

“Leaders and Followers”
Hebrews 13:7
Bobby Parks
September 10, 2023 • Sunday Evening Sermon

About 40 years ago, when we were missionaries in South Africa, one of my mentors was a man by the name of Dr. Henry Brandt. He was a self-made millionaire, engineer, businessman, and a management consultant for many different Christian organizations. One time he went to a church to speak and before the service, he noticed that everybody was in the back. The first ten rows were completely empty. I was sitting next to him and I leaned over to the pastor and said, “Why don't you ask them to move up closer?” The pastor got up and said, “there's a lot of empty seats up here if anybody wants to move.” How many people do you think moved? None. When it was time to preach Henry Brandt got up and said, “I don't want to speak to you people way back there. I want you to move up. Come on. I'm not going to start talking till you move up.” Some of them moved up a couple of rows and he said, ‘No, no, come on all the way up.’ Eventually he got them moving, but as you can imagine there was some groaning and grumbling as they were moving. Brandt said “Okay, my topic tonight is attitudes and I especially want to speak about complaints.”

After the message, he and the pastor were talking and the pastor said, “The way you spoke to those people, I would never speak to my people like that for if I spoke to them like that, they would think I was speaking directly to them.” To which Dr. Brandt replied, “Sir, if your objective is to preach a message that doesn't relate to anyone, you can probably accomplish that. Then why are you preaching?” So you may be thinking, ‘Who am I speaking to tonight with a topic like leaders and followers? Are you speaking to leaders or followers?’ Yes, both.

In fact, I have a precedent for that in Philippians 1:1-2 which says [1] *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, **with** the overseers and deacons: [2] Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.* When the Apostle Paul is addressing the church at Philippi, he starts off by saying “to all the saints in Christ Jesus, who are in Philippi.” That's a typical way he addresses people not in all of his writings, but in many of them – to all the saints, all the believers. Then he says, ‘With the overseers and deacons’ and that's the only time he does that in all of his letters.

Notice also that he uses the word with when he adds the overseers and the deacons. The overseers are elders so he is saying ‘with the elders and the deacons. In other words, he addresses all the saints/believers with the elders and deacons so everybody is together in this. We're a body. He doesn't say those who are under the elders and the deacons. He says along with them. Paul's emphasis there is on the people who are in Christ, the saints in Christ, not just Philippians, for that would be a worldly way of looking at it, but those of you who are in Philippi, but you are in Christ. There's a spiritual emphasis there.

Tonight, is our ordination service and the good news is this happened to me about 15 or 16 years ago and actually after this those who are being ordained will never make a mistake or sin again, and if you believe that, you are probably disqualified for the job. Seriously, I want to go to my first point now, which is the ministry of weakness. Let's look at II Corinthians 12. In this passage the context is that Paul has been talking about the visions he had about the third heaven.

II Corinthians 12:7 which says [7] *So to keep me from becoming conceited because of the surpassing greatness of the revelations, a thorn was given me in the flesh, a messenger of*

Satan to harass me, to keep me from becoming conceited. Did you notice that he used the exact same phrase to keep me from becoming conceited twice in one sentence? Perhaps if Paul had been writing this today some might think he would use the delete key thinking he had already used that, although he during this time he was writing it by hand. Yet I don't think he meant that at all. I think he meant to say it twice. I think he wanted to get the point across that as a spiritual leader for the Lord, God was having to work to keep him from becoming conceited so he says it twice in one sentence.

The time that I was talking about earlier, when Henry Brandt was a mentor, I was new in South Africa, and was in a position of leadership with the Ministry of Cru (Campus Crusade for Christ) for the first time. I didn't want to be in the position of leadership, but I was put into it and I figured I might as well try to do my best. I was very conscientious to try to do a good job. After I'd been doing it for a year or two, I began to think 'I kind of got this, I know what I'm doing' so I began to think that my way was the best way. Because of that, I became a little bit manipulative with my staff so that we always did things my way. In fact, I only found out a few years later when one of them told me that during those years my nickname was the Abominable No-man, because whenever someone had a new idea, I would say 'no.' That's the way it was and it's easy to become conceited. Paul is warning himself, here in this passage. Let's continue in the text.

