

Gospel Leaders

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[0 : 00] We're going to look at a particular topic this evening. The topic is leadership. And this is something that Derek, the Minister and I have been thinking about for a while, wanting to do with the congregation.

And I don't want you to switch off and think, OK, this is for the elders or ministers or deacons, because everybody in life exercises leadership at different points.

You may exercise leadership in a family context. You may exercise leadership in a work context. You may exercise leadership in the Sunday School or Kids Church downstairs or leading some kind of team in the church or whatever it is.

But at different stages, at different points in life, we're all entrusted with the responsibilities of leadership. And so I want us to take a little while to start thinking about what does Christian leadership look like, or what does it look like for a Christian to exercise leadership?

And we've titled this one this evening, Gospel Leaders, because really what I want to say is that our leadership, the way we lead and the kind of leadership we exercise, all of that should really flow out of the work of the Gospel in our own hearts.

[1 : 31] So don't switch off if you think I'm not a leader, because in different ways in life you will be leading others. One way of defining leadership is just that it's about influencing people.

And all of us influence the people around us, either for good or for bad. And so we need to think what kind of influence, what kind of leadership do I give?

And a lot of the ideas that we have around leadership are quite confused and often not very biblical. So the last time I spoke about leadership I was with a group of guys who were mostly from Italy and Russia. And so I wanted to try and ask them what are your ideas of leadership, what kind of ideas of leadership do you get from your own culture?

Because often the way we think about how we should lead is influenced by the leaders we have in our own culture. So I was asking them about Russian and Italian leadership and there you go, that was the picture that I put up for them.

[2 : 43] Because there are two very strong leaders there, one is Putin, one is Berlusconi. And they both exemplify one kind of leadership in their own culture, sometimes it's spoken of as being the man.

But what it is, is about leadership exercise through one very powerful authoritarian figure. So both in Italy, the kind of power that Berlusconi had or in Russia, the kind of power that Putin had, so much centered around them and the influence that they had as individuals.

So sometimes we think of leadership as the exercise of power and our own charisma. There's another great leader that some people even in this church have been known to idolise, so that's Winston Churchill, Angela Merkel for the Eurofiles, the good lady herself, much in the news recently, Mrs Thatcher, idolised by lots of people as a strong leader and then a truly great leader appears on your screen because he's Scottish, first of all, Alex Ferguson, so lots of people look at him and think there's somebody who's a fantastic leader, a born leader they might say, somebody with real understanding of people and power and who's driven and passionate and successful. And then we start to think, well that's what leadership is about, it's about being passionate and powerful and influential at that level. But I just want us to think about this much more biblically and the first thing I want us to understand is that Jesus entrusts leadership to those who love him and who love others. The Bible gives us two great commands, love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and then love your neighbour as yourself.

And if we're not loving God and loving others, then we're not really in a good place to be exercising leadership.

[4 : 56] And leadership then doesn't begin from a position of personal strength or power, but rather what I want to say is that leadership begins from a place of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ.

In John chapter 10, Jesus is describing his own leadership. So Andy read to us from John chapter 10 where Jesus describes himself as a shepherd and as the good shepherd.

And he's pointing out to us then that leadership comes from a heart of love and a heart of care and a heart of compassion.

And so to be a leader means that God's gospel needs to be working in our lives. Jesus says that as the good shepherd, he's laid down his life for the sheep.

Now that kind of brings us to the very heart of what Christianity is about. Sometimes we think Christianity is a moralistic religion, even if we know better, we sometimes operate along those lines that it's all about me trying to be a good person.

[6 : 13] But the heart of the Christian message is not about our attempts to be good, but rather about our failure to be good. And that into our failure God has come in mercy and in grace, and he has sent his son Jesus Christ and Jesus lays down his life.

Puts his life in our place, goes to the cross where he died and his death is a provision to atone to pay the price for our sin.

And until we know God's grace and God's forgiveness in that very real and personal way, then we can't begin to think about really exercising any kind of Christian leadership.

There needs to be first of all a real living Christian faith in every one of us. That means that we need to recognise what do I need in my life? I need Jesus Christ.

I need to turn away from my own failings, from my own weakness, from my own sinfulness, from my self-love, and I need to reorientate my life round Jesus Christ and put my faith, hope and trust in him.

