**Principles of Effective Christian Leadership**

**Colossians 1:24-29**

**Written by Bruce Goettsche (May, 1998) and Edited by Daryel Erickson**

I was eager to read the book Iaccoca by Lee Iacocca, the former Chairman of the Chrysler Corporation. I was fascinated by the way this man took a company from virtual bankruptcy to success. I wanted to learn how he someone could do what he did. Last year I eagerly read The Road Ahead by Bill Gates of Microsoft. He has his finger on the pulse of technology and I wanted to hear what he had to say. We often buy books by politicians, athletes, Scientists and Doctors because we want to learn the lessons that made them successful.

In the text before us the Apostle Paul reveals his principles of effective Christian Leadership. They are principles that govern his life. But these are principles not just for the Pastor, teacher or Christian worker . . . they are principles valuable to every Christian because they point us to true discipleship. These are not the same principles you will find in contemporary books on management. These are uniquely Christian principles.

**Effective Christian Leaders Are Willing to Pay the Price**

Paul begins "Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of the church." (1:24). Paul rejoices in what "was suffered for you." What is he referring to here? Look at the preceding verses and you realize that Paul is referring to the sacrifice of Christ for our sin. Paul is grateful for Christ's work in their life.

But there is more to this statement. He also says "I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions, for the sake of the church." He began by talking about Christ's afflictions, now he is talking about his own. The phrase "what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions" is awkward. It's not that Christ's death on the cross was lacking anything. Paul realizes that the suffering he is experiencing is really directed at Christ and in that sense is still Christ's affliction. Paul says there is a price to pay to lead... These statements should not surprise us. Jesus warned us. He said, "Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also." [John 15:20].

Paul goes into some detail about his sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11; five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn? If I must boast, I will boast of the things that show my weakness.

Notice that Paul identifies several sources of suffering. There is **overwhelming physical suffering**.

He was attacked, beaten and left for dead, all because of his proclamation of the gospel. This may not happen to churchgoers in our country very often but it is happening in other countries. The world is becoming increasingly hostile to the Christian message.

Paul tells us that the Gentiles also threaten him. In other words, he faces the **subtle antagonism of non-believers.** Here is something we should be able to relate to. Every time we take a stand for Christ, we become a target. If you take a leadership position, you become a bigger target. This is often much more subtle and subversive. People will exclude you, ridicule you, and criticize you behind your back.

Third, he faces suffering from false brothers. **These are Devastating attacks from within the church.** In Shakespeare's Julius Caesar, Caesar is killed by a group of assailants. A famous line is "et tu, Brutè?" Caesar was stunned that one he thought was a friend would turn on him. Anyone who has served in the church ministry for any length of time understands this feeling. Some of the most painful blows come from these "false brothers" the ones we thought were our friends. It would be nice if everyone in the church applied God's commands to love, kindness and encouragement. It would be nice, but it is not the way it is.

Paul identifies one other source of suffering: "I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches. Who is weak, and I do not feel weak? Who is led into sin, and I do not inwardly burn?"

One of the most painful aspects of Christian leadership is **the heartbreak of sharing people's pain**. It's tough to listen to the heartache that goes on in so many lives. It's devastating to see someone who is acting out of rebellion to the Lord. It hurts every time I stand at a casket as a family says their final goodbyes. The closer I am to the family. The more it hurts. There is a price to be paid to be an effective leader. There is a price for taking a stand for Christ. You need to know and prepare for this cost before you begin.

**Effective Leaders Have a Servant Mentality**

Paul states "I have become its (the church's) servant by the commission God gave me..." Paul viewed himself not as a professional or an executive, but a servant.