II Corinthians 12:8-10 says [8] *Three times I pleaded with the Lord about this, that it should leave me. [9] But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for My power is made perfect in weakness."* Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. [10] *For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*

God Almighty is giving a message to Paul here that His grace is sufficient. God is not going to get this problem out of his life because it has a purpose. And whose weakness is he referring to? It is not God for He has none but it's Paul's weakness. The point I want to make here is God uses us in His work, but He doesn't use us in spite of our weaknesses. No, He uses us because of our weaknesses. That sounds a bit counterintuitive. Yes, for the reason God uses weak people is so He gets the glory. It's not how great we are, smart we are, experienced we are for the only thing that's going to make any dent in our work is if God is the One who is working. He is jealous for His own glory. He wants to get the glory so He gives us weaknesses. (7:04)

Think about it. What are some weaknesses that you have that might sometimes hold you back a little bit from volunteering to do something for the Lord? Maybe you've had an opportunity to serve in some way in the church and you think, "I can't do that because..." What comes after that *because...*? God actually gave you that weakness so that you would depend upon Him rather than depending upon yourself. If you think you've got it all together, you're not a good candidate for leading. There's got to be humility there.

One of my other favorite preachers from many years ago, who's now with the Lord is Ron Dunn, and he told the story about a man in his church who spent over a year in the hospital. He was diagnosed with three terminal diseases. He survived them all, but a lot of pain, a lot of rehab difficulty and he described in detail all the difficult things he went through during that year in the hospital when he was giving his testimony in the church. When he finished, Ron Dunn said to him "When you finished your talk, everyone in that church wanted to have the faith that you have to trust God, but none of them wanted to go to the school you went to learn it."

We think that serving the Lord can be easy, where God can make a way that we can do it without difficulties. We had a great sermon this morning about suffering from Hebrews 12 and I

suggest you listen to it. It really relates to what we're talking about here. God allows us to have weaknesses and He allows us even to fail. He disciplines us because He is going to make us like Christ. We need to always be remembering that our sufficiency is in Christ, it's not in ourselves. One of the ways I've discovered we show that we believe that our sufficiency is in Christ is by praying about what we do, and secondly, by being willing to ask others for advice. I was not very good at asking others for advice.

Let's move on to our next point and that is the ministry of humility. Romans 12:3 says, *[3] For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.* So, it's natural for us to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. We think that we know what we're doing. We think that we're right. In fact, if we think for a moment that we're not right, we change our mind and now we're right again. We think that we know what we're doing. That's just the way life is and that's wrong. This passage in Romans says not just to leaders, but to everyone. He says, 'I say to everyone (which includes followers and leaders) don't think of yourself more highly than you ought.'

A story that I like that illustrates this is from Paul David Tripp. Tripp is a prolific writer, and he wrote a book called Dangerous Calling, many years ago, which is for pastors and the dangers of the pastoral ministry. He used a story in that, and used that same story later in his book on marriage called What Did You Expect? Here's the story. He says, "I was there. I was self-righteous. (In other words he was proud). I didn't know it. I was an angry man, but I simply did not see myself with anything approaching accuracy. In fact, I was quite hurt when my wife Luella would characterize me as angry, and I was quite convinced that she was a discontented wife. Once I actually said to her, '95% of the women in our church would love to be married to a man like me.' (Can you believe that a pastor could say something like that? That is arrogance.) I was so convinced of my own righteousness and therefore I was convinced of my innocence. By the way, Luella very sweetly informed me that she was in the 5% about that." How about that for some humility?

