Leaders...class is not dismissed

Derek Voorhees

Jesus’ kind of leaders have influence because they are learners. Their classwork with The Rabbi is never dismissed. Jesus invites, “Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart...” (Matt. 11:29, italics mine). Because the “take my yoke” command gets more attention than the “learn from me” command, it’s worth considering a few points as to how learning relates to leadership.

First, “learning leaders” possess a humble posture of learning from Christ. The best leaders are ever teachable. When leaders continually learn, they are less apt to diminish and more apt to multiply others’ capacity to lead. Learning leaders are humble, because they allow editors in their lives who have permission to correct, reproof, encourage and train them (2 Tim. 2:2; 3:16). The best leaders are aware of their blind-spots and fleshly desires, and therefore submit to being honed by wisdom from above.

Second, learning leaders learn from older, seasoned leaders by asking them questions. Even the early disciples asked Jesus how to pray, and He taught them (Luke 11:1-13). Leaders ask experts to teach them. Too many leaders grow accustomed to telling more than asking because their self-image is often based on being the resident scholar. Asking questions with a genuine heart to learn is not a sign of incompetent leadership, but one of incomplete discipleship still in process.

Third, a learning leader never “arrives.” The moment a leader has “arrived” as the expert his stock of influence declines. Know-it-all leaders lust for attention and do not resist the harmful desires for self-inflation. Jesus warned against personal exercise of authority in the kingdom of God (Matt. 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-44), but know-it-alls are egotistic, narcissistic, and carnal. Thus they lead poorly.

What do learning leaders learn? Servant leadership. “Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:43-44). Learners lead with no desire to promote their name, fame or legacy. Robert Greenleaf describes servant leadership this way:

A new moral principle is emerging which holds that the only authority deserving one’s allegiance is that which is felt and knowingly granted by the led to the leader in response to, and in proportion to, the clearly evident servant stature of the leader. Those who choose to follow this principle will not casually accept the authority of existing institutions. Rather, they will freely respond only to individuals who are chosen as leaders because they are proven and trusted as servants. (Greenleaf, Servant Leadership, 1997:10; bold italics mine)

Leadership that is self-generated without a desire to serve first does not receive respect by “the led.” Why? Jesus’ kind of leaders are learning to influence “the led” from a position of a servant for no personal gain. These types of humble learning leaders are all around us. Would others say you are one?
The Call Above Comparison

Derek Voorhees and BBC colleagues

The apostle Paul knew the positive power of what is commonly viewed as negative: comparison. In an effort to help impoverished Christians in Judea, Paul asked churches in parts of the 1st century Roman Empire to donate funds. The Corinthians initially expressed their willingness, but later began to waver on their commitment. To motivate them, Paul elevated the Macedonian churches as a model for the Corinthians to emulate. Paul boasted that despite great affliction and extreme poverty, the Macedonians shared liberally to participate in his relief campaign. Then, with sincere love for the Corinthians, but with slight sarcasm toward their pride and selfishness, Paul prodded them to be generous participants like the Macedonians (2 Cor. 8:7). The apostle compared one church with another, in a healthy way. That’s rare. Today, the opposite is common: one church comparing itself to another church out of envy.

Boasting about one’s church with an attitude of “one-upmanship” belittles the Kingdom. Instead of striving to be the best church for their community (which is the ideal), competitive churches trying to outdo a Kingdom rival settle on being the best the church in their community (not ideal). The latter mindset feeds on competitive comparison, which saddens Christ’s heart and establishes an “us versus them” mentality prohibitive to churches uniting.

Churches accomplish more in partnership than in isolation, even if that means uniting across theological differences to meet human needs. In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things love...right? But too often churches compete and create doctrinal trenches around their “church-dom.” That saddens Jesus’ heart and demeans His prayer for unity (John 17:11). What can be done to correct this?

Because comparing and competition can be based on our own false conceptions, all Christians (especially leaders of churches) need to honestly assess their motives by asking important questions: What is going on inside us when we compare our church with another? What is the motive behind the ministries we offer? Are we driven to make our church more famous than Jesus?

We each need a regular process of realigning our life and church back to Christ and away from self-absorption. Without an intentional realignment process, we are vulnerable to serving for self-glory and making destructive comparisons with other churches. So, consider these reflective questions:

1. Are we living by grace or performance? Every Christian’s service is a product of God’s grace.
2. Are we serving with a willing heart? Are we each willing to step in obedience and faith to meet needs around us...without anyone knowing what church we represent?
3. Are we focused on Christ or the name of our church? By fixing our eyes on Jesus we will more likely serve with the goal of making His name famous; whether our church gets credit is truly irrelevant.

