

A Lesson on Leadership

- Acts 15:22-41
- This section of the book of Acts jumped off the page as I have studied it the last few weeks as a lesson in leadership. From the leadership of the apostles and elders, led by James, in dealing with the potential disaster of the Jew/Gentile split by writing a letter to the Gentile believers, to the leadership of Judas and Silas that was recognized by the church enough to where they were given the task of taking the letter to the Gentiles, and finally to the leadership conflict that took place between Paul and Barnabas. There is much we can learn about leadership from this chapter, and what I want to share with you that I believe the Lord has given me touches every one of us. Whether you see yourself as a leader or a potential leader or not, these truths apply to all of us.
- **The Letter**
- Last week we talked about what was in the letter, and that is repeated in the text today, but today I want to relate the letter to leadership, and particularly the “it seemed good” method of leadership.
- Notice the three times this phrase, “it seemed good” is used by Luke. First, It seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch. (vs. 22) The decision has been made by the leaders, and the phrase, “with the whole church” to me indicates the body was in a supportive role, not a decisive role. The elders led, and the body followed their lead with support. Second, “it seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you.” (verse 25) This is part of the letter they sent to the Gentiles, letting them know why they were sending men with the letter. John Stott said they sent these men to do three things: explain the letter’s origin (tell the story of how it came to be); to interpret its meaning (what do you mean by, “abstain from things strangled?”), and perhaps most importantly, to secure its acceptance. There’s nothing more powerful than personal contact. A soldier off on assignment was gone for a year but he was faithful while away to write letters and every single day the mailman would bring a letter to the soldier’s girlfriend. When he got back home the soldier was shocked to find out that his girl had married the mailman. A letter is a good way to send a message, but in person is best.
- “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements.” (vs. 28) Hey, Gentiles, just to let you know that this decision was not ours, but it was God’s. We have to be really careful throwing around phrases like, “God has told me, or God has led me, or I believe the Holy Spirit would be pleased if I...” How did they know it seemed good to the Holy Spirit? God did not speak to the leaders in an audible voice. He spoke through men’s voices, Peter, Paul, Barnabas, James, and He spoke through His Word.
- **The Leaders**
- One of the phrases that leapt off the page to me this week is in verse 22: “leading men among the brothers.” Judas and Silas were chosen by the Jerusalem leaders to take the letter, along with Paul and Barnabas, to the church in Antioch. Maybe they were leading men among the brothers because they WERE leading men. I like what John Maxwell said about the five levels of leadership. The first level is Position, and it’s based on rights. “People follow you because they have to.” Political leaders fall into this category. Employers. Hopefully not elders or fathers! They should be at least level two, which is Permission, and it’s based on relationships. People follow you because they want to. The third level is Production, and it’s based on results. People follow you because of that you have done for the organization. The fourth level is People Development, and it’s based on reproduction. People follow you because of that you have done for them. (or maybe, to put it in a more spiritual light, they follow you because you have invested in them, disciplined them, or taught them. Ronald Reagan said “The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one who gets the

people to do the greatest things.”) The fifth level is called Pinnacle and it’s based on respect. People follow because of who you are and what you represent. Walter Lippmann said, “The final test of a leader is that he leaves behind him in other men the conviction and the will to carry on.”

