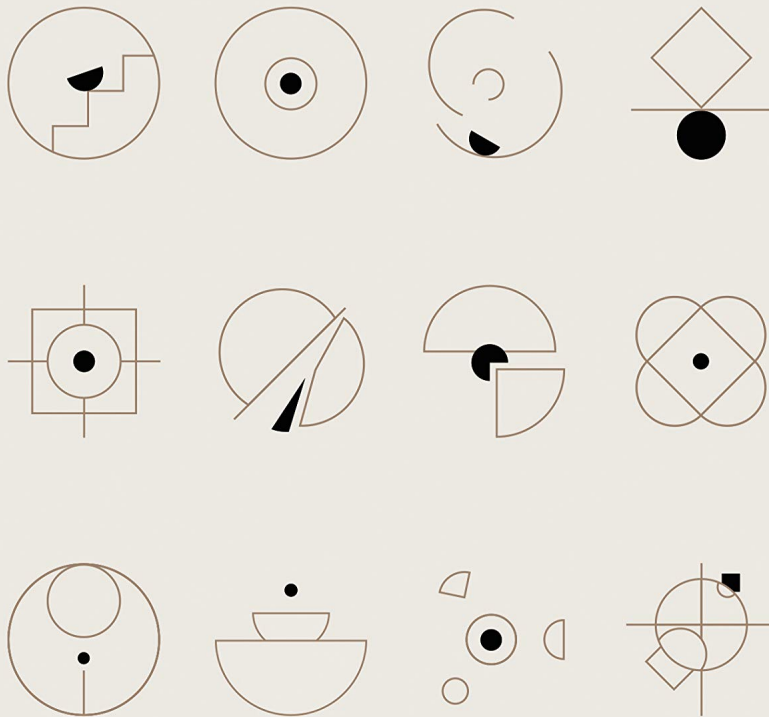


LEAD



12 Gospel Principles for Leadership in the Church

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

LEAD

Paul David Tripp

Lead

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To all the leaders who invested in me, shepherded me,
confronted me, prayed for me, and modeled for me the
patient, forgiving, transforming grace of my Savior.

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PREFACE

IT IS ONE OF THE DISTINCT, undeserved privileges and joys of my life. I did not train to do it, did not see it coming, and continue to carry the surprise with me to this day. I have been called to put gospel words on page after page after page in book after book. I get up each morning with enthusiasm and appreciation. At first, writing did not come naturally to me. I wrote with about as much confidence as a person, swept into the winter spirit, ice skating for the first time. My first manuscript came back with the editor's corrections and comments in red, and it looked like a botched transfusion! But I've kept at it and am so deeply grateful that this is what I get to do with my life, my time, my gifts, and my knowledge.

I only have one thing to offer: —the right-here, right-now truths of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. All I ever do with each book is put on my gospel glasses and look at another topic in the life of a believer or in the culture of the church. I have jokingly said that I have written only one book; I just retitle it every year. Because the gospel is so infinitely deep, I know I could keep digging into it for the next century and never reach the bottom. I also know that applications of the gospel to everyday life are so

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wide and varied that I would also never run out of new things to examine from a gospel perspective.

You see, the gospel is not just a set of historical facts. It is that, for sure. It is rooted in divine acts of intervention and substitution that if not real and historical would rob the gospel of its reliability, promise, and power. But the gospel is not just a set of historical facts; it is also a collection of present redemptive realities. Certain things are true now, and are true of every believer, because of what God historically did and is presently doing on their behalf. There is more. The gospel is a living identity for all who believe. We have become something in Christ, something that is glorious and new and filled with new potential. Good gospel theology doesn't just define for you who God is and what he has done; it also redefines who you are as his child.

There is one final thing. As I said earlier, the gospel is meant to be a new set of glasses that every believer wears and through which he looks at life. Let me say it another way. The gospel of Jesus Christ is meant to be your life hermeneutic, that is, the means by which you understand and make sense of life. This is important because human beings don't live life based on the facts of their experience but on their interpretation of the facts. Whether they are aware of it or not, every human being is a meaning maker, a theologian, a philosopher, or an anthropologist, always taking things apart to understand what they mean. As a ministry leader, you are doing theological work not just when you preach, teach, or lead but also in the ways that you think about yourself, understand your ministry, and relate to fellow leaders. Every book I write is written to help people look at some aspect of life or ministry through the lens of the gospel.

Sometimes this wonderful work I have been given is easy and flows fluidly; the words seem to fly out of my fingers and onto the page. But other times I seem to spend a lot of my writing time looking at the unwritten page, debating how things would be best said

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and praying for wisdom and ability that I do not have on my own. On those days, I'm not sure how much of it is me and the variety of distractions and weaknesses that I bring to the writing process or if it is the topic and all the delicate balances that need to be expressed well. I am not discouraged when the work is hard, because I am deeply convinced that I have been called to do this work—not first because I am glorious in gift and wisdom but because my Lord is glorious in every way, and he meets me in my weakness with strength that only he can give.

I write always as a pastor. This may seem strange to you, but I write with a congregation in view in my mind's eye. I write with love for the people in view. I write with a passion for them to know the full depth and breath of what they have been given in the amazing grace and boundless love of Jesus. And I know that because the work of Jesus on our behalf is so completely sufficient, I can be honest. There is no damage that sin has done or will do that hasn't been addressed by his person, work, promises, and presence. I write convinced that we, the community of believers, can be the most honest community on earth because there is nothing that could be known, revealed, or exposed about us that hasn't been covered by Christ's atoning work.

In the end, I trust that my work will not just give people a new way to think about the gospel information that they find in their Bibles but will ultimately lead to heart and life transformation. I write with the hope that my words will stimulate faith, love, hope, courage, joy, humility, perseverance, mercy, and generosity, and that these things will live not only in all the typical places where people live and relate but also in the relationships and work of those commissioned to give leadership to the church.

It is with these hopes that I offer this book to you. I write as a pastor who loves pastors and has a deep appreciation and respect for the daily sacrifices that every ministry leader makes for the sake of

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the gospel of Jesus Christ and the spiritual health of the people of God. Like every other book I have written, I think of it as a gospel book. It is not first a ministry leadership critique but rather a call to let the gospel of Jesus Christ form the way we think of ourselves as leaders, the way we relate to one another as a leadership community, and the way we go about doing our ministry leadership work. This has not been an easy book, because I wrote wanting to examine hard things, but I do so in a way that reflects the hope and love of the gospel. I didn't want the honesty to diminish the hope or the hope to weaken the honesty. My hope is that as you read, you will be blessed not only with hope but hope that corrects, protects, and sets a new agenda where needed.

May God richly bless you and all you do in his name!

