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SANCTIFYING GOD BEFORE THE PEOPLE

One definition of a leader is “someone who has influence over at least one other person.” This definition puts all of us in leadership positions, some having influence over just a few individuals, others having influence over many people, with most of us falling somewhere in between.

Moses’ Missed Opportunity

Leaders carry an awesome and sometimes frightening responsibility. We can let it shape us for God’s glory, or we can let it take us into a self-centered realm and create trauma and damage for ourselves and those around us. In the book of Numbers, we find Moses departing from his faithful practice of spiritual leadership and doing things by his own authority and in his own way:

And Moses and Aaron gathered the assembly together before the rock; and he said to them, “Hear now, you rebels! Must we bring water for you out of this rock?” Then Moses lifted his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod; and water came out abundantly, and the congregation and their animals drank. (Num. 20:10-11, New King James Version)

Moses had just come from a personal encounter with God where he received clear instructions:

Moses and Aaron went from the assembly to the entrance to the Tent of Meeting and fell facedown, and the glory of the LORD appeared to them. The LORD said to Moses, “Take the staff, and you and your brother Aaron gather the assembly together. Speak to that rock before their eyes and it will pour out its water.” (Num. 20:6-8, New International Version)

What went wrong? Was Moses afraid of another 40 years in the wilderness? Did he lose his temper—again? Was he tired? Was he emotionally spent after the loss of his sister? Whatever the reason, Moses

disobeyed God; he struck the rock instead of speaking to it. Here's what God said: "And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, 'Because you did not believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them'" (Num. 20:12, English Standard Version). The New Living Translation renders the text: "Because you did not trust in me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel." This reveals one of God's prime directives for His leaders: We are always to sanctify God before the people and demonstrate His holiness.

So what was the sin? Moses placed the focus on himself instead of on God: "Must *we* (Moses and Aaron—human leaders) bring water for you out of this rock?" Moses' attitude glorified himself instead of God and ultimately denied that God is the one who provides for the people. Furthermore, when spiritual leaders fail, the values, spiritual principles, all the powerful biblical teaching they have brought to God's people—all those things are then brought into question and often are used as an excuse for people not to follow God. God identified Moses' problem as a lack of faith and trust: "Because you did not believe in me." Moses wasted a crisis opportunity—he lost the chance to bring a spiritual victory, a growth opportunity, for God's people even in their rebellion.

In a world that denies the existence of God, tries to put Him in a box, and attempts to minimize who He is and what He can do, it is our opportunity to take every chance given to maximize God in the eyes of His people and of the world. It is our prime directive to sanctify God before the people.

It is the prime goal of the evil one to keep us focused on self before the people instead of God. After all, this was at the core of Lucifer's sin: "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High" (Isa. 14:14, New American Standard Bible). Sin was born in the heart of a leader.

Who Does Leadership Glorify?

The battle of self is a core spiritual issue that every person must fight. We must ask ourselves the question: Who is being glorified through my leadership—God or me? The moment we cross that line, when self becomes our focus, we have been seduced, either by our leadership role itself or by subtle temptations within that role. The seduction of leadership is frighteningly akin to sexual immorality. The focus is on the reward that comes when self is gratified. That was Moses' failure. Striking the rock was all about *his* troubles, the threats

coming from the people against *him*, which jeopardized *his own* personal gratification. Our moment of gratification gives evidence that self has been elevated instead of God, and we stand guilty of misrepresenting His holiness before the people.

Leaders face many dangers. People say a lot of nice things about us. We are given upgrades in meetings, office, and travel; we get special treatment that many other people do not receive. When we walk into a room, people notice. We always have to be “on,” so it is easy to be less than genuine. The demands of our leadership role are often so heavy, and often controlled or pushed by others, that it is easy to jump to entitlement thinking—“the church owes me!” These and other realities in our daily experience contribute to the seduction of leadership into an internal focus on self instead of on God.

What are some warning signs that you may have been seduced by your leadership role?

- If you lose your temper in a church board or elders’ meeting and lay the opposition low
- When in a conflict situation you worry more about how you will look than about the spiritual outcomes for the people involved and for the organization
- When you feel you are entitled to receive that which is beyond policy
- When you give more focus to image than to spiritual depth
- If after a sermon that went well you agree with the compliments that it was probably one the best sermons they ever heard
- When you are not thinking and praying about how to expand the leadership beyond your circle
- When it is easy to expect things of others that you won’t do
- When you take advantage of your position to exercise power

Lest we think this a small thing, reflect on God’s response to Moses’ lapse of leadership focus: “And the LORD said to Moses and Aaron, ‘Because you did not trust me enough to demonstrate my holiness to the people of Israel, you will not lead them into the land I am giving them!’” (Num. 20:12, NLT).

