

THE GREATEST LEADER OF ALL

Sermon- "The Greatest Leader Of All"

Back in the 1970's and 80's when I was in the business world there was a lot of talk about leadership. What makes a good leader? What qualities do good leaders possess that make people want to follow them? How can one become a good leader? Hundreds of books were written about leadership and thousands of training programs were offered to help business managers become effective leaders. There was general agreement about *who* the good leaders were, but opinions about *what* made them good leaders were all over the map.

Jack Welch, the CEO of General Electric, was often cited as a good leader even though he stuttered when he spoke and at times couldn't decide whether to stay at G.E. Or leave. He was considered a good leader because General Electric prospered under his leadership. Good leaders were generally judged by the results they got rather than by how they got them and all you could say for sure was that good leaders were people who could attract and motivate followers. But even that could be controversial. At a leadership symposium I once attended, a dispute arose over whether Adolf Hitler was a good leader. One man said that anyone who could motivate and mobilize four and a half million soldiers to die for him while screaming "heil Hitler" was clearly an effective leader. Another man said he was a horrible leader because he was evil. Then a third person jumped into the argument and said that morality had nothing to do with leadership. And so it went—and went—and went.

In any case, at some point I was asked to address a leadership conference. I was inclined to turn down the invitation because I didn't know any more about leadership than the next guy. But as I thought about it, it occurred to me that even if I didn't know much about leadership, I did know who was the greatest leader of all time, and that was Jesus Christ. After all, two thousand years after he had appeared one third of the people living on earth still followed him. No other leader in history can come close to those numbers. So all spiritual considerations aside, Jesus must have done a lot of things right to attract and motivate that many people. So I decided to do what you might call a secular analysis of Jesus' leadership style and see if I could identify the things he did to attract and motivate his followers. This is the result.

1. First and foremost, *Jesus led by example*. He didn't say, "go there"; he said, "follow me."

Before he asked his disciples to proclaim the gospel, he proclaimed the gospel—loudly and clearly. Before he asked them to minister to others, he ministered to others. Before he asked them to give up their lives for him, he gave

up his life for them. So when Jesus asked his followers to do something he could do it with credibility because he had done it himself. He led by example.

2. Jesus spent a lot of time teaching his disciples what their mission was and how to accomplish it. What he taught them could be boiled down to two things: first, that the kingdom of this world and all who dwelt in it were sinful and headed for destruction, and second, that he had come to usher in a new kingdom called the kingdom of God where people could be saved from their sins and have eternal life by following him. That was his message and how he went about teaching it is very interesting. Every teacher knows that one of the most effective teaching tools they have is analogy. Jesus' analogies took the form of parables—short, vivid stories which described the kingdom of God, showed people how they could enter it, and warned them of the consequences of ignoring it. Parables like “the good Samaritan” and “the prodigal son” are still regarded as literary masterpieces. Jesus told these stories—and others like them—again and again so that they would sink in. He wanted everyone who followed him to know exactly what he wanted them to do—and how to do it. Good leaders are good teachers—and Jesus was a wonderful teacher.

3. Jesus was absolutely honest with his followers. Like “the five minute manager” he admonished them when they did wrong and he praised them when they did right—and he did it right then and right there. When Peter called Jesus “the Christ—the Son of the Living God—Jesus said, “blessed are you...” A few minutes later, when Peter advised Jesus not to submit to abuse and crucifixion, Jesus said, “get behind me Satan.” That gives new meaning to the term “performance appraisal.” Jesus never equivocated or held back information from his followers: he told them the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He was bluntly honest with them about what the consequences of following him would be. “They will lay hands on you and persecute you...you will be betrayed even by parents, brothers, relatives and friends, and they will put some of you to death. All men will hate you because of me. But not a hair of your head will perish. By standing firm you will gain life.” (Luke 21:12, 16-19) [My recruiting strategy when we were trying to convince a manager to come to work for us at Nestle.] And when I left the business world and went into ministry, I would use the same technique when I was making evangelism calls. “Why don't you come to our church sometime and worship with us? We've got a beautiful church, great music and wonderful people—you'll feel right at home!” That's not how Jesus did it, is it? Jesus said, “Come follow me and you'll be persecuted and betrayed and all men will hate you. “Well, I never claimed to be Jesus.

4. *Jesus' was humble: he came to serve rather than be served.* The bible tells us that, “he had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.” (Isaiah 53:2) Jesus never flaunted his wisdom or his power. Paul writes of him that, “...he did not consider equality with

God something to be clung to, but made himself nothing...and being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death..." (*Philippians 2:6-8*) But Jesus wasn't passively humble, he humbled himself by serving others. When two of his disciples—James and John—asked to sit at his right hand and left hand in his kingdom, Jesus called all twelve of his disciples together and said: "you know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." (*Matthew 20:24-28*)

5. *Jesus was not shy about asking his disciples to give him everything they had to give—including their lives.* "...he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. He told them: take nothing for the journey—no staff, no bag, no bread, no money, no extra tunic...go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves." He demanded their loyalty and condemned disloyalty in the strongest possible terms, saying: "if anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the son of man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his father's glory with the holy angels." There was no middle ground with Jesus: you were either for him or you were against him.

6. *Jesus showed complete trust and confidence that his disciples would achieve the goal he had set for them.* When he spoke to them about their mission, he didn't speak in terms of "if you do" but in terms of "when you have done." Before he died he told his disciples, "I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do even greater things than these..." And he assured his disciples that when they had completed their mission, he would be there to welcome them into his kingdom, calling them "good and faithful servants" and promising them a heavenly reward. "Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my father's house are many rooms; if it were not so I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you."

Finally—and most important of all—Jesus loved his followers. He loved them in truth and action by caring for them and by giving up his life for them. He also urged them to love and care for one another. He proved through his life and his legacy that love and forgiveness are more powerful than hatred and revenge.

An English magistrate by the name of Lord Acton once said that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. One might add that humility purifies and complete humility purifies completely. When Pontius Pilate tried to use his power as a roman governor to threaten Jesus, Jesus replied, "you have no power but that which God has given you." Those words should be inscribed in every leader's brain. The power to lead people doesn't consist of authority and commands and threats and promises. The power to lead people consists of

doing what you ask them to do, of teaching them how to do it, of trusting them to achieve it, of serving them with humility, and, above all, of loving them in truth and action. That's how Jesus led those who followed him and he was the greatest leader of all time.

AMEN.