Howard Hendricks was a great professor at Dallas Theological Seminary, influenced a lot of people in terms of his teachings on discipleship. He said this; 'A leader is someone who knows where he's going and can persuade others to follow.' I like that little word persuade. It's not just ordering, telling, having authority, but it's persuading. A leader is someone who can persuade others to follow. Crawford Loritts, who spoke at Briarwood some years ago, said "A person who thinks he's leading and turns around and sees no one is following, is simply taking a walk." In other words, who are you persuading to follow if you think that you actually are a leader? Having a position or a title does not make us a leader. We have to be able to lead others. We have to be able to persuade others.

Many of you here at Briarwood are both leaders and followers. Think about this for a moment. Some of you may be an elder, a deacon or a VBS leader. You may be on a committee of your Sunday school class or of the church. You could be a class teacher or a class leader. You might be a leader of your shepherding group in your class, which is a small group, but many of you have some kind of leadership that you're involved in. Even if you do have some area of leadership, you also have people that you follow because everyone in our system follows, even the senior pastor is accountable to the session. There's no one without the need to be under someone else. That's the way it is and so we're going to talk a little bit more about leaders and followers in this study.

One of the things that I want you to keep in mind is if the Bible talks about leaders and speaks to leaders, there are some things that are related to that that relate to followers. In other words, it's either stated or it's implied. Or if the Bible is talking to followers, there's something either stated or implied for the leaders – they go together. They're related. For example, there's a passage that's addressed to elders in I Peter 5:1-5 and begins with this; 'So I exhort the elders among you...' and then he gives some criteria for what he wants the elders to be like and to do.

Then he says this in I Peter 5:5, [5] *Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."* Think about that last phrase – God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble. The God of the universe is talking here to Christians like you and me. In speaking to Christians, He says He opposes the proud. I don't know about you, but the Christian life is hard enough without having God opposed to me. I need all the help from Him I can get. We don't want Him to be opposed to us. So, are we talking here about proud leaders or proud followers? Yes, because Peter says it is all of you who are to clothe yourselves with humility.

The next point called following the leader and that comes from Hebrews 13. When I was a kid, we used to have a game that we played sometime on the playground called Follow the Leader, and whoever was the leader could do whatever they wanted. They could hop along on one foot and you had to imitate them or at least attempt to which was the whole idea of the game. The Scriptures talk about following leaders as well. Hebrews 13:7 says, [7] *Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.* There are some key words here that I want us to focus on.

The first word is *remember* and that word is a command in the Greek. We are being commanded to remember these things. Remember who? Remember your leaders, those who spoke the word of God to you.

Another key word is *consider*. Consider means to look at something attentively, to consider it well, to observe it accurately. In other words, intensely, So intensely consider these leaders and the outcome of their way of life. As you do that, it then tells us to imitate their faith. In other words, follow their example, seek to resemble their example. Some commentators have difference of opinions here. Some believe that this is referring to leaders who have died because it's past tense – those who spoke (past tense) the Word of God to you. They may be some of your heroes, so imitate their faith. Others say it could relate to people who are still alive but either way, it's addressed to followers, telling us we should be imitating their faith. We should be considering their way of life. It doesn't say to do this if they measure up to some standard that you have or if they're really wonderful leaders or if they are nearing perfection in the way they do everything. It just says consider their way of life and follow them.

We have an example in the Old Testament of something happening along these lines in Numbers 12. There's the story of the older brother and sister of Moses – Miriam and Aaron. Moses was the kid brother but at this point, Moses was the leader. What did they do? They spoke against him. Here's what they said in Numbers 12:2, [2] *And they (Miriam and Aaron) said, "Has the LORD indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" And the LORD heard it.* In other words, they're speaking against their leader. Moses says the Lord heard it. If you read the rest of the story, he dealt with it swiftly and seriously, because they were rebelling. Some people think that if you have rules that's going to cause people to rebel. Rules or policies don't make a rebel, they reveal the heart of a rebel. The person who's a rebel wants his own way. One of the reasons I know that is, not only does the Bible teach it, but I have

experienced it because that really described me. I wanted my own way. I told you earlier I was the Abominable No-man. I knew how things should be done and that's a tendency that we have if we're not careful.

