Leading in the Footsteps of Jesus

What Is Leadership and Why Does It Matter?

*Jeremiah 23; Nehemiah 2*

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Good morning, men. It’s great to be here with you this morning. How many of you have benefitted from good leadership at some point in your life? Raise your hand. Almost everybody. How many of you have been impacted by poor leadership at some point in your life? Almost everybody has been impacted by poor leadership. When you start a new year it is always a good time to evaluate, rethink, take some time to step back and consider where we are, what God is doing, and what He wants to do in us.

We are going to do a two part series this week and next week. We will talk about leading in the footsteps of Jesus. All of us are leaders in some aspects of our lives. We are leaders in our family, with friends, in church and work environments, and in neighborhoods. Each of us interacts with people where we have responsibilities or opportunities for leadership.

This week we will look at what leadership is and why it matters. We will do that by looking at Jeremiah 23 and this will set the stage for next week’s lesson when we talk about how we actually implement leadership. How do we live as a leader? Jeremiah 23:1-8:

“Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!” declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: “Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,” declares the Lord.“I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord.

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
    “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,
a King who will reign wisely
    and do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah will be saved
    and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
    The Lord Our Righteousness.

“So then, the days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when people will no longer say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the Israelites up out of Egypt,’ but they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the descendants of Israel up out of the land of the north and out of all the countries where he had banished them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”

May God add understanding to the reading of His holy Word.

When you look around our country today, it is hard not to ask, where are all the godly leaders? You do a search in Google news on the phrase “leadership crisis” and get 69,500 hits. You start scanning through them and see a couple of local police department scandals near the top of the list. There are issues of political footballs tossed around and deferred and not dealt with. There are business crises in companies that are talked about and described as ethics and poor decisions. There are celebrities with all the break-ups and lack of morality and all those kinds of things. They show up in the list of news. All across the culture we see a void of leadership. We see that men are not stepping up to act as real men or to act as the men God called us to be. One example of this is one in three children in America live in a home without a father. In some ZIP codes more than 80% of the children live in homes without a father.

We know the type of devastation this brings. We know children who live in fatherless homes are five times more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. They are five times more likely to repeat a grade in school, or live in poverty. You can just see the devastation that comes. We could go to all other aspects of our lives.

I remember a practical thing, for me. My youngest son Kyle was playing football in one of the leagues here in Central Florida and we intentionally picked this league because they played the games on Saturdays instead of Sundays. What happens here in Florida? We get rain on Saturdays. We get a notice saying the games are postponed, but we will play them Sunday morning. I have an hour to interact with the commissioner. I was helping coach one of the teams. I called them up. I asked, can we do this Sunday afternoon? Can we double up next week? Is there some other way to do this? He said no, we don’t want to wait; it will rain. I said I would think that there are probably some other people who would want to preserve the time to go to church. I hadn’t had a chance to call him until 5 or 6 hours after the email went out. He said there are 400 families in our program and you are the only person who has emailed or called. We are leaders. We are the Christian men running those kinds of sports programs that are making decisions that would preserve some of the things that would be important to us.

I realize everyone in this room is coming into 2013 in a different place. Some of you are doing really well today. You had a great holiday season, a great Christmas, and you are feeling full of the spirit of God. You are walking with Christ. You are engaging with Him and with the people God put in your life. If that is true about you, I hope today will be a real tune-up; a way to tweak that a little bit and remind you why you want to do what you want to do.

I realize there are others here today who are struggling. Some of you come in and did not have such a great Christmas. Maybe you feel like God is cold and distant. You are here, but you are here because you are supposed to be here. You hope maybe to get something out of it. You don’t really feel that closeness with God. You don’t feel the presence of God. Maybe you got off track and you were distracted by sin. Some of you probably are dealing with lust or pornography. Maybe you got caught up with materialism and focused on some of the things you need or want in your life. Maybe it is success at work or your reputation. Maybe you are toying with some things that are distracting you from where God wants you to be and being the leader He wants you to be.

Some of you probably feel overwhelmed today. I know I feel a little overwhelmed. Many of us had vacation during the holidays and it was one thing when everybody else is on vacation too. I am off this week and some folks have gone back to work. The emails start flying, and I think, here we go again. You have this sinking feeling. I have so many things stacked up I already need to deal with when I get back to work.

A lot of you are in the same situation. You have family situations and you don’t know how they will be resolved. Maybe in your marriage there are some things simmering, they are coming to a boil, and you don’t see a way through that. I realize everybody is coming from a different place today.

I have a simple goal. My simple goal is to show you that your leadership matters and then point you to Jesus. That is all I want to do today. Your leadership matters and I want to point you to Jesus. Next week I will show you how to live out that leadership.