Wait a moment: had not Moses been amazingly faithful to God? Had he not been intimately engaged with God in His very presence, speaking face to face as one speaks to a friend? Had he not led the children of Israel out of Egypt? And had he not endured years of rebellion, murmuring, and disobedience by the people he led? I consider Moses to be the greatest leader in all of history, second only to our Lord Jesus. So

why such a severe response from God?

God calls every believer to be a leader. By our influence, we are to help people mature in their faith in God. We are to sanctify Him in their eyes with every opportunity that life brings. In fact, the crisis at the rock was a point in the history of Israel when God desired to help His people take another step in spiritual growth in preparation to cross over Jordan into the Promised Land. The lack of water was simply an opportunity to honor God before the people and bring them to a new level of spiritual growth and confidence in Him. Moses' failure of leadership destroyed that opportunity for the entire nation, and God's response shows us the seriousness of the leader's failure to sanctify God before the people.

What does it look like when you sanctify God in your leadership role?

- You are an intercessor in prayer for the spiritual good of others
- Your prayer is that God is glorified, and that people see the true character of God in every interaction of your life
- You are dying to self every day
- Your humility goes beyond appearances
- Those around you tend to be inspired to seek God rather than reject Him
- You mentor those around you in a way that assists them in growing in God

Moses' story does not end with his failure at the rock. He did not nurse his wounds and feel sorry for himself. He could have responded with anger toward God for being so hard on him because of this one failure after many faithful years of service. But Moses chose not to stay focused on himself. Instead, he returned to a God-focused, God-sanctifying leadership. In fact, the Bible recounts many successes that Moses had after this failure! He led the Israelites around the hostile territory of Edom (Num. 20:14-21). Because he obeyed God's instructions and faithfully relayed them to the people, the Israelites were victorious in battle against the many enemies they faced as they approached the Promised Land (Num. 21:1-3; 21:21-35; 31:1-54). Moses also successfully managed the transition of the high priesthood to Aaron's son Eleazar after Aaron died (Num. 20:22-29). He even asked God to select a new leader who would take his own place when God revealed to him that he too would soon die. God answered his prayer and chose Joshua to be the new leader of the Israelites (Num. 27:12-23).

Besides commissioning Joshua as his replacement, Moses also took other measures to ensure that the people would continue to follow God.

He gave detailed instructions on the religious ceremonies that the people were to observe (Num. 28-29). He also gave moral and ethical instructions from the Lord which were to guide the Israelites in everyday life. One of the most impassioned pleas for obedience to God is found in Deuteronomy 30, after Moses had instructed the Israelites about God's law.

There were still problems that Moses faced, but he never again failed to honor God before the people. When poisonous snakes began killing the Israelites, it was Moses who appealed to God on their behalf, even though the Israelites' had brought this judgment upon themselves because of their complaining against God and against Moses. Moses made the bronze serpent and instructed the Israelites to look upon it to be saved (Num. 21:4-9). When the men of Israel engaged in sexual immorality and idolatry with the women of Moab, Moses followed God's command and told the people to execute the perpetrators (Num. 25). While such a response might seem harsh to us, it shows how seriously God, and Moses, took the sin of idolatry. Moses had learned the lesson of sanctifying God before the people. He would allow nothing to stand in the way of God's holiness being displayed to the Israelites.

Moses accepted the consequences of his sin and continued to faithfully lead God's people even though he would never enter the Promised Land himself. But God did allow Moses to see the Promised Land before he died. From the heights of Mount Nebo, God showed him the land that the people he had led for those 40 long years would inhabit (Deut. 34:1-4). Moses died without setting foot into the Promised Land, yet God did something even more remarkable for him. The New Testament indicates that God resurrected Moses (Jude 1:9). He was one of the two heavenly visitors who talked with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3). Moses was forgiven by God and taken to the real Promised Land of heaven. His story offers reassurance that failure is not the end for leaders. Leaders who fail will suffer consequences, but when they repent they are forgiven and restored. By returning to a God-sanctifying leadership, they can still be successful leaders.

