls slanders the character of God day after day.

Leadership abilities can be learned and can be very helpful tools as we serve God’s people. We must be free to use any skills we gain in this world that will enhance the building up of our churches. But God’s people are sheep. Sheep do not need to be managed and organized as much as they need to be shepherded. They need to be led, cared for, protected, and fed. Some things about shepherding can be taught, but the most important things are built into us as we seek God’s face and He opens His heart to us. His ways reveal His heart, and we know the heart of God as we seek His face and then follow Him.

Paul Was a Follower

When we think of great leaders in the New Testament church, the first one that comes to mind is the Apostle Paul. We can see him out there leading the charge for the gospel, organizing churches, training leaders, and giving direction for ministry. Paul saw himself, however, not primarily as a leader but as a follower. When we read his letters, we see often that familiar reference to himself as “a servant.” Paul served, following the direction of his Lord: “Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by

command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope” (1 Timothy 1:1).

The great apostle served at the pleasure of his master, the Lord Jesus. Paul, who had once given his energies to destroying the church, now loved Jesus so passionately that his great desire was to lay down his life for the church. Just as with Moses, Paul’s love was fueled as he sought the face of his Lord: “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death” (Philippians 3:10).

The ministry of the Apostle Paul in relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ is an amazing reflection of the ministry of Jesus in relationship to His Father. Here, Christ is the one who provides the initiative and direction for Paul, and Paul follows. Even at Paul’s conversion on the Damascus road, Jesus said to Paul: “But rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do” (Acts 9:6). This statement characterized the rest of Paul’s days.

The Lord’s direction and Paul’s heart to follow His leading were the pattern of his ministry. The Holy Spirit directed the leaders in the church at Antioch to send out Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1-3), and God gave him the vision that called him to Macedonia (Acts 16:6-10). The Spirit “compelled” him to go to Jerusalem (Acts 20:22-23). Toward the end of his life and ministry, Jesus “stood by him and said, ‘Take courage, for as you have testified to the facts about me in Jerusalem, so you must testify also in Rome’” (Acts 23:11).

The Apostle Paul followed Jesus throughout his ministry, as the Lord directed him from day to day. Paul’s ministry was all

about the acts of the Holy Spirit through him. God did through Paul far more than he could ever have dreamed, and so it will be for you and me when we exchange our image of a leader for the glorious role of a follower!

As Paul followed Christ, his heart became more like the heart of his Lord. We can see that in the fruit of his ministry among the elders at Ephesus. Paul had spent three years there, teaching, encouraging, and discipling the leaders. Near the end of his ministry, as he was on the way to Jerusalem and then on to Rome, where he would give his life for the gospel, Paul called the elders at Ephesus to meet him at Miletus. This was his message to them: “And when they came to him, he said to them: ‘You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia, serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials that happened to me through the plots of the Jews’” (Acts 20:18-19).

Paul talked about how he had lived among them. He described his heart of service, humility, and tears. He told the elders who loved him so much that he was compelled by the Spirit to go to Jerusalem, knowing that prison and hardships awaited him. But he was a follower and could only go where Jesus led: “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:24).

After Paul described his heart for the Lord and for the church at Ephesus, he called them to serve as shepherds of the flock of God: “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care

for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

Like Moses, when Paul sought God’s face, God revealed His heart to him. As Paul followed Jesus, the Father built into him the heart of His Son, and that heart was revealed in the ways that Paul served. It was in the framework of that relationship and that model that Paul called the elders at Ephesus to be shepherds. In the same way, we can shepherd the flock of God only as we follow the Lord Jesus and know His heart, which we see in His ways: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1). When we follow the ministry model of the Lord Jesus and the Apostle Paul, God protects us from being consumed with what we are doing and invites us to become caught up in what He is doing.

Peter Was a Follower

As shepherds of God’s people, are you grateful that the Lord chose Peter as one of His apostles? I am! We may have difficulty relating to the Apostle Paul, but we can all relate to Peter. This passionate, impulsive man who boasted of his commitment to Christ and then fled when he feared for his life reveals that God raises up leaders among real people, even weak people who come to Him with a whole heart.