[7 : 37] So that's where Christian leadership starts. It starts with the gospel and the work of the gospel in our lives. And you have to really be asking yourself, and I hope you aren't asking yourself at this very moment, is that same gospel working in my life? Do I know the power of repentance?

Do I know what it is to want to just leave sin behind and go and find a new life and forgiveness in Jesus Christ? Do you see that as your own personal greatest need tonight and your greatest longing and desire?

So repentance, trust, faith in Jesus Christ, the gospel, a real living gospel at work in your heart today. And then another basic foundational thing of leadership I've taken from Moses.

Now I studied biblical Hebrew over 20 years ago, and I remember several words, and those two words are uttered by Moses in Exodus chapter 3 verse 11. So please take your Bible and go to Exodus chapter 3, and we'll just have a quick look at what Moses says here.

So Exodus chapter 3, Moses has been called into leadership by God, and his role as a leader is to go and speak to Pharaoh and deliver God's message to Pharaoh. So what does he say?

[9 : 09] Well in Exodus chapter 3 verse 11, verse 10 we could read, God says, So now go, I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.

But Moses said to God, who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt? So there's three words here in English, two in Hebrew, who am I?

Me and Okie is what, or me and Anakai is what Moses says. And there's just this great sense of unworthiness and inadequacy, who am I that you could ask me to do this thing?

Who am I that I should go and speak to Pharaoh in the name of God? In John chapter 15, verse 5, so go back to John's Gospel, move beyond John chapter 10 and go to John 15, verse 5.

And here Jesus is talking about our lives being rooted in him, and he says, I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

[10 : 25] Apart from me you can do nothing, or apart from me you can do no good thing. So again, what we've been reminded of is inadequacy, personal inadequacy for the task of leadership.

Moses is asked by God, go and speak to Pharaoh, and Moses just thinks, who am I to take on that kind of ministry, that kind of service, that kind of task? Jesus is speaking to the disciples here the night before, it's crucifixion.

He's been speaking to them about the future of the church, and he's reminded them, listen, as I entrust you with the work in the ministry of the church, you aren't going to be able to do anything unless you rely fully, completely, totally upon me.

And so I want to say two things to you about leadership. First of all, it is an awe and a privilege to serve God in any way. And so whatever you do for God, it might be the AV, it might be teaching in kids' church, it might be involved with the worship, it might be catering, it might be something that's visible to everybody, or something that's very kind of background.

But whatever it is, I hope you treat it as a holy privilege that God is allowing you to serve him, and that you don't resent it, you don't grudge it, but you thank God for it.

[11 : 45] But the other thing I want to say off the back of that is I hope too that you approach it with humility, because what you're looking for is spiritual fruit from what you do, and none of us can produce spiritual fruit, that's what Jesus is saying.

Now people who are charismatic and powerful individuals, they can seem to achieve a lot, but lasting spiritual fruit is a work of the Holy Spirit.

So for us to achieve anything lasting and worthwhile needs us to rely, not on our gifts or abilities, but to rely on the work and the power of the Holy Spirit.

And so as you go into any kind of task in the life of the church, or any kind of task in your family, whatever it may be, go there with a great sense of humility, great sense of privilege that you're serving God in a witness form in this world, and go with a great sense of I need the Holy Spirit.

There's a story about Charles Spurgeon who was a very famous Baptist minister in the late 1800s, and today he would be a megachurch pastor, and he had a huge congregation in London, and apparently every time he went to preach there were 10 or 12 or however many steps up to his pulpit, and on every step he would say to himself, I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit, I believe in the Holy Spirit.

[13 : 15] He was so convinced of his own inadequacy for what God was asking him to do, but also so convinced in the power of the Holy Spirit to use a man like him to bear fruit for the gospel. So I want us to have that same sense of humility and inadequacy, but to rest in God and to trust in the power of the Holy Spirit and to realise it's God's work.

Any kind of work that we're engaged in for God, everything that we do for God, any kind of leadership act, you're doing it for God and it's God's work.

And I'm saying that because we need to let God reign and be in control. Too many people when they're trusted with leadership they see it as an opportunity to get what they want.