Paul David Tripp

May 13, 2019

INTRODUCTION

Crisis

I LOVE THE CHURCH. I love its worship, I love its preaching, I love its gospel theology, I love its community, I love its witness to the world, I love its ministries of mercy, and I love its leaders. When I have the privilege of standing before a gathering of church leaders, I am always filled with a deep sense of honor and appreciation. I know well the road that every pastor travels because I have walked that long road myself. I know the burden of being a member of the core shepherding and leadership community of the church. I have the highest respect for those who answer the call to give their life to church ministry. I know the average pastor is overworked, understaffed, and underpaid, so I have such appreciation for those who have chosen to live that life. I am a member of a wonderful church, with godly and dedicated leadership and life-giving gospel preaching. Being part of its community is one of the joys of my life.

The love that I have for the church is why I am concerned for the leaders of the church. My concern has deepened as I have gotten call after call, calls that have come as a result of my book *Dangerous*

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Calling.¹ The particular call that follows came from the head of a local church board with which I had a loose ministry partnership. He was shocked, hurt, angry, and confused. He called for my help, but I'm not sure he wanted my help, at least not the help that I felt constrained to give him. It wasn't long into the conversation that his anger turned toward me. I wanted to help him and his band of fellow leaders through the dark and rocky road that they would walk over the next several months, but his anger told me I wouldn't be invited in. I put down my cellphone after our talk and sadness washed over me. It wasn't the first time, and I knew it wouldn't be the last. I carry that sadness with me. It drives me to prayer, it makes me celebrate God's grace, and it motivates me to think that we can and we must do better.

What concerned me with the call that day and many other similar calls is not that my leader friend was shocked, hurt, and angry. He should have been shocked at the duplicitous life of the senior pastor he was calling about. He should have been hurt that his pastor loved his pleasure more than he loved the people he'd been called to feed and to lead. The caller needed to be righteously angry at the violation of everything God designed his church to be. But what concerned me and left me sad after the call was that there was no introspection, no wonderment about the nature of the leadership community that surrounded the fallen pastor, and no apparent willingness to talk about things other than what to do with the pastor who was the focus of his anger.

I wish this conversation had been an exception, but it wasn't. We have all been witnesses to the fall of well-known pastors with a huge amount of influence and notoriety, but for every public falling, there are hundreds of unknown pastors who have lapsed, have left both their leadership and their church in crisis, or are

1. Paul David Tripp, *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

spiritual shells of the pastors they once were. We have talked about the idolatry of celebrity, about pastoral immorality, and about seduction of power, but I am writing this book because, very often, behind the failure of a pastor is a weak and failed leadership community. We don't have just a pastoral crisis; I am convinced from conversation after conversation with pastors and their leadership that we have a *leadership crisis*.

Could it be that the way we have structured local church leadership, the way leaders relate to one another, the way we form a leader's job description, and the everyday lifestyle of the leadership community may be contributing factors to pastoral failure? Could it be that as we leaders are disciplining the pastor, dealing with the hurt he has left behind and working toward restoration, we need to look inward and examine what his fall tells us about ourselves? Could it be that we are looking to the wrong models to understand how to lead? Could it be that as we have become enamored with corporate models of leadership, we have lost sight of deeper gospel insights and values? Could it be that we have forgotten that the call to lead Christ's church is not summarized by organizing, running, and funding a weekly catalog of religious gatherings and events? Could it be that many of our leadership communities don't actually function like communities? And could it be that many of our leaders don't really want to be led, and many in our leadership community don't value true biblical community?

I knew when I wrote *Dangerous Calling*, which addresses the unique temptations that every pastor faces, I would need to write another book addressing the community of leaders that surrounds the pastor. I have needed the years since *Dangerous Calling* was published, with all of those sad and difficult phone conversations, before undertaking it. I have needed to sit face-to-face with scores of pastoral newbies and veterans. I have needed many hours of examination and reflection. But I am excited to use my voice in the hope that it

will ignite a conversation that I am convinced we need to have but often are not having.

This book is not a depressing critique. You can go to Twitter for that—the place that has revealed to us all that judgment is much more natural to us than grace. I want to propose a positive character model for local church or ministry leadership. There is so much written about a leader’s gifting, about having the right people in the right seats, about leadership structures, and about how to make decisions and drive vision. All of these things are important, but they are not the most important thing. I want to turn your thinking toward the foundational character and lifestyle of a healthy church leadership community. My hope is that the result will be insight, confession, and community transformation.

Jim called me because the secret, sordid life of his senior pastor was no longer a secret. Like so many situations, the computer was the tool that had exposed the secret. At first, Jim and his fellow leaders were in denial. They simply could not believe that this stuff was going on in the life of the man they had worked alongside and trusted for years. They thought maybe his computer had been hacked, but when they approached him, they changed their thinking, because he had a denier’s answer for everything. Now they had to work through their disbelief as well as all the plausible explanations their pastor had given and that, frankly, they wanted to believe. The more they dug, however, the more they were unable to deny the truth of what was uncovered, and the more they uncovered, the more they had to confess that there was an awful lot about this pastor that they did not know. They were like ten people in a canoe built for four launched by ranging rapids toward a waterfall ahead.

To add to their out-of-control feeling, this crisis had shattered their unity. Perhaps it’s more accurate to say that the crisis had exposed how thin and easily shatterable their unity was. The men who were most loyal to the pastor argued and debated with the men they

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thought were rushing to judgment; the organizational guys argued with the men who tended to be more pastoral; and in all of these debates there was way too much judgment of the others' interests and motives. Meanwhile, a shocked and hurting congregation was not getting from their leaders what they needed.

As I walked with these leaders through their distress and confusion, engaging them in conversation after conversation, it was clear that they were foundationally unprepared for what they were dealing with. It wasn't just that they were structurally unprepared; they were, more importantly, unprepared in terms of character and relationship. The fact that such basic things were missing complicated and obstructed their calling to lead their church through that very difficult moment. And in their unpreparedness, they spent as much time debating among themselves as they did dealing with the crisis and the man at the center of it.

It's not just the little, unknown churches that are unprepared. We have all watched flagship churches deal with similar pastoral crises, and we have seen them act and speak too soon, only to then retract what they have said and done and then suggest another view and another course of action that they soon also modify. We've seen leaders in these churches publicly disagree with one another. We have seen loyalty, power, and division control decisions rather than biblical wisdom. How many failed pastors will there be, how many more broken and hurting churches, before we humbly ask questions about how we are leading the church that the Savior has entrusted into our care?

I celebrate the wonderful, vibrant, and healthy churches that I partner with around the world. I love the energy that we are pouring into church planting and church revitalization. I love that gospel-centered churches are speaking ever more loudly as advocates for what is just and right for those who have no voice. I am not at all depressed; I am excited. But I am concerned that weaknesses in

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the leadership community have the power to not only weaken the function and witness of what appears to be a very healthy church but may also, in what seems to be an instant, cast that church into a quagmire that can damage and divert its ministry for a long time. In some situations it appears that the glory will never return.