Peter saw the face of God in the mercy of Jesus and it changed him forever. After Jesus had restored Peter and commissioned him, He told Peter that following Him would cost him his life. But instead of responding to Jesus’ compassionate ministry of healing, reconciliation, and restoration with a heart

of worship and thanksgiving, Peter looked at the Apostle John and asked, “What about him?” (see John 21:15-21). Christ’s response transformed Peter’s life: “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow me” (John 21:22).

Jesus gave Peter the grace to follow Him, and God built into Peter the heart of a shepherd. Peter laid down his life for Christ’s Church, and he gave his life for Christ in his death. Out of his relationship with Jesus and his experience as a shepherd, Peter gives this counsel: “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed” (1 Peter 5:1).

Peter comes to us as a fellow elder. He does not exalt himself above us; he humbles himself as one of us. He does not command; he makes an appeal: “shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2-3).

This apostle who was a witness to Christ’s sufferings is giving us a “how-to” manual on shepherding. He mentions no organizational skills even though those would be helpful to us. He describes no management techniques even though those might be valuable, too. Rather, he talks of matters of the heart because those are the keys to effective and fruitful ministry. In fact, Peter does not mention “leading” here. The call is to be shepherds.

Do you see the ways of God in Peter’s call to you and me? He models humility and speaks of contentment. He calls us to

serve and to be examples. Because Peter's identity was rooted in his call to follow, he learned the heart of his Lord and was acquainted with His ways. If we want to be shepherds after God's heart, we will make those our priorities as well.

God Will Do More Than We Dream

The second thing that will happen in our lives and our ministries as God graciously allows our identity to change from that of a leader to a follower is that He will do in us and through us more than we could ever dream. Two scriptures from Paul's letter to the Ephesians have transformed my life. The first is: "For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

We all live with a sense that God has prepared us to serve Him in ministry. We know that God called us in Christ before He created the heavens and the earth. "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world" (Ephesians 1:4). For generations before we were born, God was sovereignly choosing our ancestors so that we would be just the persons He was designing us to be. He weaved us in our mother's womb. In all of our days He has allowed difficult circumstances, overwhelming situations, failures, successes, joy and sorrow, evil, injustice and painful relationships to shape us for His glory. We know that God has been preparing us to be His servant.

But we do not tend to live moment by moment with the knowledge that the God who has prepared us for ministry has

also prepared ministry for us! Long before we were born God prepared works for us to do. Only by following Him can we walk with Him in those eternal works. Otherwise we will be caught up in our own works.

Another scripture that has completely turned my understanding of ministry around is Paul's prayer for the church at Ephesus: "Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

If we could meet with the senior class of a seminary or Bible school on the day of their graduation and ask each student about their hopes and dreams, we would be amazed at how great and lofty they would be. For years they have sat under wonderful teachers, they have read tremendous books and heard from some of the finest missionaries and pastors in their chapel services. Over the years of their schooling their hopes have grown: "Someday I will be in the place where I can do the great things I have been dreaming about."

If we said to those beautiful and dedicated young people: "If God would fulfill every dream you have ever had for ministry, wouldn't that be incredible?" Even though they might tend to agree, the truth is this would not be wonderful, it would be a terrible disaster! Do we want a God who is limited to our dreams? Of course not! We want to serve a God who is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine. This only happens when we become followers rather than leaders. No matter how big our dreams are, they are always too small.

Your People Will Love You

The third thing that will happen if God is gracious to us and allows our primary identity to shift from being a leader to a follower is that our people will love us. We looked earlier at the Apostle Paul's closing exhortation to the elders at Ephesus when he called them to meet him on the island of Miletus. The scene in Acts chapter 20 is one of the most precious and intimate in all the scriptures. As he recounted his ministry among them, he did not focus on his amazing accomplishments or organizational skills, but how he brought to them the heart of the Lord Jesus. He talked of humility, tears, intimacy, serving and giving.