I had a friend who used to be desperate to be an elder in his church, because he thought his church was a mess and if he was an elder that church would improve so much. And sometimes we look at leadership in that way, if only I was in charge, if only I was in, and it's a hunger for control which is an idol.

And do not think of leadership as control, because Jesus warns against that, especially in 1 Peter chapter 5. Leadership is not about lording over other people, pursuing your own agenda, or you being in charge.

[14 : 37] Leadership is living under God's authority, doing God's work and recognising that God is the one who reigns.

And our task is to serve God and his people, to love God and his people, not to exercise control to get what we want or to have things done the way we like them.

So those are some of the basic things about Christian leadership that I just wanted to point out to us. It needs to begin with the gospel working our own heart, it needs to come out of our sense of our own inadequacy and privilege, a total dependence on God and the power of the Holy Spirit, and also not pursuing our own selfish agenda.

So sometimes different kind of problems we face in leadership, in societies where leadership is authoritarian.

So when I was in Italy recently, I was speaking to some people in church leadership in Italy, and they were saying church leadership in Italy follows the cultural model, is very authoritarian, very heavy handed, all centred around one guy and he's the main man and everybody has to kind of get in line with him.

[15 : 53] And with some of the Russian people, that's similar kind of cultural style of leadership. Now in our culture, leadership's changed a lot probably in the last two or three decades. Political leadership is all about finding out what do people want and then promising them that you're going to give them what you want.

So you do kind of polls and surveys and you sit down with voters and find out what do voters want and then you try and promise them that you can give them what you want. So that kind of leadership then is about pleasing others or personal gain perhaps. Some people are looking for those kind of things that leadership is a popularity contest. Now we have to leave aside these cultural styles. I think that's a problem I just want to highlight that sometimes our idea of leadership isn't really biblical, it's cultural. That's where the style comes from. Sometimes we lead out of wrong motives. I've said that already that sometimes it's all about being in control and being the person in charge and getting our agenda. [16:58] Sometimes it's about trying to win the respect or admiration of others. Sometimes it's about pleasing others and we exercise leadership in such a way that we're just trying to keep everybody else happy.

Sometimes of course Christians are people who profess to be Christians and this is a real issue for the churches. They've used power in very abusive ways. And that's something that the world and non-Christians can see very clearly as they look into the church from the outside. They see how Christians have taken authority and power in the church and then used that for money. So if you watch the God Channel on satellite TV and the prosperity preacher is asking for funding or if you read the papers about people who've used ecclesiastical church power in order to manipulate people sexually or abuse them and exploit them. So so much of the way that the church has exercised power is corrupt and manipulative. And that's always going to be the case unless it begins from a gospel heart and follows a biblical focus. [18:18] So some people have the wrong motives and you need to really let the gospel be working to challenge the motives of my heart. Some people I think have got autonomy down the bottom and I alluded to this already.

Their leadership isn't really about serving God or depending on God. Actually as they lead they have a rebellious heart towards God. They're not really walking in step with God at all. They're walking in isolation from God and they're autonomous. They're not really living under God's control or God's authority. And then some people think leadership is all about having the right techniques. So if you're a Christian then where do you learn your leadership techniques? I had a conference last year and at this conference we had a couple of guys speaking to us about Christian leadership and the guy put up various cool leadership diagrams that were all based on how to play American football, especially if you were the quarterback. [19:27] And at the end he told us that he'd got his leadership model from the Chick-fil-A Management Consultants book. So sometimes that's what we think.

Leadership is about having the right techniques, the right insights. And of course we shouldn't get them from Chick-fil-A. That's so stupid. We should get our leadership techniques from the Bible. And so we'll go and look at Moses and David and people like that who are great leaders in the Bible and we'll say what were their techniques? What ten lessons of leadership can I learn from Moses or David? What are the characteristics of a good leader in the Bible and then how do I imitate them? But of course that's not what Moses and David are there for in the Bible to show us ten principles of great leadership. Moses and David and other men in the Bible or women in the Bible, they're pictures of God graciously working through broken vessels for His glory. [20:31] That's what Moses and David are about. That's what other leaders in the Bible are about. It's God taking broken people, graciously working through them. And that gives us hope.