The courage that propels me to approach this topic is rooted not in my wisdom or experience but in the presence, power, wisdom, and grace of my Redeemer. As I begin writing this book, I am once again remembering what gave me hope and motivation when I wrote *Dangerous Calling*—Matthew 28:16–20:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

The disciples had been through a whirlwind of unimaginable things; the late-night arrest of their Messiah in Gethsemane, Jesus’s trial and torture, the public crucifixion, the sight of his empty tomb and his post resurrection appearances. Try to put yourself in their place. Try to imagine the confusion, the internal debates, the fear, the doubt, and the wonderment of the future. Imagine the joy of his appearances crashing against the struggles of belief that would accompany the miracles and the mystery. Consider what happens next in the context of what the disciples were dealing with emotionally and spiritually.

Jesus, knowing that there was both doubt and belief in the room, was about to commission this group of fearful believers to carry the gospel of resurrection life to the world. Yes, he would commission

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these men at this cataclysmic moment. I likely would've thought, *They're not ready, it's just too soon. They need to know so much more. They need to come to a deeper understanding of what just happened. They need time to mature.* But in the middle of the most amazing, confusing, and gloriously mind-bending moment in history, Jesus did not hesitate; he simply said, "Go."

I love the words that follow because they tell us why Jesus was confident to draft these men, at that moment, for his worldwide gospel mission. He was confident not because of what was in them and what he knew they would do, but because he knew what was in himself and what he would do. So he said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He was saying to these men that there was no situation, no location, or no community outside of his authority and sovereign rule. He wanted them to understand that everything in heaven and on earth was under his command. Consider why this was so vital for these men who desperately needed his grace in order to bring his message of grace to the nations.

I don't know if you've ever considered this, but the reliability of God's promises of grace to us is only as great as the extent of his sovereignty. God can only guarantee the sure delivery of his promises in the places over which he has control. I can guarantee what I promise to you in my house, because I have some authority there, but I cannot make the same promises for my neighbor's house, over which I have no control. Jesus is saying, "As you go, you can bank on everything I have promised you because I rule every place where you will need those promises to be fulfilled." God's promises of grace are sure because his sovereignty is complete.

But Jesus had more to say. He then looked at this room of men, with the mixture of doubt and faith in their hearts, and said, "Behold, I am with you always." These words are much deeper than Jesus saying, "I'll be there for you." Jesus is taking one of the names of God: "I Am." He says, "Know that wherever you go, the I Am

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will be with you, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the one on whom all the covenant promises rest, the one who is the same yesterday, today, and forever, the one who is Alpha and Omega. I am the I Am, and I would never think of sending you without going with you in power, glory, wisdom, and grace.” The disciples would find all they needed for what they were being commissioned to do in the power, presence, and grace of the one sending them.

It is with the same assurance Jesus gave to the disciples that I write this book. Because of the completeness of Christ’s authority, the inescapability of his presence and the surety of his promises, we don’t have to be afraid of examining our weaknesses and failure. The gospel of his presence, power, and grace frees us from the burden of minimizing or denying reality. The gospel of his presence, power, and grace welcomes us to be the most honest community on earth. We are not cemented to our track record. We are not left to our small bag of personal resources. Because he is his best gift to us, our potential is great and change is possible. And so it is the gospel of his presence, power, and grace that gives me the courage and hope to write about a very important place where change needs to take place. May the same grace give you an open heart as you read.

A MODEL

The foundation of everything proposed in this book about the shape, character, and function of the leadership community of the church of Jesus Christ is this: the model for the community that is the church, and most importantly its leadership, is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Now, I know that this seems both obvious and vague, but I am persuaded that it is neither, and that if the primary driving force of leadership in local churches around the world was the gospel of Jesus Christ, many of the sad things we have seen happen in the lives of leaders and their churches would not have happened.

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I want to invite you to examine with me a passage that lays down a gospel foundation for all relationships in the church, from the average person in the pew to the most influential, culture-, and mission-setting leaders. Let me say, before we look at this passage, that no organizational or achievement-oriented leadership model should overwhelm the values and call of the gospel as the core structural and functional model and identity for local church and Christian ministry leaders. As I have reflected upon this passage, my mind has gone to the thousands and thousands of pastors, ministry leaders, elder boards, and deacon boards around the world, and I have wondered if the community norms of this passage are their normal experience as leaders. The passage comes in Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1–3)

It should be noted that Paul's first application of the truths of the gospel, which he has just expounded for the Ephesians, is to remind them that it is those very truths that are to form the way they think about themselves and their relationships to one another. Those truths are to be the foundation stones of whatever community structures they build. There are few more important applications of the truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ than to consider how they set the agenda for the way we live with, relate to, and work with each other as members of the body of Christ. And let me point out that there is no exception clause for pastors, elders, and deacons or some different community model for them in this passage or in any of the similar passages. The gospel, which is our hope in life and death, also sets the agenda for how we live, relate,

and lead between the “already” of our conversion and the “not yet” of our final home going.

My purpose here is not to do a detailed study of Ephesians 4:1–3 but to propose how its gospel values can begin to form the way we think about how we function and relate as church leaders. I want to suggest that if you really do want your relationships to be worthy of the gospel you received, then you will value humility, gentleness, patience, forbearing love, and peace, and if you value these gospel characteristics, you will ask yourself, “What would my leadership community look like if we truly valued these things more than positions, power, achievement, acclaim, or success?” Let me answer this question by suggesting six characteristics that will mark out a leadership community formed by gospel values.

1. Humility

Humility means that each leader’s relationship to other leaders is characterized by an acknowledgment that he deserves none of the recognition, power, or influence that his position affords him. It means knowing, as a leader, that as long as sin still lives inside you, you will need to be rescued from you. Humility means you love serving more than you crave leading. It means owning your inability rather than boasting in your abilities. It means always being committed to listen and learn. Humility means seeing fellow leaders not so much as serving your success but serving the one who called each of you. It means being more excited about your fellow leaders’ commitment to Christ than you are about their loyalty to you. It’s about fearing the power of position rather than craving it. It’s about being more motivated to serve than to be seen. Humility is always being ready to consider the concern of others for you, confess what God reveals through them, and to commit to personal change. Humility is about firing your

inner lawyer and opening yourself up to the ongoing power of transforming grace.