As he was about to leave, Luke records for us how Paul's brothers and sisters poured their affections on him as he was trying to get to the ship: "And when he had said these things, he knelt down and prayed with them all. And there was much weeping on the part of all; they embraced Paul and kissed him, being sorrowful most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they would not see his face again. And they accompanied him to the ship" (Acts 20:36-38).

The church at Ephesus was not the only place where we see these relationships between Paul and his people. Look at these words from Paul to the church at Thessalonica: "But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (1 Thessalonians 2:7-8).

These attitudes possess great power for you and me in the hands of the Holy Spirit. Gentleness, coming like a nursing mother, giving ourselves, being “affectionately desirous.” Only God can make these shepherding attitudes genuine and build them deeply into our spirits, otherwise they will be seen as fleshly and manipulative. But if they pour from the depths of our being and are characterized by transparent integrity, God will move our people to love us as we have loved them. We can, then, quickly turn their love for us toward the Lord so they can passionately love, serve and worship Him.

Our character will be revealed in this process. If we love our people and give ourselves to them only to manipulate them and enrich ourselves, we are not shepherds but gospel peddlers for our own sake. Our goal in all things is the glory of God and the advance of the gospel. The passions of our people must be gripped for God if they would love and serve him. We love them because God has raised us up to shepherd them after His own heart. They love us because of the way we give ourselves to them. But we do not seek that love for ourselves; we want them to love Christ and His Kingdom.

The Ways of the Shepherd

King David followed hard after God and knew Him intimately, and God was merciful to him. David, who grew up caring for a flock of sheep, understood the Father’s ways and became a man after God’s own heart. He reveals in his Shepherd’s psalm how he sees the Lord and what the ministry of a shepherd looks like: “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. He

makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters” (Psalm 23:1-2).

Because God was the Shepherd of David’s life, David had all that he needed. There was no lack in any area because his heavenly Father provided everything through the riches of His grace. The places of abundance, safety, and quietness into which God led David left him with a spirit of contentment in his Lord, and he expressed that contentment in worship.

Only someone who had fallen as David had could have written: “He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Psalm 23:3). God picked David up and filled his heart when he was empty. He directed David into all that was right and good, for the sake of His Name. The reputation of the shepherd is always at stake in the way he cares for his sheep.

David was confident that in the darkest days of his life he would not be alone: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me” (Psalm 23:4). In the deepest valleys, filled with death’s shadows, David would not be afraid. The knowledge of God’s presence was his greatest protection, and even in the Father’s loving discipline there would also be the Father’s comfort.

Even in the face of those who would destroy him, David receives such abundant blessing from God that his life overflows: “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows” (Psalm 23:5). As David muses more and more on the ministry of the Shepherd, his heart fills even more with worship, and his

confidence grows as well. God poured over him the oil of His Spirit, and all the Father's blessing flowed in that anointing.

Many enemies—from fearful kings to David's own son—threatened his life and his kingdom. Often the circumstances were so overwhelming that it seemed impossible to get through them. Sometimes the pain was so great that he wondered if he would ever be healed or experience wholeness again. But God was faithful. His goodness and mercy became David's provisions all of his days, and then God shepherded David to His eternal home, where His servant is enjoying His presence forever: “Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD forever” (Psalm 23:6).

When God calls us to walk with Him in shepherding His people, the shepherd's heart that we see in Psalm 23 is the heart that He desires us to bring to them. Walking before one another with the heart of our Shepherd removes a spirit of competition among leaders. It enables us to rise above personal agendas, and it destroys political environments on ministry boards so that we can bring the life of our Father to our people. The leaders in our churches and our missions organizations may be brilliant, efficient, and very productive, but if they do not follow their Shepherd, they will remain heartless.

Shepherding is nothing less than bringing the heart of God to His people in a way that helps them to flourish and grow for His glory. To do that, we need to listen, hear, follow, and know Him so that He can reveal His heart to us and in that process, build into us the heart of His Son, the great Shepherd of the

sheep.

Questions for Interaction and Application

We encourage you to use this booklet as a four-week personal devotional tool or as material for a class or small group. These questions and reflections will help you in that process.