And the hope is not that if we learn good techniques we'll be great leaders. The hope is that if we are humble, if we confess our brokenness and our inadequacy, and if we throw our lives into the care of Christ and if we trust in the power of the Holy Spirit, then God can work through us to bring about fruit for His kingdom. So don't go all kind of technique-ish when you look at leadership either. So this is the heart of what I want to say really and it's just this, what leadership is about ultimately is teaching others to live under the good rule of God.

So when you're a leader in the church or in the Sunday school or kids church or any youth group or wherever you are, it's not about, well now I'm in charge, I'm in control, people may follow my rules. A leader is somebody who helps others and teaches others to live under the good rule of God Almighty. God is the one and God is the only one ultimately who leads and rules His people.

[21 : 53] God alone is King and Lord over the church. God is enthroned, I'm not, neither's Derek. God hasn't even given Derek and I little thrones to sit on, because He alone is King.

All power authority belong to Him. And we're not here as leaders to steal away the authority, the power or the glory of Jesus Christ.

Instead what the church and what Christians are to do and what Christian leaders are to help you do is to demonstrate what it's like to live under the good rule of King Jesus.

And so as leaders what we're here to do is to help each other and help others to learn to live under God's good kingship and His kingly authority.

So that's basic thing then. Who rules? God rules. Second thing, how does God rule?

[23 : 05] God rules through His word. That's how God exercises His rule and authority in the churches through the word. And so for those who are in leadership, whether it's with young people or older people or whatever situation they're in, we teach others to live under God's good rule by teaching them the word of God.

And so leadership, the great heart and focus of leadership is bringing God's word into the lives of others and helping them to live out the truth of the gospel in their situation.

So we're here as leaders, you're here in a leadership role, whatever it might be, and you're here to live out God's word, to help others live out God's word and to help others to submit their lives not to your authority but to God's authority.

And God rules through His word but God leads through servant-hearted cross-shaped leaders. Jesus makes clear in John chapter 10 that leadership is costly.

I am the good shepherd, I lay down my life for the sheep. So there's great sacrifice involved in leadership, there's great cost. It's about serving and loving others even when that's difficult or painful or hard for us to do.

[24 : 33] It's not a self-serving process, it's a Christ-serving process, a God-honoring process and a process about serving others.

And so God leads through sacrificial servant leaders who draw other people into His word and under His authority.

The last thing I really want to say is to myself and to everybody else, to the elders of this church, I want to emphasize this very clearly. And to all of you I want to say this, that leadership is pastoral. It's concerned with the good and the well-being of God's people. Because the easy thing for us to do is to start to think of leadership as control or leadership as running a program or leadership as supervising a certain set of tasks.

And my job as a leader is to execute all these tasks and to make sure that they're done or to make sure that other people do them. And I want us to move away from that mindset completely and to say that in the Bible, leadership is about people.

[25 : 50] Jesus said, go and make disciples for instance. What's that about? It's about people, isn't it? The mission of the church is about people, drawing other people into being followers of Jesus Christ and then teaching them to obey his commands, teaching them to live under the authority of his word.

And so one of the great pictures of leadership in the Bible is the one that Jesus gives us in John chapter 10. And we call that pastoral. It comes from this idea of being a shepherd.

And that's a strong theme right through the Bible. Moses, we looked at Moses a well back. He was a shepherd. King David, who was one of the great leaders of Israel, was a shepherd.

And God told those who were to lead Israel in the Old Testament that they were shepherds. And what we find in the Bible is then this kind of contrast being made between good shepherds and bad shepherds.

I want you to go back to the Old Testament with me for a few minutes to the book of Ezekiel and chapter 34. So this is a time in the history of the nation of Israel when it's in a lot of trouble in a military way, in a political way, but in a spiritual way.

[27 : 11] And God is saying, well, just think about the kind of leadership you've had. So this is page 865 if you've got one of the church Bibles. And here is God speaking to the leaders of his people

Israel.

This is what the word of the Lord said to them. The word of the Lord came to me, son of man prophecy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophecy and say to them, this is what the sovereign Lord says. Woe to the shepherds of Israel who only take care of themselves.

