

God Is First

by Wayne Pederson, *President, HCJB Global*



Did you ever notice that people who have to keep proving themselves are hard to like? The truth of the matter is that many who are compelled to impress others are usually very uncomfortable and insecure.

The mother of John and James came to Jesus with her sons and asked a favor. “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

Jesus called them 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.”

This story reminds me of a couple of our grandkids who say: “Me first.” “I want the biggest.” This seven-year-old mentality is all too characteristic of even some Christian adults.

In another incident, when Jesus noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, He told them this parable: “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important

place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In his book *Good to Great*, Jim Collins talks about the kind of leader that makes an organization go from a good company to a great company. Collins describes the Good to Great leader as a Level 5 leader. Contrary to what some may perceive as a competent leader, the Level 5 leader is self-effacing, quiet, a reserved blend of

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personal humility and professional will. His or her ambition is more for the organization than for personal success.

It sounds like the kind of leader Jesus would recommend.

A.W Tozer said this about leadership: “A true and safe leader has no desire to lead, but is forced into a position by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the press of circumstances. The man who is ambitious to lead is disqualified as a leader. The true leader will have no desire to lord it over God’s heritage, but will be humble, gentle, self-sacrificing.”

I love the view of Dr. Scott Rodin:

Five years ago, if you had asked me for a Scripture that epitomized the leadership ideal, I would likely have pointed you to Nathan’s directive to King David, ‘Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the Lord is with you.’ After all, there were kingdoms to conquer and people to be led.

Five years later, I would point to a different verse. In speaking of Jesus, Paul tells us, “He made Himself a man of no reputation, taking on the very nature of a servant” (Philippians 2:7 NKJV). The verse does not say Jesus became a man of bad reputation, or questionable reputation, but simply of ‘no’ reputation. Reputation, image, prestige, prominence, power, and other trappings of leadership were not only devalued, they purposefully dismissed.

I have come to believe that true Christian leadership is an ongoing, disciplined practice of becoming a person of no reputation, thus, becoming more like Christ in this unique way.

Most Christian leaders would say that in their hearts they wish that Jesus would increase and they would decrease. But it is hard to decrease in a leadership position. There are natural trappings that distinguish those in leadership such as salary, title, prestige, priority, power, influence, honor and advancement. There are also pressures to increase and motivations to build a Kingdom. This desire for the fame and fortune of leadership must be met not only by resistance, but,

according to John Adams, we must have “a habitual contempt of them.”

Henry Nouwen is even more direct:

The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which our world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross. It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest.

If Christ is truly living in us, then we can in turn live for others in our work. We will have

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no need to seek for increase in our positions of power. We will have no desire to build our own kingdoms and advance our own reputations.

They seek no glory for themselves, but find great joy in seeing others prosper.

I have come to understand that godly leadership is a call to a lifestyle of an ever-decreasing thirst for authority, power and influence, where the quest for reputation is replaced by the power of God’s anointing.

Paul the apostle, as he began his ministry and his walk with Christ, described himself as “least of the Apostles” (I Corinthians 15). That sounds humble, but it’s a pretty exclusive group he’s “least of.”

Later in his ministry (Ephesians 3:8), he describes himself as “less than least of all God’s people” He has significantly

downgraded himself.

Towards the end of his career he graduates to chief—“chief among sinners” (I Timothy 1:15).

Paul “grew” from “least of the apostles” to “chief among sinners.” In fact he often introduced himself to his readers as “Paul, a devoted slave of Jesus Christ on assignment” (Romans 1:1 The Message).

So let me ask the question: Who’s greatest in your life? Is it you?

Is the most frequent word in vocabulary “My” or “I”?

Let me suggest five points of action:

1. Find ways to deliberately, intentionally give preference to others.
2. Look for a way to promote someone else or let someone else get credit
3. Frequently ask: “How can I be a “servant” leader? How can I serve others today?
4. Take this quiz:

A. What’s my highest personal ambition? _____

B. Am I willing to give it up to serve Christ? Yes _____ No _____

5. Say this prayer: “Jesus, I surrender my highest ambition so you become my highest goal. Help me this week to stop serving me and begin serving thee...and others you bring into my life. Amen.”

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