A Personal Approach to Accountability

Moses' experience underscores the sacred stewardship that leaders hold and the serious consequences of failing to sanctify God in our leadership. How can leaders avoid the seductive but dangerous lure of self-glorifying rather than God-sanctifying leadership? Here's a simple

approach that has been helpful to me and has become a personal accountability statement. It is probably too simple to be anything close to profound, but you may find it useful. In every situation choose to:

*Do the right thing,
In the right way,
At the right time,
And for the right reason.*

Let's break it down one section at a time.

Do the Right Thing

Of the four parts of this accountability statement, doing the right thing can, at times, be the easiest to figure out—but not always the easiest to carry out. Several foundational qualities are characteristic of those who do the right thing even when it may be difficult. They include good judgment, sound character, and moral integrity. In addition, being open and receptive to God's leading through the Holy Spirit is essential.

The most powerful values that steer us to knowing what is right—a love for God's law, the Golden Rule, and a godly character—are found in Scripture. The right thing becomes clear when principles of God's law are employed in the context of the life of Jesus and in an atmosphere of love. Doing the right thing will always be the most right when we move away from personal subjective thinking, focus on God's perspective, and act in harmony with His redemptive nature.

Moses failed to do the right thing when he struck the rock instead of speaking to it as God has instructed. It might have seemed acceptable to Moses to strike the rock; after all, in a previous situation God had instructed Moses to strike the rock to bring forth water for the people (see Exod. 17:6). But precedent is not always a reliable indication of the right thing to do. The right thing in one situation is not always the right thing in another situation, no matter how similar they may appear to be. Doing what God says instead of following our own judgment is the best policy for doing the right thing in every situation we face.

Some challenges that make it difficult to do the right thing include our relentless adversary, that old serpent, and those who are guided by self. Sometimes doing the right thing is standing before a group and making a profound statement like Joshua: "As for me and my house, we will serve the LORD" (see Josh. 24:15). Other times it can simply be a supportive statement for a leader who is standing for right while being assailed by a small but vocal group with inappropriate agendas. A few

timely statements by quiet but solid people have turned many negative meetings to the positive outcomes God intended for the mission of the church. So, standing for and doing right is a cornerstone to a spiritually sound community. But it is not the only thing on which we are to focus.

In the Right Way

The core of doing something in the right way rests in our attitude. Some operative words are “loving,” “unselfish,” “respectful,” and “caring.” In harmony with God’s nature, the focus is on the best spiritual outcome for as many of those involved as possible. Moses’ attitude when he struck the rock revealed his loss of focus. He lost sight of the spiritual outcome and failed to sanctify God before the people. His handling of the situation was not loving, unselfish, respectful, or caring. He was probably exasperated by the grumbling of the Israelites. In many ways they deserved to be rebuked! If we were in his place we might have reacted similarly. But Moses’ reaction did not reflect the character of God.

When Christ was confronted with the woman found in sin (see John 8:2-11), He did not condemn her but approached her in a loving way that made a difference in her life. From that day on, she was a follower. He knew she had sinned, and she was painfully aware of her sin; but Christ treated her with an accountable and redemptive approach. Christ applied grace, but also moved her life upward with graceful accountability. In saving her, He also made an appeal to those who opposed Him and gave them an opportunity to sweep away the sin in their own hearts.

In confronting them, Christ was mindful of two things: He was protecting the life and heart of the woman while at the same time being sensitive to her accusers by not making a public spectacle of them. The outcome of a good spiritual process is more likely to be redemptive when the approach follows Jesus’ example. Gentleness does not eliminate accountability. When confrontation is the right thing, the best confronter is one who has a relationship with that person. Love cares enough to help someone move away from behaviors that are destructive to self and/or others. People who are controllers can be very difficult to approach. Because of their own insecurities, they often use the following behaviors:

- Manipulation using hostility, intimidation, the martyr complex, etc.
- Not respecting others’ feelings, boundaries, and opinions
- Rejecting good counsel
- Inconsistently applying standards to others versus themselves

- Overreacting at an inappropriate level in relation to the actual issue in question
- Misusing inspired authority as a power tool
- Rarely accepting responsibility by deflecting away from the real issues by transferring the guilt to another
- Denying or minimizing events, twisting facts
- Claiming incomplete processes to avoid consequences

If you find yourself doing some of these things, you might be a controller. If you use this list against someone else, you might be a controller. The value of this list is to keep you objectively engaged and thus avoid letting a confrontation turn away from the real issues at hand.