My next point is a peaceful and a pleasant ministry. Hebrew 13:17 says this *[17] Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.* So again, he's addressing followers. What is he telling them to do? Obey and submit to your leaders and followers need to deal with leaders in a respectful way because as we know from Romans 13, 'all authority is from God.' No one is in a position of authority, whether it's in the church or whether it's in the secular world, unless God has put them there.

We need to recapture the goodness of that word *authority*. In our culture today in America, authority is a bad word. It's a dirty word. No one wants to be under any authority. Everyone wants to do their own thing but authority in the Biblical sense is a good word, and we need to embrace it, that it is a good word. It's a positive word. Just think what happened when they tried in some cities to defund the police saying 'We don't want these authorities running around.' They got a lot of crime, didn't they? So, it's a problem. We need to stand up for the fact that God believes in the principle of authority.

What does it tell us about leaders here? It says leaders are keeping watch over your soul. He's addressing the followers and he's saying, 'obey and submit to them *for* they are keeping watch over yourselves.' That little word *for* is important. It's indicating purpose there. So, let me ask you, if you have people that are leading you in some role in some area of the church, do you believe that God is capable of using flawed leaders to get His work done? Do you believe that He can use flawed leaders to do the work of sanctification that He's doing in your life? What about you who are leaders? Do you make decisions knowing that you're going to give an account to God? Makes it pretty serious, that we're going to give an account of what we do as leaders to God. We're also going to give an account to what we do as followers as to whether we deal with our leaders in a respectful way which is also very important.

It also tells us in Hebrews 13:7 what happens if followers don't submit in the right way, what did it say? Let them do this with joy and not with groaning. In other words, if you as a follower, make it so difficult on your leaders that they're just groaning, it's not going to be good for them but it also says that would be of no advantage to you. It's a two-way street. It's going to affect you, the follower, as well as the leader. There is some synergy in God's way of doing things. So leaders and followers need to remember that spiritual qualities are more important than administrative skills, teaching ability, or any other skill that you can think of in the job. Do we try to hire people that have no skills? Of course not. We want people that know what they're doing but those skills alone will not suffice. If there's going to be harmony and growth in the body, people have to have an attitude of humility.

In the Scriptures, Jesus introduced a new kind of leader in Matthew 20. The context here is that the mother of James and John is asking for a special place for James and John in Jesus' Kingdom. Matthew 20:24-28 says *[24] And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers. [25] But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. [26] It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, [27] and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, [28] even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

As is seen by verse 24, the other disciples were angry that these men might get this spot because they all wanted those positions. This is the text where we get the term that we often hear in Christian circles of servant leadership – whereas leaders we are to serve others. We've lived in Africa, visited many other countries, talked to many missionaries from other countries and we've yet to find a culture where the norm is for the leader to be a servant. It's countercultural. This is God's way. It's not the world's way in any culture. The leader is the one who sits up there and everyone serves him right? No, in God's way it's supposed to be different.

There's a good Biblical example that in the Old Testament in I Kings 12. It is the story after Solomon died, where his son Rehoboam became King. Some of the people came to Rehoboam and said, "Your dad was a bit harsh. He was really hard on us." So the leaders said to Rehoboam the King, "If you will be a servant to this people, these Israelites, serve them and speak good words to them when you answer them, they will be your servants forever." In other words, they are going to be serving each other. There's going to be a synergy, a harmony, a working together. We find further in the chapter that Rehoboam did not do that. He chose not to serve them and that's when the kingdom divided. That's why we had two kingdoms in the Old Testament. That's when the problem started.