2. Dependency

Dependency means living, as a leader, as if I really do believe that my walk with God is a community project. It means that because of the blinding power of remaining sin, I give up on the belief that no one knows me better than I know myself. Dependency means no longer being afraid of exposure, because I really do believe that there is nothing that could be known, exposed, or revealed about me that has not already been addressed by the person and work of Jesus. It means living as if I really do believe that isolated, individualized, independent Christianity never produces good fruit. It means acknowledging that every leader needs to be led and every pastor needs to be pastored. Dependency means acknowledging theological understanding, biblical literacy, ministry gifts, and ministry experience and success do not mean that I no longer need the essential sanctifying ministry of the body of Christ. It means confessing that as long as sin remains in me, and that apart from restraining grace and the rescuing ministry of those around me, I continue to be a danger to myself.

3. Prepared Spontaneity

If you acknowledge the presence, seducing, and deceiving power of remaining sin, you will also acknowledge that everyone in your leadership community is still susceptible to temptation and is still at risk. You know that sins, small and great, will infect your community and obstruct and divert its work. You live with the knowledge that everyone in your leadership community is still in need of rescuing and sanctifying grace. So you set in motion plans for dealing with

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the sin, weakness, and failure that will inevitably rear their ugly heads. You will not be shocked by, deny, or minimize what God, in grace, reveals but deal with it forthrightly in a spirit of biblical love and grace. You will not be more concerned with defending the reputation of your leadership community than dealing with its failures. Prepared spontaneity means that because you have taken seriously what the gospel says about ongoing spiritual battles in the heart of every leader, you have prepared yourself to deal with the sin that God exposes, even though you don't know beforehand what he will, in grace, expose.

4. Inspection

Inspection means that we invite people to step over the normal boundaries of leadership relationships to look into our lives to help us see things that we would not see on our own. It means inviting fellow leaders to watch for our souls. It means inviting them to interrupt our private conversation with protective biblical insights and restorative gospel truths. It means acknowledging that self-examination is a community project, because we are still able to swindle ourselves into thinking that we are okay when we are in danger and in need of help. So every leader must be willing to live under loving, grace-infused, patient, and forgiving biblical inspection.

5. Protection

We all sin, but we don't all sin the same. For reasons of history, experience, gift, biology, and a host of other things, we aren't equally tempted by the same things. You may be susceptible to the temptations of power, while someone else may be susceptible to the temptations of pleasure, while I may be tempted by the lure of material things. This understanding of the variegated seductions of sin and

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the different way they impact each one of us is vital to the long-term health and gospel fruitfulness of every local church leadership community. True biblical love doesn't just accept you, bless you with patience, and greet your failures with forgiveness. Along with all these things, it works to do everything it can to protect you from the eternal weaknesses of heart that make you susceptible to temptation.

The words of Hebrews 13:17 speak with a motivational clarity: "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." Leaders are responsible to protect the souls of those who are under their care. The words here are both specific and provocative. It doesn't say leaders are commissioned to take note of your behavior; of course that is true, but there is something deeper and more fundamental pictured here. It's souls that leaders are held accountable to protect. *Soul* points to the inner person, his thoughts, desires, motives, weaknesses, strengths, level of maturity, susceptibilities, etc. It means knowing someone at the level of his heart so that you can predict where he may step over God's wise boundaries. What is depicted here is a level of protective leadership that will only ever happen in the context of depth of relationship.

If this protection is meant to be the experience of everyone in the body of Christ, should it not be present in the core leadership community? It has saddened me how many times I have been contacted to help a leadership community deal with a fallen leader, only to discover there were indicators all along of particular weakness and susceptibilities that no one in his leadership community seemed to see. Because we as leaders don't always see ourselves with accuracy, and because we don't always see the areas in which we are weak, we all need a protective community that is watching for us even when we aren't as watchful as we should be. If we are to be protected, we need to be known at the level where temptation is its most powerful, the heart.

6. Restoration

One of the most beautiful, hopeful, and encouraging gospel themes that courses its way through Scripture is the theme of fresh starts and new beginnings. Fresh starts and new beginnings are a hallmark of the rescuing, forgiving, restoring, and transforming power of God's grace. For Moses a fresh start looked like a burning-bush voice calling him back to Egypt to liberate God's people, this time by God's power. For David it meant being confronted by a prophet, confessing the horror of what he had done, and continuing his kingship. For Jonah it meant being vomited up on the seashore and commissioned a second time to take God's message to Nineveh. For Peter a fresh start happened on the shore of the Galilee, as the Messiah he betrayed forgave him and sent him once again into his service. For Paul, a fresh start and new beginning looked like a blinding light on a road to Damascus and words of forgiveness and commission carried by a rather fearful messenger.

Grace means we are not held to our worst moment or cursed by our worst decision. Grace means out of the ashes of sin, leaders can rise because the Savior has resurrection power. I wonder, in the way we think about leaders and the function of the leadership community, would we have restored any of these biblical characters? What is different about the way we look at the sin, weakness, and failure of a leader and the way God looks at the same? In none of the instances that I cited was the sin denied, hidden, or minimized. In each situation it looks as though what was done was so grave that there could be no hope for the sinner's future. Our tendency in such situations is to think that while God's forgiveness demonstrates amazing grace, he will nevertheless say, "As far as usefulness in my kingdom, you're done." But in those biblical situations, each was restored to a position of spiritual leadership.

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I am going to have much more to say about this in a chapter to follow, but what I want to ask here is, Do our leadership communities function with a gospel-driven, restoration mentality? I know so many fallen leaders who were cast away and are supporting their families doing telemarketing, house construction, or computer sales. We should never minimize a leader's sin, nor should we rush to put a leader back in the saddle who has not yet dealt with central issues in his heart, and certainly there are some cases in which a leader should never be restored to a position of leadership, but we also must not abandon our functional belief in the restorative power of God's right-here, right-now grace.

The church is in desperate need of a leadership community whose function is not just structured to achieve with efficiency but is more deeply shaped by the comforts and calls of the gospel of Jesus Christ. As in every other relationship of human life, if you look at your leadership community through the lens of the gospel of Jesus Christ, it will transform your expectations, your commitments, your behavior, and the way you respond to difficulty. It is not just nebulous biblical talk to say that the gospel must be our model for the formation and function of the leadership community that is to guide the church. The focus of this book is the specific call of the gospel on the way we think about leadership.