Week One

1. Have you desired a ministry of leadership in your church?
What prompted you to desire a position of serving in that way?
2. I mentioned Tom's sense of inadequacy as he considered this opportunity. I talked also of my own sense of unworthiness. Have you struggled in the same way? Why is this a battle point for us?
3. Does the phrase "followership skills" take you by surprise as it did Tom? Why does this concept give us so much difficulty?
4. How do you respond to the idea of your primary identity in relationship to the Lord as that of a sheep? Do you welcome it or strive against it?

Reflections

Ask God to give you the grace to see yourself through His eyes, and to increase in your heart the value of your relationship with Him as sheep and Shepherd. Tell Him that you want to learn to follow Him, and of your desire to lay down any images of “leadership” that are in contrast to the role of a servant. Pray that in your unworthiness, God might make you sufficient through Christ for all that He desires you to do.

Week Two

1. What are the primary characteristics of a sheep in relationship to the shepherd? Why does God desire to build those into you and me?
2. When you consider the various characteristics of a sheep, which most clearly portray your relationship with your Shepherd? Where do you need to grow the most?
3. When you consider how a sheep listens for the voice of its shepherd, and that God desires you to hear His voice, what are the things in your life that most keep you from listening and hearing?
4. What do you think it means for a sheep to know the shepherd? How is that expressed in your relationship with Christ?

Reflections

Confess to the Lord those attitudes and practices in your life

that keep you from listening for His voice. Talk to Him about the things that hinder you from hearing. Tell Him freely about the times when you went your own way because you didn't want to take the time to wait, to listen and to hear where He wanted you to go. Ask God to give you the heart of a sheep that is dependent upon its shepherd for direction, provision and protection. Pray that even in your humility, God would draw you into deeper relationship and intimacy with Him.

Week Three

1. How do you respond to the thought of Jesus as a follower rather than a leader? Does that diminish Him in your eyes?
2. What were the characteristics of Jesus' relationship with His Father as He followed Him? Can you see yourself living with confidence that God will "show you what He is doing" as He did with His Son, or are you fearful you might miss what He wants you to do?
3. How do these characteristics differ from our images of leadership? Can a person actually "lead" without initiative, vision, goals, and dreams?
4. What qualities do we see in Moses, Paul and Peter that are similar to those we see in the Lord Jesus? What progress do you see as God is developing those in your heart?

Reflections

Pray that God would make the place of a “follower” more significant in your heart than the position of a “leader.” Tell Him once again about the attitudes that need to grow or be changed as you transition in your vision of yourself from a leader to a follower. List out again the qualities that you see in the Lord Jesus, Moses, Paul, and Peter that you are asking God to build into your heart. Ask the Father to be faithful to His process of bringing you to maturity in Christ as you follow Him.

Week Four

1. What do you think motivated Moses to ask God to show him His ways? What do God’s ways look like, and why is it so important for us to know them?
2. How were “the ways of God” revealed in Peter’s ministry? How were they seen in Paul’s life and ministry?
3. Why is it so important to our relationships in ministry that we respond to one another with our Father’s heart? What changes when we come to each other in this way? What happens if we don’t?
4. If it is true that God builds into us the heart of His Son as we follow Him, how do our priorities in ministry change as a result? What qualities could be more important for a leader than organizational skills, efficiency and productivity?

Reflections

As Moses did, ask God to “show you His ways so that you may know Him.” Tell Him that you want your knowledge of Him to go far beyond seeing His works. You want to know those attitudes, values, passions and motives that reflect the beauty of His heart. Pray that your relationships in your family and your ministry would be the fruit of following hard after God until He has made your heart like the heart of His Son. Worship Him for His mercy and His grace that make this transformation possible, and for the great power of the Holy Spirit in you that makes it a reality!

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the heart of GOD series

Moses prayed: "Teach me your ways so that I may know you" after he experienced his greatest intimacy with God. When he hungered to see His face, God allowed Moses to see the beauty of His heart. What does the heart of God look like?

In this series we look closely at the heart of God, and how He gives Himself to us. We explore what we look like when our Father builds His heart into us and gives us His passions, attitudes and priorities. We will ask God how we can give His heart to one another so that our relationships reflect the beauty of our Lord.

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