- Jesus would not define leadership as a position or a title. He left His position in glory to humble Himself as a man for the sake of His people and for the glory of God. Leaders don’t seek a position or a title; they seek the glory of God and the good of those whom they lead.
- Oswald Sanders said in his book, “Spiritual Leadership” that a Christian leader is someone who is called by God to lead, leads with and through Christ-like character, and demonstrates the functional competencies that permit effective leadership to take place.” General Norman Schwarzkopf said, “Leadership is a combination of strategy and character. If you must be without one, be without strategy.”
- The men demonstrated leadership by being submitted to the leaders of the church in Rome, and being sent off to be servants of the church in Antioch. (verse 30) Then we see that Judas and Silas stayed on and used their gifts of teaching and prophecy, and “encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words.” It’s OK to have many words if what you are doing is encouraging and strengthening others with them. Too many of us use our many words to criticize or complain or make fun of or just talk about nothing more important than the weather and what’s on TV or at the movies. What we talk about and how we talk about it reveals our character. What did Jesus talk about? Money, food, clothing, sexuality, marriage, children, sleep, work, houses, authority, government, and His Father, among other things. How did He talk about all of that, including money, sex and food? With an orientation towards God. He related everything back to our relationship with God. He said, “Don’t be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will put on. Is not your life more than food and your body more than clothing?” (Matthew 6:25) Then He points them to the Father. A godly leader is always pointing to the Father. A worldly leader is always pointing to himself.
- Henry and Richard Blackaby wrote a book called *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People to God’s Agenda*, and in the book, they listed what they believe are some of the most prevalent pitfalls every Christian leader must acknowledge and avoid, by God’s grace.
 1. **Pride:** the leader’s worst enemy. One prominent Christian leader who lost his ministry because of an extra-marital affair said, “I began to think too highly of myself.” C.S. Lewis has a powerful chapter devoted to pride in his classic, *Mere Christianity*. Here are a few quotes. “As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people; and, of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.” “Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man... It is the comparison that makes you proud: the pleasure of being above the rest. Once the element of competition is gone, pride is gone.”
 2. **Sexual sin.** Perhaps the most devastating as it can destroy a career, a family, and a reputation. It takes a lifetime to develop a reputation that is Christ-honoring, and five minutes to destroy it.
 3. **Cynicism.** “True leaders focus on that which is right and on what gives hope, not on what is wrong.” Keep up with the news, but read the Bible first and most.
 4. **Greed.** Money is not the root of all evil. The LOVE of money is. (1 Tim. 6:10)
 5. **Mental laziness.** Leaders are readers. Seek the company of wise people by reading good books.
 6. **Oversensitivity.** “People who cannot handle criticism or strongly-voiced opinions need not apply for leadership positions.” If you are always getting your feelings hurt, your feelings are much too important. Kyle Idleman in *Gods at War* referred to a study of 16,000 college students that revealed that self-centeredness is spiraling out of control, and that part of the problem stems from the self-esteem movement that started in the 1980’s. Professor Jean

Twenge believes we've gone overboard in telling our children how special they are, when we should be showing them their responsibilities to others. Twenge points to a version of the song, "Frere Jacques" that is sung in some preschools now: "I am special, I am special, Look at me, look at me!"

- **The Conflict**

- As we said, conflict is inevitable in leadership, even in the church. Paul and Barnabas agree that a second missionary journey is a good idea. It seemed good to them to go back and see how the churches are that they started. It did not seem good to both of them to take John Mark along. Barnabas, John Mark's cousin, wanted to give him a second chance. Paul said, 'no way.' Luke does not interpret the argument for us. He doesn't pick sides. He does say "there arose a sharp disagreement," which is strong language that comes from a word that means, "to provoke to anger." You see it again in Acts 17:16, when Paul was in Athens and seeing all the idols the people there worshiped, his spirit was "provoked within him." That's Bible for, he got ticked off. That's what happens here. Paul and Barnabas are both ticked off and they go their separate ways. We know there is reconciliation later. Paul mentions Barnabas later when he writes 1 Corinthians. And he asks for John Mark later in life, saying, "he is very useful to me for ministry." But here in Antioch, the split is real, and painful.
- Here's the good news. God often multiplies through division. He does it peaceably through church plants. We are divided from the 5 families that left us to start Cornerstone, and from the seven families that left to start Savoring Christ Church. But God has multiplied through those divisions. He also divides, as He did with Paul and Barnabas, in a way that is painful in the beginning, but brings fruit in the end. Barnabas took John Mark and took him on a preaching journey and we can only infer that it was Barnabas' encouragement to his cousin that kept John Mark in the game and trained him so that he WOULD be useful for ministry. Paul took Silas on the second missionary journey, so here is another man in a long line of men who would be discipled by the greatest missionary the world has ever seen. God multiplies through division. Don't seek out division! Don't be a divisive brother! But understand that divisions in the church are not always a bad thing.
-