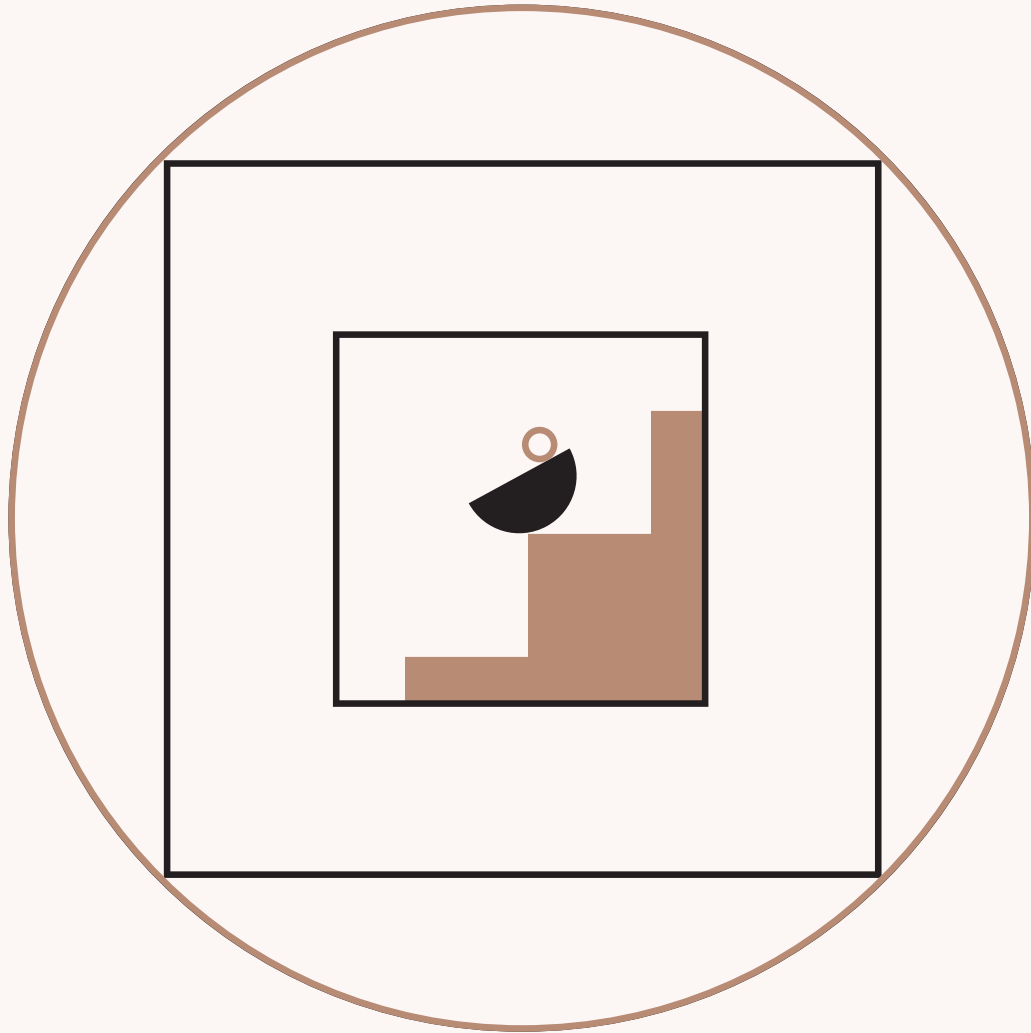
TWELVE GOSPEL PRINCIPLES

I meet individually on a regular basis with ten young pastors and ministry leaders. There is nothing in ministry more important to me than this, and there are few things that I enjoy in ministry more. There is a real way in which these men are my ministry heroes. They

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have given their lives to live in the trenches in the middle of the spiritual battle that is the church. They deal with the full range of joys and hardships that are inevitable in ministry. They have been called, like their Messiah, not only to preach the gospel but also, like him, to suffer for its sake. I love walking with them through the twisted roads, the hills and valleys, and the shiny days and stormy nights of the life of a spiritual leader. But again and again I am saddened that they lack the kind of gospel-rich community that every pastor or leader needs in order to be spiritually healthy and to enjoy ministry longevity. My meetings with them have forced me to think about what that community needs to be like.

So this book is shaped by twelve leadership-community gospel principles. These principles are deeply relational because the gospel is. Remember that the gospel of God's grace teaches us that lasting change of heart and hands always takes place in the context of relationship, first with God and then with the people of God. One way that I think about the twelve principles that drive the content of this book is that they are a love letter to these dear men whom I walk with and have such affection for. My hope is that not only would these principles protect them and bless them with a long and healthy ministry life, but that they would do the same for you and generations of Christian leaders to come.



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A ministry community whose time is controlled by doing the business of the church tends to be spiritually unhealthy.

— 1. —

ACHIEVEMENT

EVERY LEADER LEADS while being in desperate personal need of the full resources of God's grace. This inescapable reality must be a major influence on the way those in the leadership community see themselves, conduct themselves, and do the work to which God has called them. It's not just the young pastor who needs grace or the struggling pastor or the fallen pastor; grace is the essential ingredient in the success of anyone's ministry, any time, at any age, in any location, and in any type of ministry.

The next chapter will unpack what it means for a leadership community to function like the gospel community that it was designed by God to be. In this chapter I want to consider how the good thing—achievement—can become a bad thing for leadership because it has become a ruling thing. Now, I know that achievement is not only a wonderful thing; it is also a vital thing. Salvation is all about achievement. There would be no hope of forgiveness, of present help, or of a new heavens and a new earth if it weren't for the unstoppable ambition of the Lord of lords to

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achieve what only he could achieve in extending his grace to his people and in redeeming and restoring his groaning world. But there is more.

God's saving grace ignites in the hearts of all his children a radical shift in ambition. Where once our thoughts, desires, words, and actions were motivated and directed by our ambition to achieve our definition of personal happiness, by grace they are now shaped by our ambition for the kingdom of God to achieve all God has designed for it to achieve. Where once we were ambitious for what we want, we now are ambitious to do the will of God. Further, God calls us to be ambitious for the growth and expansion of his kingdom between the "already" of our conversions and the "not yet" of our home going. Human beings are achievers, meant to build and rebuild, to grow and expand, to uproot and to plant, to tear down and to build, to dream and to achieve dreams. But every ambition and every achievement must bow to the lordship and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So it must be noted that the rescue and redirection of the desire of our hearts concerning what we seek to achieve is a work in progress. I wish I could say that what always motivates me to do what I do and say what I say is a heartfelt ambition for the glory of God and the success of his kingdom, but it is not. I wish that the ways I spend my money and invest my time was always motivated by vertical ambition, but they aren't. I wish I could say that God is always at the center of every ambition of the thoughts of my heart, but he is not. I wish I could say that I always want every achievement in my life to be a finger pointing to God's existence and his glory, but I can't. So it must be said that for me, and I'm sure for you, ambition is a spiritual battleground, and it must also be said that in the leadership community of the church, ambition for God's glory and his kingdom easily and subtly morphs into something else.