Jesus gave us an example of what this means. In the upper room when the disciples gathered with Jesus for the Passover meal. Before the meal we see the contrasting styles of leadership. The disciples were in a power struggle. The question was who should take the position of a servant and was the feet of the disciples. Peter and John debated who was most important. The disciples compared credentials, displayed their degrees, and trumpeted their experience. They sought to gain their position of importance. He shows the disciples the nature of godly leadership. He takes off his garment and humbles himself like a servant and washes the feet of the disciples. The disciples were aghast. This was not the way a leader was to behave. Jesus told them that He was giving them a model of the kind of leadership He desired: servant leadership.

When people in the world talk about leadership you hear words like:

* Power
* Influence
* Leverage
* They are called people who "make things happen" or "don't put up with any nonsense"

Jesus talks of leaders with words like,

* Compassion
* Humility
* Gentleness
* Generosity
* Patience
* Service

Paul understands that he is a **servant of God.** He says He is a servant by the commission of God. He understood that He "worked for God". God did not serve Paul . . . Paul served him. He also sees himself as a **servant of the church.** He is a servant of God's Kingdom. He is not a professional . . . but a servant. His job is not to build a kingdom to himself but to build God's kingdom.

And the apostle Paul understands that he is a **servant of the Word.** His job was to proclaim God's truth. It is very easy to forget this. We get wrapped up trying to be creative and innovative. We dabble in politics and pop psychology. But this is not our calling. These things cannot save anyone. There is a tendency to make the Word of God a servant of the teacher rather than the teacher, a servant of the Word of God. It is not our job to "pick and choose" which part of the Bible we will focus on and believe. We must present and study the fullness of the truth. God's Word must dictate what we teach, not public opinion, contemporary events, personal preference. Scripture is not for us to use to prove our ideas. We are here to proclaim God's ideas!

Effective Christian leaders understand they are not the served but the servants.

During the American Revolution, a man in civilian clothes rode past a group of soldiers repairing a small defensive barrier. Their leader was shouting instructions at them but making no other attempt to help them. Asked why by the rider, the leader said with great dignity, "Sir, I'm a corporal!" The stranger apologized, dismounted, and proceeded to help the exhausted soldiers. The job done, he turned to the corporal and said, "If you need some more help, son, call me." With that, the Commander-In-Chief, George Washington, remounted his horse and rode on. [Jumping Hurdles, Hitting Glitches, Overcoming Setbacks, Steve Brown p. 164] One man had a title.... the other was a leader.

**Effective Christian Leaders See the Big Picture**

Paul writes, "We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone- with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ." Paul sees the big picture. He is not seeking to build organizations . . . he is seeking to develop PEOPLE. His goal is to present everyone perfect in Christ.

Effective Christian Leaders are those who look beyond attendance figures. They look beyond today. They want to develop people, not just produce events. They want to see people grow not just show up. Do you see this in Paul's words? Paul understands that His first goal is to reach people with the Gospel and then develop them in their Christian life. Gordon MacDonald really paints a clear picture, "there are many things the world can do as well as the church (entertain, sing, counsel, draw crowds, build buildings) but there is only one thing the church can do that the world cannot . . . we can extend grace. That's our focus. That's the big picture. Having the big picture changes the way we approach ministry,

* We will be less concerned with programs, more concerned with people
* We will have more patience with those who are different from us
* We will focus more on ministry and less on programming
* We will be less concerned with our rights and more concerned with our responsibilities

Maybe it's best to give you a picture of what we are talking about. His name is John. He has wild hair, wears a T-shirt with holes in it, jeans and no shoes. This was literally his wardrobe for his entire four years of college. He is brilliant and kind of esoteric and very, very bright. He became a Christian while attending college. Across the street from the campus is a well-dressed, very conservative church. They want to develop a ministry to the students, but are not sure how to go about it. One day John decides to go there. He walks in with no shoes, jeans, his T-shirt, and wild hair. The service has already started and so John starts down the aisle looking for a seat. The church is completely packed and he can't find a seat. By now, people are looking a bit uncomfortable, but no one says anything.