A few final thoughts. First, increased numbers of bodies, bucks and buildings should never be the health-meter of a church. Second, pride is to be crucified, so we will serve God and people with humility. Last, know that your church’s value and identity is in Christ alone.

NOTE> Church leaders, be sure to read the additional article penned by the BBC faculty to offer help to leaders who find themselves in a crisis of comparison, driven by insecurity and envy. It’s located...where?
The Personal Crisis of Comparison

Derek Voorhees and BBC colleagues

**Few things in life threaten our identity like the ugliness of comparison.** Have you ever been imprisoned by it? It is an oppressive opponent for Church leaders who struggle with comparing themselves to leaders of other churches. To tackle this topic, I’ve asked my colleagues on the BBC faculty to offer their insight and wisdom to aid pastors shackled in the personal crisis of comparison.

Being up front speaking on what’s been prepared and then exposed to public scrutiny each week can create in pastors a level of insecurity and thirst for constant affirmation. When affirmation is not received pastors seek it elsewhere, many times by grading themselves against an unfair standard of comparison. This is why it is easy for pastors to notice churches doing “better” than theirs and wonder what they’re doing wrong. Even when things are going great, there’s always someone doing it “better.” Because the chase after affirmation never satisfies long term, church leaders can grow discouraged with themselves. Satan smiles when Christian leaders compare, because of two reasons: (1) Their identity becomes grounded on their poor self-image more than living in God’s image, and (2) Comparison leads to a skewed perspective of the leadership in the Kingdom, that of “Kingdom-competitors” rather than “Kingdom-partners.” Fact is, more gets done for God when no one strives to hoard glory unto themselves.

**CAUSES of comparison**

**Leaders are hardly ever satisfied.** They are always a bit unsettled, always aiming forward...and that’s good. It’s just the way leaders are. Should leaders excel? Yes! Is it okay for leaders to observe and learn from others in a similar capacity? You bet! Can leaders measure themselves against the success of others as a goal to aim for and imitate? Sure! But they must remember that their identity is not tied to comparing their accomplishments to those of others, to the neglect of what God says about them.

**A cause of comparison is driven by a deep need to be noticed and valued.** A leader’s endeavor to make an “impact” and “influence” for God’s Kingdom can be a hunger for significance, which can form into a mask of idolatry...a desire for fame that only God deserves. Feelings of inadequacy are motivated by fear of being less significant than others. Sadly, this is all too common with pastors today who envy what others have.

Emotionally healthy leaders manifest certain qualities. Because emotions work in coordination with our reason abilities, they can motivate us...but emotions can also mitigate how we lead. Thus, emotional strength is essential. There are numerous situations emotionally stable people avoid, but one is that leaders don’t beg for attention from others. Those needing recognition find themselves experiencing feelings of worth only when others make them feel needed; so, they solicit affirmation from others. Emotionally unhealthy leaders are uncertain of their value, with a low sense of self-worth. If you don’t know that you matter, then no one will ever believe you do.

Another cause of comparison is found in Phil. 2:3, where Paul labels two ingredients of this crisis as “selfish ambition” and “empty conceit” (Phil. 2:3). He exhorts the believers that they should have nothing to do with these. “Selfish ambition” is akin to rivalry, making oneself appear better than others; “empty conceit” speaks of fabricating a point to boast about without any basis for such a boast. Together these motivations construct an excessive desire to be recognized, which lies at the core of comparison. Paul’s command to think selflessly like Christ (2:5-11), highlights the cause of such ambition and conceit: self-
centered pursuits for sufficiency and significance in other’s eyes. The cause is a spiritual cancer in too many leaders today.

In similar fashion, James highlights that when “bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambition” (the same word as in Phil. 2:3) inhabit one’s heart, what is on display is “earthly,” “natural”...even “demonic” (NASB). Two times within three verses James speaks of “jealousy” and “selfish ambition” as synonymous to arrogance and a lie against truth (3:14), the cause of disorder and evil (3:16). These traits are clearly not marks of wisdom “from above” (3:15, 17). Heavenly wisdom is like seeds on steroids that grow righteousness and peace in the church and the world (3:18). Temporal and carnal wisdom is like sickened seeds of discord and resentment. Here is Satan’s suffocating trap to ensnare leaders “among you who think they are wise” (3:13): Comparison and envy of others does not lead to peace and contentment within; rather, comparison and envy create chaos and disorder. These fracture not only the foundation of a leader’s heart, but eventually the bonds of togetherness amongst Christ’s followers. If a leader is searching for significance by comparing, he will ultimately play a role in destroying both the fellowship and the witness of the church.