WHAT GLORY: AN ACHIEVEMENT STORY

They were young and ambitious. They loved the gospel, and they loved their city. They really did want to achieve great things for God. They didn't just want to be gospel sayers; they wanted to be doers as well. They believed that the transforming grace of Jesus had the power to transform every aspect of people's lives and the communities in which they lived. They were determined to be big-kingdom achievers who God would use to rescue thousands of little-kingdom captives. They weren't proud; they were confident in God's presence, power, and promises. In their gatherings they preached a clear, well-applied gospel message and invited people into God-exalting worship. And they took the gospel to the streets, not only proclaiming grace but doing acts of mercy that directly addressed the particular groaning of their community. They worked hard, planned big, and trusted that God would produce results.

Of course, they revised and revised again their gospel achievement plan, but as they did, they began to see results. It was dribs and drabs at first, but before long people began coming to Christ, and community ministries were noticed and welcomed. Before long they outgrew both their building and their staff. They looked for a much bigger facility to better house what they wanted to achieve and hired people to make sure they accomplished their goals. No one on the inside would have noticed it, but a shift was taking place. Thankfulness to God for what he had done had begun to compete with pride in accomplishment. Less and less time was invested in fellowship and worship during leadership meetings, and more and more time was spent analyzing the stats and strategizing goals. Leaders progressively separated from the body of Christ and became less candid, approachable, and accountable.

Thousands attended across multiple campuses each Sunday, and millions of dollars were collected each year. The leadership community

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had become a very different culture from the humble, grace-based community they once had been. The elders no longer functioned as the pastors to the pastors or as the spiritual guides and counselors of the congregation. No, they functioned week in and week out like the corporate board of a religious institution. The only thing that distinguished their board meetings from the corporate board down the street was a short devotional and time of prayer before each meeting. The deacons were no longer a mercy ministry board but more like the church's executive accountants and property managers. Growth and money now dominated their discussions and their vision.

Increasingly staff members were afraid of doing anything that would get in the way of corporate achievement. So few pastors and staff had the courage to confess to personal struggle or ministry failure. Staff that didn't achieve or who questioned decisions or values were quickly let go. Much of the staff was discouraged and exhausted, but few would confess it. Burned-out pastors and staff members resigned with little desire to continue in ministry. No one seemed to ask how the church could be the church as described in the New Testament if the leadership no longer functioned as the gospel community that the church was redeemed to be.

None of this happened all at once, and little of it was self-conscious or intentional, but subtle changes had radically altered the culture, mentality, and values of the leadership community. It was all masked by the hungry crowds that still came and the many ministries that continued to grow. The church was no longer just a much bigger rendition of what it had been in its early days; it had progressively become something very different. At the heart level, leaders had changed, and before long, the changed leadership community would, in pride of achievement and unapproachability of spirit, destroy what God had so graciously built. Could it be, in your leadership community, that there are signs that the glory of achievement has begun to replace the glory of God as the most powerful

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motivator in the hearts of your leaders and of the way leadership plans assesses and does its work?

Gospel-oriented achievement is a beautiful thing, but the desire to achieve becomes dangerous when it rises to rule the hearts of the leadership community. Below are signs that indicate when achievement has become dangerous. Use these to evaluate your leadership community and for the purpose of honest leader self-examination.

1. Achievement becomes dangerous when it dominates the leadership community.

Let me begin by acknowledging that God has ordained us to do ministry where money is a needed concern, where there are necessary business aspects to what we do, where strategic planning is important, and where the numeric growth of the church requires more property, bigger buildings, a greater focus on facility maintenance, and a progressively growing community of employees to staff it all. None of these things are wrong or dangerous; they are necessities of a wise stewardship of a growing ministry. But these things must not become so dominant that they begin to change us and the way that we think about ourselves and the ministry to which we have been called. We cannot allow ourselves to migrate from being pastor and ministry leaders to being the corporate board of a religious enterprise. We cannot allow ourselves to move from being humble, approachable gospel servants to being rather proud and not-so-approachable institutional achievers.

Achievement plans for a local church are not necessarily enemies of humble gospel ministry, but as you experience ministry success and numeric growth, they are difficult to hold in proper balance. When humble, gospel-passionate pastors, preachers, and leaders over time morph into institutionally focused administrators or vision castors, they tend to lose some of their gospel passion, and the church or

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ministry suffers as a result. Yes, we should be ambitious for the expansion of God's kingdom of glory and grace, but we must also recognize that as long as sin still resides in our hearts, achievement is a spiritual war zone that is not only littered with pastor or leader casualties but has reduced many who are still in ministry to the ranks of the walking wounded. Hear the cautions for us in the spiritual history of Israel, as they tasted the success and affluence of the Promised Land:

It was I who knew you in the wilderness,
in the land of drought;
but when they had grazed, they became full,
they were filled, and their heart was lifted up;
therefore they forgot me. (Hos. 13:5–6)

In your ministry community, has the quest for institutional achievement become dominant? Don't answer too quickly.

2. Achievement becomes dangerous when it controls our definition of leaders.

The qualifications for ministry in the church of Jesus Christ are radically different from the way we typically think about the makeup of a true leader. I want to listen to what people in a church or ministry say after announcing that someone has real leadership qualities. I want to hear what they think those qualities are. Should people be ceded position, authority, or leadership in a ministry or church because they have been successful in ministry, because they have the drive to get a job done, because they have handled their finances well, because they are persuasive communicators, or because they have an impressive resume?

Consider, for a moment, the radical nature of the qualities that God says in 1 Timothy 3:2–7 make for a long-term, faithful ministry leader, the kind of leader every influential church or ministry needs:

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- Above reproach
- Husband of one wife
- Sober-minded
- Self-controlled
- Respectable
- Hospitable
- Able to teach
- Not a drunkard
- Not violent
- Gentle
- Not quarrelsome
- Not a lover of money
- Managing his household well
- Not a recent convert
- Well thought of by outsiders

I want to make two observations about long-term success in ministry. First, in a general sense, God wants pastors and leaders to be successful because he loves his kingdom and his bride, the church, but in God's estimation, long-term faithfulness that produces fruit in ministry is rooted in humble, godly character. A second thing that this leader-quality list presses in on us is that ultimately God is the achiever; our calling is to be usable tools in his powerful hands. Because we are not sovereign over the situation in which we minister, because we have no power to change peoples' hearts, because we are often in the way of instead of being part of what God is doing, and because we cannot predict the future, we have no ability on our own to achieve ministry growth or success. We are called to faithfulness of character—character, by the way, that only God can produce in us, and God is sovereign over the miracle of redeeming grace and the expansion of his kingdom. *Where in your leadership community have you become more focused on doing than on being?*

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3. Achievement becomes dangerous when it forms our view of success and failure.