Should not shepherds take care of the flock. You eat the cards, clothe yourselves with wool and slaughter the choice animals. But you do not take care of the flock. You have not strengthened the weaker, healed the sick or bound up the injured.

You have not brought back the strays or searched for the lost. You have ruled them harshly and brutally. So they were scattered because there was no shepherd. And when they were scattered, they became food for all the wild animals.

My sheep wandered over all the mountains and at every high hill. They were scattered over the whole earth and no one searched or looked for them. So there is a picture of bad shepherd.

[28 : 14] I have never been a shepherd of real live sheep. But I have known a few shepherds of my day. So a shepherd's task is really to care for the flock.

Not to let them be scattered, not to let them go hungry. But here they have not fed the flock, they have not strengthened it. They have not looked after the sick or the injured. And they have allowed the ones who have wandered just to go off and they have not gone after them to bring them back. No one searched or looked for them. So that is a bad shepherd picture. And it is against that kind of picture then that Jesus presents himself as a good shepherd.

Go to John chapter 9. So John chapter 9 is a story about a man who was born blind. And he is healed by Jesus on the Sabbath day.

And then what happens is that the shepherds of Israel, the leaders, a group known as Pharisees, they haul this man in front of a committee to give him into trouble for getting healed on the Sabbath.

[29 : 29] And so they interrogate him and they are not very happy with the answers they get. So then they drag his parents in and interrogate them also. So what kind of picture do we get of the Pharisees leadership?

It is controlling, it is hostile, it is about interrogation and pressurizing people. And then in verse, so just go to John chapter 9 verse 26.

They are asking this man who has been healed. And verse 25 he says, whether he is a sinner, whether Jesus is a sinner or not, I don't know.

One thing I do know, I was blind but now I see. Then they asked him, what did he do to you? How did he open your eyes? He answered, I have told you already and you did not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you want to become his disciples too?

Verse 28. Then they hurled insults at him and said, you are his, this fellow's disciple. We are disciples of Moses. We know that God spoke to Moses but as for this fellow we don't even know where he comes from.

[30 : 38] And the man answers, well that's remarkable, you don't know where he comes from but he opened my eyes. We know that God doesn't listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will. Nobody has ever heard of opening the eyes of a man born blind.

If this man were not from God he could do nothing. So how do the shepherds respond? To this they replied, you were steeped in sin at birth. How dare you lecture us and they threw him out.

So there again you see is the picture of the bad shepherd. It's hostile, it's controlling, it's abusive and it's harsh. And if this man isn't going to serve their agenda then he can just get lost.

And that's when Jesus comes in chapter 10 and contrasts himself as the good shepherd who cares for his sheep, who lays his life down for his sheep.

He says, I know my sheep in verse 14, my sheep know me. Just as the father knows me and I know the father, I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen and must bring them also.

[31 : 46] They too will listen to my voice, there will be one flock, one shepherd. So we have it then hopefully an understanding of leadership.

It's pastoral, it's being like a shepherd who guides, feeds, protects, loves, cares.

And that's what leadership is about. Whoever you're responsible towards in a leadership kind of capacity, you're asked by God just to humbly love and serve those people.

And your concern is for their spiritual wellbeing. Are they living well under the rule of God? Are they being fed and nourished spiritually? Are we protecting them from false teaching, from false gospels,

from godless living?

Are we helping them to walk in the ways of God? The great pastoral moment or the great pastoral Sam that we find in the Bible, which is very well known to lots of Christian people, is Sam 23.

[32 : 52] I thought I would read that to you in conclusion. So Sam 23 is a picture of how God leads us as his people.

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters.

He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil for you are with me.

Your rod and your staff, they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil.

My cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life. And I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

[33 : 59] That's the kind of leader that God wants you to be. And that's the kind of leader that you have in God. What a great leader we have.

It takes us to green pastures, a place of rest and nourishment and enrichment. Still waters, apparently that's the kind of water sheet like.

Sheep water preferences are around still waters. When they're in danger, he's there, overseeing and protecting. Even when their enemies press on them, he prepares a rich feast.

And goodness and love will follow them all the days of your life. What God we have who loves us in this way and who promises us these things.

And we just want to love our God and worship Him. And praise Him and thank Him that He leads us with such a loving and tender and gracious heart.