A central issue around controlling behaviors is the misuse of power. Here's a wonderful statement written by Eugene Peterson (2003) in his introduction to 2 Corinthians in *The Message*: "Because leadership is necessarily an exercise of authority, it easily shifts into an exercise of power. But the minute it does that, it begins to inflict damage on both the leader and the led" (p. 2090).

It's worth reading a second time. In a review of the vast majority of conflicts I've worked through as an administrator, power is nearly always at the core of each conflict. Godly leadership is not about self; it's about God, His plan, and His power for the salvation of all who will accept. People who focus on exercising power over others often attempt to control with the behaviors listed above. If you find yourself doing any of those behaviors, you are probably attempting to use power to control others. Peterson's statement says it well, but there is often a thin line between appropriate authority and using power. When leaders carefully exercise godly authority, the outcome can be wonderfully appropriate. When the use of power enters into the equation, the leader and those led are damaged—as well as God's cause.

Eugene Kennedy and Sara Charles address this in their book, *Authority*:

Authority is from the Latin word *augēre*, which means to create, to enlarge, to enable growth. Yet because authority is so often confused with authoritarianism, or the urge to control by power, we exclude it from our vocabularies and from our lives. Authority is actually the nurturing ingredient in our roles as parents, employees, spouses, teachers, lovers, and friends. Healthy authority is about neither power nor control.

In its truest sense, authority means to *author* something from within oneself—a good marriage, a family, a book, a job, an idea; or to engage in creative works of other types—to love another, to teach students, to start a business, to help the sick, to secure justice for those to whom it has been denied. These works depend on the natural exercise of healthy and constructive authority.

Authority does not control, it authors. (Kennedy & Charles, 1997, book jacket)

I believe the huge misunderstanding of our God is that He is just some authoritarian making unilateral decisions about people with no care, no love, and certainly no compassion. It is of eternal consequence for us to understand that God, the most powerful being in the universe, is not an arbitrary judge, not a dictator, not authoritarian—He is, in fact, an Author of our lives, our future, and our salvation. His plan, His sacrifice, all that He is, is about carefully, lovingly fashioning us for fulfillment now and a joyous eternity. In fact, Paul understood this concept when he wrote in Hebrews 12:2: “Looking unto Jesus *the author and finisher* of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, *and* is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (King James Version, emphasis supplied).

At the Right Time

Timing can be the most difficult of the four principles to apply. When is the right time to address a conflict or problem? It is common for a leader to know what should be done and how to do it long before knowing when the time is right. Timing especially needs to be subject to the Holy Spirit’s leading. Remember, the most important goal is reaching the best spiritual outcome. When a person is engaged in hurting someone emotionally, physically, or spiritually, our response should usually be very quick. But there are many cases when acting too soon will increase damage and responding too late will allow more damage than necessary. With focused and caring prayer, God will provide signals that indicate that the time for action has arrived. Often, issues of courage or fear, stubbornness and self, will inhibit our understanding God’s timing. Paul’s description of dying to self is important so we can know God’s timing. Timing is often a huge factor in good outcomes.

For the Right Reason

Our personal motives in leadership are the primary engines of good outcomes. Remember, control is not our goal; good spiritual function, personal growth, and quality outcomes are the goal. If our focus turns to self, motives are compromised. If we are operating in godly love and altruistic concern for others, we are probably doing things for the right reason. The right or wrong reason for doing something often dramatically shapes the first three parts of the accountability list. It’s a good

question to ask ourselves as we look in the mirror: *Why am I doing this?*

Those who feel that doing the right thing is the only necessity in dealing with people often cause much damage. Each of the four parts of accountability is core to sanctifying God before the people.

Those in administrative leadership face unique challenges in the battle of self that others do not. Leaders who have the greatest influence have the greatest responsibility. One of the most painful realities of leadership is that our mistakes, whether moral failures or simple misjudgments, can be used by the evil one to conjure up excuses in the hearts of followers to avoid doing the right thing. But here's the wonderful side of the stewardship of leadership: the greater a leader's influence, the more opportunity God has to encourage His saints and build up their faith in Him. God still needs leaders to lead His people to the Promised Land, leaders who will take every opportunity to sanctify Him before the people.

References

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