I am persuaded that when an achievement focus dominates a leadership community, it tends to have an erroneous definition of failure. Failure is not the inability to produce desired results. There are so many things in ministry in this fallen world, over which we will never have control, that influence outcomes. If hard, disciplined, faithful, well-planned, appropriately executed and joyful ministry work does not guarantee results, then the lack of desired results should not define leadership failure. Remember Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 3:7: "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only *God who gives the growth.*"

True failure is always a character issue. It is rooted in laziness, pride, lack of discipline, self-excusing, failure to plan well, lack of joy in labor, and failure to persevere during hardship. Failure is not first a matter of results; failure is always first a matter of the heart. It's failure when I have not invested my God-given time, energy, and gifts in the work God has called me to do. Ministry laziness and unfaithfulness are failure.

If, however, a leadership community is too result- or achievement-focused, it will tend to disrespect a leader who hasn't achieved desired outcomes even though he has been a faithful steward of the gifts and opportunities God has given him. Rather than reminding themselves once again that they are utterly dependent on God to grow the seeds that they have planted and watered, that leadership community will tend to think that they have put the wrong person in the job, set that leader aside, and look for someone else to do the task. I can't tell you how many faithful pastors and leaders I have counseled who have come to think of themselves as failures because their work didn't achieve what they and the community around them hoped it would achieve. In ministry, success and failure are

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not a matter of results but are defined by faithfulness. Faithfulness is what God asks of us; the rest is entirely up to his sovereignty and the power of his grace. *How does your leadership community define failure, and how does that shape the way a leader is viewed whose work has not produced the desired results?*

4. Achievement becomes dangerous when it silences honest leader communication.

Because of what God has done for us in the person and work of Jesus Christ, our leadership communities have been freed to be the most honest communities on earth. We are free to confess weakness because Jesus is our strength. We are free to confess failure because all of our failures have been covered by his blood. We are freed from taking credit for what only God can produce. We are free to respectfully disagree with one another because we get our identity and security from our Lord and not from one another. We are free to confess wrong attitudes toward and actions against one another because grace allows us to reconcile. We are freed from the allure of power and position because we have been freed from looking horizontally for what can only be found vertically. And we are free, because of Christ's work, to talk about these things and confess how we struggle with them.

But in achievement-dominated leadership communities, that kind of honest talk tends to get silenced. It's not silenced by the plan of any one person but by the values of the leadership community. In achievement-focused leadership communities, leaders tend to be afraid of confessing weakness or admitting failure. They tend to deny both to themselves and hide both from their fellow leaders. It has pained me to talk to leaders who are in regular contact with a leadership community but tell me that they have no one to talk to about their weaknesses or to confess their fear of ministry failure.

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It's not that they have been ministering alone, but the functional values of their ministry community make it hard for them to think that they can be honest about their struggles and find understanding and grace.

Think with me about the danger of a ministry leader who feels he can't be real with anyone. None of us is independently strong. All of us drag into our ministry a personal catalog of weaknesses, and we will until we're on the other side. God offers us his enabling grace because we still need it. Denial of weakness is never a pathway to good things. We all fail somehow, someday every day. Often failure is the workroom God uses in our lives to reform us to be what we need to be in order to be more successful tools in his hands. And, by the way, we are commanded in Scripture to confess our faults to one another. I will say more about this in the next chapter.

Hiding, denial, and fear will keep a ministry community from spiritual health, and the lack of spiritual health will prohibit the ministry longevity that is a necessary ingredient in realizing long-term results. *Do your leaders feel free to confess to personal weakness and failure, knowing that when they do, they will be greeted with grace?*

5. Achievement becomes dangerous when it causes leaders to view disciples as consumers.

Here is the danger: in local church ministry it is much, much easier to build church stuff than it is to build people. Building facilities, multiplying ministries, and planning a yearly catalog of events are much more immediately satisfying and fulfilling than the long-term, often frustrating and discouraging work of leadership giving themselves to the gospel work of building a community of disciples of Jesus Christ. So it is tempting to define ministry by the church stuff that we have built, managed, and maintained rather than by the numbers of people who are in the process of having their lives

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turned inside out and upside down by the progressive work of transforming grace.

Yes, there are facilities that need to be designed and built, there are programs that need to be established and staffed, and there are events that need to be scheduled, but these things must not be viewed as the heart of the ministry work to which we have been called as a leadership community, and they must not dominate our ministry energy, efforts, conversations, and decisions, and they surely must not define the way we assess ministry success.

Our ministry passion and energies should be focused on doing everything we can to lead the people entrusted into our care into a deeper love for and service to Jesus so that everything we do serves this disciple-making purpose. When this central calling is replaced with institution building, potential disciples get turned into consumers. They tend to view the church as a location with a set of facilities and a catalog of events, and they shop for what they think will meet their needs or the needs of their family. The church is not a vital part of their lives, like an organ or a limb of one's physical body. Instead, the church is just an event they attend, stepping out of their lives to do church stuff and then stepping back into their lives when the event is over. A disciple has no such separation in his thinking. For him, being part of the body of Christ is an identity that doesn't just define a set of gatherings he attends but redefines everything in his life. Everything about him—his relationships, his work, his time, his money—is being transformed because he is part of the transformational community of disciples called “the church.”

This work is much, much harder and requires much more patience and grace than achieving facility and program goals, and the gospel tells us why. We have the power to build church stuff, but we have no power whatsoever to build people. When it comes to people building, we are completely dependent on transforming grace. The Savior is the people-building achiever who uses us as his tools but

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works in his own way and on his own time. What are you seeking to build and how will you know that you have achieved your goals? It really is true that ministry achievement becomes dangerous when it turns potential disciples into consumers. *How has the way you have built the church and the way you think about your job as leaders influenced the way your congregation thinks about the church and their relationship to it?*

6. Achievement becomes dangerous when it tempts us to see people as obstacles.

We can't allow ourselves to be so intent on achieving great things for God that we develop negative attitudes toward the messy people of God who are intended to be the objects of the ministry to which we have been called. God knew that if he placed his church in a fallen world that it would be inefficient and a bit chaotic. But the mess of ministry is God's mess, a mess that drives leaders beyond the borders of their own wisdom and strength to rely on the presence, power, and promises of the one who sent them.

I can't resist repeating a story I've written about elsewhere, because it is such an example of this point. I was teaching a pastoral ministry class and telling my students stories of the messy and sometimes difficult people God called me to lead, when a student interrupted and said, "Okay, Professor Tripp, we know that we will have these *projects* in our church; tell us what to do with them so we can get back to the work of ministry." In his view, these people were obstacles in the way of ministry rather than the focus of his ministry. Of course ministry is messy! The church is a community of unfinished people living in a broken world and still in need of God's forgiving and transforming grace. The church isn't meant, for either leaders or those being led, to be comfortable; it's meant to be personally transformational.