John gets closer and closer to the pulpit and when he realizes there are no seats, he just squats down right on the carpet. (Although perfectly acceptable behavior at a college fellowship, trust me, this had never happened in this church before!) By now the people are really uptight, and the tension in the air is thick. About this time, the minister realizes that from way at the back of the church, a deacon is slowly making his way toward John. Now the deacon is in his eighties, have silver-gray hair, a three-piece suit, and a pocket watch. He was a godly man, very elegant, very dignified, very courtly. He walks with a cane and as he starts walking toward this boy, everyone is saying to himself, "You can't blame him for what he's going to do. How can you expect a man of his age and of his background to understand some college kid on the floor?"  
  
It takes a long time for the man to reach the boy. The church is utterly silent except for the clicking of the man's cane. All eyes are focused on him. You can't even hear anyone breathing. The people are thinking, "The minister can't even preach the sermon until the deacon does what he has to do." And now they see this elderly man drop his cane on the floor. With great difficulty he lowers himself and sits down next to John and sits with him so he won't be alone.  
  
Everyone chokes up with emotion. When the minister gains control he says, "What I'm about to preach, you will never remember. What you have just seen, you will never forget." That Deacon was a leader. He was willing to serve. He saw the big picture.

**Effective Christian Leaders Know the Source of Their Strength**

Paul concludes this section with these words, "To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me." The word "struggling" in Greek is the word agonizomai, from which we get our word agonize, and conveys the idea of an athlete straining to win the race."

When I was a teen we used to say, "it is better to burn out for God than to rust out for the Devil." The idea of course was that we should be diligent in our work for the Lord. But in this diligence it is important that we remember Paul's final principle: we must work "with all HIS energy, which so powerfully works in me."

All the energy that we can muster cannot equal what God can do through us. Allistar Begg said, "We must remember that the best of men are men at best." There is a practical implication of this principle: we are effective only when we function in God's strength. I'm not mechanically inclined. I do know that every once in a while you have to put gas in the car or it stops running. Some Christian leaders (present company included) are like that car . . . they drive hard but have forget to "fill the tank" by spending personal time with the Lord. The result is that we stop functioning. We dry up, burn out, and walk away. We need to take in as well as give out. Our strength is not in OUR ability but His. The first responsibility of every Christian leader is to abide in God's strength.

Are we running on empty? When was the last time we got alone with the Lord? When was the last time we allowed Him to fill us with His wonder and grace? Have we been so "busy" that we are relying on our own strength to carry us through? You and I may feel that we "don't have time". We need to make time. And when we take time to regularly "fill up" we will find that the time we have is used more effectively and efficiently because we will be working in His strength, not ours.

**Conclusions**

There are at least two different approaches to leadership. The most common is the idea of leading by dictate and power. The other, the example of Christ, is to lead by serving. One emphasizes measurable results. The other emphasizes people. One says, "Only the strong survive" the other says, "the strong have the most to give." One spotlights personal right, the other emphasizes personal responsibility. One resorts to intimidation and power plays, the other works through love. Tell me, which approach will you adopt for your life?

This is not just about leadership . . . it' about life. Every day we are asked to make decisions. Every day we must decide how to handle the various situations that come our way. In each decision we choose one of these two approaches. Each of us decides a dozen or more times a day to do it God's way . . . or the worlds.

I suspect I haven't told you anything you didn't already know. But I do hope that I have sharpened the distinctions between the two ways before us. I hope Paul's words have helped you to see what God's way really is. And having seen, I pray you will follow.

To those who lead, let me say: thank you. We really need you. We need those who are strong even in the midst of the hassles, those who lead by example, those who see the big picture. We need those who stand on the Word of God. We thank God for you. We will try to be more of help than a hindrance to you.

Bruce Larson talks about Sandhill Cranes "These large birds, who fly great distances across continents, have three remarkable qualities. First, they rotate leadership. Second, they choose leaders that can handle turbulence. And then, all during the time the one bird is leading, the rest are honking their affirmation." Pretty smart birds, don't you think? (Developing the Leader Within You, Maxwell Introduction)