**As the leader goes, so goes the church.** If the leader is a humble learner, optimizing the talents of those he leads, the culture of that church may be healthy. Yet, if the leader exudes an attitude of having “arrived” and leads out of insecurity, the culture of that church will be one of competition and comparison between their church and others across town.

**CURES for comparison**

Leaders can become preoccupied with themselves. So, recall what Paul wrote: “I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me” (1 Cor. 4:4, NIV11). Paul recognized that he did not get his value from others, nor did he get it from himself. Instead, Paul essentially says, “I don’t care what you think; I don’t even care what I think.”

That’s wise advice. **Comparison is a losing game.** Imagine if one’s preoccupation was simply about faithfulness with whatever God has entrusted. Imagine if we were truly free to celebrate what God is doing through all sorts of organizations, and we refused to find our significance in comparison to others. Comparison can dis-hearten and dis-courage. So, consider a few antidotes for leaders trapped in this crisis.

- **BE HONEST.** Confess to another leader and to the Lord you are driven for worth by what others think about you...as well as what they say about you to their friends and colleagues. Since only Christ can overcome our inner-critics that sabotage our self-acceptance, tell Him of your struggle. Admitting it will help you rest on what God has done for you in Christ, not on what you’ve done for God through your ministry. You do not need accolades to matter. You’re a beloved child of God, in whom He delights ( Isa. 62:4; Ps. 147:11).

- **BE MINDFUL.** You did not get into church leadership as a career choice or as a way of getting noticed; you got into it because Jesus gave himself up for you and called you to this scope of Kingdom work. **Think again!** You have significance only because of the work of the cross. If you **re-mind** yourself of that by daily letting Scripture cascade over your soul while dialoguing with God, the pressure-release will free you from the need to compare. “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above...” (Col. 3:1-2a, NASB).

- **BE REPENTANT.** Stop guilt-tripping the church you lead. When a leader has a deep-seated discontent with his church’s growth rate, he can implicitly communicate that the people are not doing enough...or
else his system would have produced a larger or “better” church by now. Continue to cast a compelling vision for the church to strive for, but be careful not to take your personal disappointment out on the congregation, pushing them to achieve marks to make you something…to define you.

- **BE YOURSELF.** Are you naturally extroverted? Maximize it! Naturally introverted? Maximize it! There is not a single type of leadership mold these days. Just because you didn’t score a High D on the DISC test or as a Powerful Choleric on Littauer’s personality profile does not mean you are “less-than” those who do. Be yourself so God can fully enliven the you He made with the dreams He has for you…using you in His way. Far too often we permit the opinion of another to define us. God had already defined each of us. As our Maker, Jesus said that He came that you would have life to the fullest. Therefore, live within the legacy He has for you and you’ll truly discover life to the fullest!

- **BE SELFLESS.** Comparison is too concerned with self. It stifles joy that should be shared when others rejoice (Rom. 12:15). Therefore, aim toward the state of mind where you no longer think of yourself, which will ultimately annihilate our comparison with others. That may take a life-time, but wage war against building a self-image by comparison. Tim Keller of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City said,

  “Few things in this world are as self-focused as the human ego. Every triumph and every slight has the potential to send us either into pride or despondency. Yet, there is another way: a way where we forget ourselves to the point where we not only cease caring what others think, but where we even fail to care what we think of ourselves. Instead, we rest and rejoice in what God thinks of us in Christ.” (sermon: “Blessed Self-Forgetfulness,” Feb. 24, 2002)

The end result of such Christ-centered thinking is that we will do all things for Him; whether they are foolish or amazing in other’s eyes is of no consequence. We will make decisions and live without a fear of failure or no applause...as well as without an ambition for notoriety or fame. The only thing that exists in a leader’s mind and heart is to live to the pleasure of being Christ’s. A form of slavery is living for other’s favor; a form of freedom is living with God's favor!

God will see you through this personal crisis! Many of the BBC faculty have been there, and even today have to reclaim freedom from the comparison trap. So, if anyone at BBC can come alongside you in confidential counsel and prayer in your journey, please call or email one of us. We care about you and the good deeds the Lord desires to do through you (Eph. 2:10; John 3:21).