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It's important as leaders to not lose sight of the fact that we have been called to people who are in need of fundamental heart and life change, while we confess that we, like them, are often in the way of what God is doing rather than being part of it. The church will never be a community of spiritually mature people if leaders are so busy achieving that they fail to treat immature people with patience and grace. Church leadership is a people-building ministry; to function any other way is both unbiblical and dangerous. *Has the way that you have defined ministry negatively impacted the way you view, live with, and lead the unfinished people who are meant to be the recipients of that ministry?*

7. Achievement becomes dangerous when it causes leaders to take credit for what they never could have produced on their own.

In church leadership it may be that achieving goals may be more spiritually dangerous than dealing with obstacles in the way of failure. When a leadership community seems to be on a run of success, with numbers increasing, ministries healthy and multiplying, and people growing, leaders are easily tempted to take credit for what only God, in his presence, power, and grace, could produce. This temptation brings to mind God's warning to the children of Israel as they entered the Promise Land:

When the LORD your God brings you into the land that he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—with great and good cities that you did not build, and houses full of all good things that you did not fill, and cisterns that you did not dig, and vineyards and olive trees that you did not plant—and when you eat and are full, *then take care lest you forget the LORD*, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 6:10–12)

If you take credit as a leader instead of assigning credit to the one who sent you and who alone produces fruit out of your labors, you

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will praise less, pray less, and plan more. Leadership communities are in trouble when they assign more power to their planning than to their prayer. When you take credit for what you could not have produced on your own, you assign to yourself wisdom, power, and righteousness that you don't have. Then you begin to assess yourself as capable rather than needy, as strong rather than weak, and as self-sufficient rather than dependent. Your pride in achievement not only makes you a proud leader but also sucks the life out of your personal devotional communion with God and your fellowship with his people. Your devotional life gets kidnapped by preparation and planning, and you are less dependent on and open to the ministry of the body of Christ. Further, because your successes have made you feel worthy and entitled, you are tempted to grant yourself a lifestyle and luxuries that few of the people you have been called to serve will ever be able to have. (Please stop here for a moment and read Amos 6:1–6.)

Way too many leadership communities in the church of Jesus Christ are populated by leaders who, because of ministry success, have become unapproachable and controlling. It is sad when the proclaimers of God's grace have come to feel less than dependent on God's grace as they fulfill their ministry calling. God has used the weakness of my sickness-damaged body to reveal to me that much of what I thought was faith in Christ was not faith at all. It was pride in experience, pride in accomplishment, pride in physical strength and the ability to produce.

This is a temptation that every leadership community faces, particularly when God has granted that community success. There are two things that need to be observed here. First, God doesn't call us to ministry leadership because we are able, but because he is. Second, as leaders we should not fear weakness, because God's grace is sufficient. It's our delusions of strength that we should fear because they will keep us from seeking and celebrating that very same grace.

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8. Achievement is dangerous when it becomes the principal lens of leader self-evaluation.

Every human being is constantly doing self-diagnosis. We are always evaluating how we are doing. And we are always looking to some kind of standard to help us measure personal achievement. Those in leadership are no exception. Sometimes they evaluate formally, but most often they evaluate in ways that are subtle and unspoken. Leaders constantly revisit their track record, evaluate their present performance, and calculate their potential. None of this is wrong, and all of it is part of what it means to be a rational, productive human being. But achievement as the dominant measure of leadership is dangerously single-focused and imbalanced and gives a false view of the condition of those in a leadership community.

A life of long-term ministry productivity is always the result of the condition of the leader's heart. Godly leaders, because of humility of heart combined with a robust faith in the power of God's grace and the reliability of his promises, are able to weather the storms, defeats, and disappointments that are the inescapable experience of every leader's life. Because of their humility they become increasingly thankful for, open to, and dependent on fellow leaders. And because of their acknowledgment of their need for God's grace, they don't take credit for what only God can bring about.

Yes, we should assess whether leaders are doing their jobs with discipline, faithfulness, and joy. And, yes, because we are passionate for the gospel and the extension of God's kingdom, we should be on the mark, working to achieve. But we must not esteem doing over being. Think of the beloved leaders whose ministries imploded; almost never were these leaders set aside because they failed to achieve. Rather, in the lives of failed leader after failed leader, the failure was more a matter of character than productivity. *Has leader productivity caused you to fail to ask questions about the deeper spiritual health of your leaders?*

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9. Achievement becomes dangerous when it tempts us to replace planning with prayer.

Perhaps every church leadership community should post James 5:1–18 as a constant reminder and warning. Fruit in ministry is the result not of our wise planning and diligent execution but of the loving operation of God’s rescuing and transforming grace. He produces the fruit; we are but tools in his redemptive hands. He calls us to himself, conscripts us for his work, produces commitment in our hearts, gives vision to our minds, empowers us to be faithful and disciplined, brings people under our care, softens their hearts to hear the gospel, produces conviction and faith in their hearts, empowers their obedience, transforms their lives, and calls them into his work.

Of course we should plan, of course we should work to be good stewards of the people and resources God entrusts to us, and of course we should continually evaluate how we are doing, but as we are giving much time and energy to these things, we must not let prayer become a perfunctory habit, attached to the beginning and ending of leadership gatherings. As I stated earlier, prayerlessness in a leadership community is always a result of putting credit where it is not due. Your leadership community is in trouble if your leaders are more excited about a strategic planning meeting than a prayer meeting.

A catalog of ministry achievements should make us even more prayerful, because we want to honor the one who has given success to our work, we want to continue to acknowledge that we cannot do what we’ve been called to do without enabling grace, and we need protection from the temptations that success brings. How esteemed are times of leadership prayer in your community? How often do you go away for a day or a weekend just to pray together? Has ministry experience and success made your community all the more dependent on the Lord? Do you have extended times of wor-

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ship together? Do you at times meet for the sole purpose of “counting your blessings?” Does success produce worship of God in your community or self-congratulation? In your leadership community is planning central and prayer peripheral? *Is your leadership community a thankful, humble, and needy praying community?*

We should be hard workers, questing to achieve great things in God’s name. We should be leaders with an ever-expanding vision for the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In every way possible we should be seeking God’s kingdom and his righteousness. We should make radical plans and take radical gospel action. We should never become achievement satisfied, because there is always more gospel work to do. But we must always remind one another that achievement is a spiritual minefield. Achievement has the power to change us—to change who we think we are and what we think we are capable of doing. Sadly, achievement can turn humble servant leaders into proud, controlling, and unapproachable mini-kings. But there is powerful, right-here, right-now grace for this struggle.

The one who called us goes with us. The one who called us will empower us. The one who called us will convict us. The one who called us will protect us. He opens the eyes of our hearts to dangers we would not see without him, but he does so not as our judge but as our Father and friend. May we approach him with confidence, with cries for help, with confession where we have wandered, and with a commitment to be good soldiers in this battle. And may we remember that he fights for us even when we don’t have the sense to fight for ourselves.