I've experienced that sort of thing. When I was the head of the campus ministry in South Africa, we had about 40 staff that worked on different campuses around the country and I was the leader over that. We had a number of policies, rules, you might say, and one of the policies or rules that I had, some of the staff told me they didn't like. I couldn't imagine that. I mean, surely my policies were great, right? So, we had a meeting with all of them to discuss this one policy they did not like. I gave them all of my best shot as to why I thought this was a logical, good policy. I didn't make it up. I'd gotten it from Campus Crusade in America, and I just thought it made sense so I instituted it there but they didn't agree with me. We talked back and forth and they couldn't see the logic that I had. Eventually, they convinced me that none of them liked it. Sometimes followers see things different than leaders, and we need to learn to listen as leaders. So, we changed the policy and it made a lot of people happy.

To wrap things up in our study, I want to mention briefly three pitfalls of leadership. The first one is an unwillingness to face hard issues. Sometimes they're unpopular decisions that have to be made and I have found that some issues only get worse by ignoring them. I had a really difficult situation one time when I was in South Africa, where one of my staff had gotten involved in a relationship that was not a good relationship with someone and really seriously needed to get out of that situation, which meant moving from one city to another. I was the one that made the decisions about where the staff would move to but this was beyond the time period when we normally made those decisions. So, when I made the decision for that staff person to move, I received all kinds of criticism. People came down on me really hard because it didn't make any sense to them. It made sense to me because I knew the situation, but I couldn't tell the situation because it would violate some confidentiality and it could hurt the reputation of not only the staff person, but the other person in that relationship. So I had to keep it to myself and just take the criticisms. Sometimes as leaders we have to be willing to do that.

Another pitfall is a lack of creativity. I was in a pastor's office one time and at Easter here at Briarwood we have the Friday service of holy week on the seven last words of Jesus. The pastor, in his office, had a plaque that said 'the seven last words of the church' and the seven words were; we never did it that way before. The reason for that is because we're going to stick to the way we've been doing it forever for we're never going to change. Yet, we need to have some creativity sometimes. Now, that's a problem if you're a leader and you're not creative like

me. I have no creativity. I don't think up new ideas but I have learned to listen to other people who do. I remember in South Africa one time someone gave me an idea and I thought it was a terrible idea so I put him off and he came back to me a few weeks later and gave me the same idea so again, I put him off. After about the third time, I said, "okay, we'll try it" and it turned out to be one of the most fruitful evangelistic ministries I was ever involved in. So we have to learn to listen to other people.

The last pitfall is losing a sense of eternity. One of my favorite passages of Scripture is II Corinthians 4:16-18 which says [16] *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.* [17] *For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison,* [18] *as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.*

We need to keep an eternal perspective on life. We as human beings get so bent out of shape and tied up with some of the minutia of details and stuff that's going on in our lives, the places we work, in the church, because we lose a sense of eternity. There are people out there that are dying without Christ, and we need to keep that in mind in all that we do. We need to keep a sense of eternity. It's an important thing to not let that be pushed aside and I have to keep coming back to that passage of Scripture and meditating on it and saying to myself, 'what is it in my life that is pushing aside a sense of the eternity of what we are involved in?' That a very important thing.

So, if what I've said resonates with you, then I think you'll understand that we need to remain in an attitude of humility and dependance upon Christ with an eternal perspective. So here are my two takeaways. They are two really short prayers in the Bible. One is from Luke 18:13 and it's from the tax collector in the temple where he says, "Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner." The other is from Matthew 14:30. It is when Peter was walking on the water and started to sink. Peter says a real quick prayer, "Lord, save me." That's the kind of attitude God wants us to have. Leaders and followers, our dependance is upon the Lord and we can't do anything apart from Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Would you pray in your heart right now and ask God to help you apply something from this message that you need to apply in your life right now? Lord, be merciful to me, a sinner. Lord, continually remind me of my need and to help my sufficiency to be only in Christ, to revel in my weaknesses so that You are glorified when anything good happens in my ministry. I pray this in Jesus' Name, Amen.