The first thing I want us to see in Jeremiah 23:1-2 is leadership has consequences. “’Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture!’ declares the Lord. Therefore this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to the shepherds who tend my people: ‘Because you have scattered my flock and driven them away and have not bestowed care on them, I will bestow punishment on you for the evil you have done,’ declares the Lord.”

Leadership has consequences. God says because you have not been tending the people that I placed in your care, and because they are scattered, because they are not walking and growing in their knowledge of me, I will bring judgment on you as a leader. That is what Jeremiah says in Chapter 23.

This idea of leadership is woven into the fabric of how God made the world. I don’t think often we understand how important this is. It is a mystery but it is very important. There is a representative nature to human existence. Think about the role Adam played. Adam was a representative of all of us before God. We don’t know how to define or talk about this fully, but there is a sense when Adam sinned, we sinned. Why? Because Adam was what the theologians call a federal head, our representative head, and what Adam did, we did. Because God saw us in Adam, is the phrase the Scriptures use. We were in Adam. That representation extends in the Scriptures in all kinds of different ways. You think about the way the Scriptures talk about the Old Testament kings. What happened when a king was following God? God brought blessing to the people because of that king’s leadership. When a king did not do that God often brought judgment upon the people.

Leadership is a serious issue. There is a sense in which you are representing the people God has placed under your influence. There is a sense that your actions are going to impact your family; your friends that you should be having influence on; people in your church where you should have leadership roles; your workplace where you should be leading others. All these people will be impacted by your leadership and your actions, because you are, in a sense, a representative for them. That is what Jeremiah is saying. It is woven into the very fabric of how the world works.

Leadership is never neutral. We can’t just put it on cruise control and hope it happens by osmosis. If we are not influencing people around us for good, if we are not influencing them to trust Christ more, follow Him more, and love Him more, then we are pulling them down. We are showing them they can ignore Christ; that they don’t need to love Him more; that they don’t need to trust Him; that they can get along without Him. Leadership is not neutral. You are either helping people around you to become the people God wants them to be, or you are helping them ignore Him or living a life independently of Him.

When we think about our different roles in our family, workplace and churches, we must ask the question in 2013, what is the influence God wants me to have? Is there anything I ought to change from 2012 to do something differently than what I was doing in the past? I want us to think for a minute about what is good leadership? We will spend most of our time next week on this. What is good leadership? If it is so important we must know what it is and what it looks like.

Turn to Nehemiah 2. We will give you a quick definition of what good leadership is. Nehemiah is a government official and he is a Jew, but he is in exile. He hears about what has happened in Jerusalem, how the city is in disgrace, and he feels the calling of God to do something about it. He starts praying about it. Months go by with no opportunity to do anything. In Chapter 2 the king asks him why he is sad. Nehemiah feels like this is the time to tell him that the reason is because of the city of his fathers, the city of his birth, has been destroyed and it needs to be rebuilt.

The king asks in Nehemiah 23:4, what is it you want? Notice how Nehemiah answers. “I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king, ‘If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.’”

What a bold request. Can you imagine this cupbearer, a government official to a pagan king, an important official who would be relied on every day, saying I need you to send me away and let me spend I don’t know how long in another city, because I need to take care of some stuff. It won’t help you any but I need to do this. That is a bold request. “Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, ‘How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?’ It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. I also said to him, ‘If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?’”

Not only do I want you to give me time off with pay, but I also want you to make sure everyone will let me get through and everyone knows I am on official business for you, “’and may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?’ And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests.” Not only that, would you provide the supplies and money I need to do this work that God wants me to do? I know it doesn’t help you at all, but can I have some timber from the forest so I can rebuild. The king says, sure.

Nehemiah was so bold to ask the king because he knew the calling God gave him. If you read the rest of the book of Nehemiah, you see how strong that conviction was that he was called to lead the people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. You can see some incredible leadership lessons. What I want us to focus on today is this definition of leadership and that is **that leadership is lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision.**

Leadership is lovingly influencing people, to pursue God’s vision. I need your help everyone stand up. We will do some motions. This is what I do with my middle-schoolers. If it is good for middle-schoolers it is good for us. Do these motions with me. Lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision. Everybody do that. Lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision. What is leadership? It is lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision. Who can do that for me? Can you do it? Lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision. Everybody sit down. Thank you.

Lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision. That is the definition of leadership we want to work with; lovingly, servant hearted, authentic, looking out for their interests. That is what people respond to. When people know that you care about them, and about their lives, and what is going on with them then they respond to that. This is how you respond to.

How many of you have been to a party or a business setting and someone just wants to talk about themselves? The mean monster who says I did this, and I did that, and I did the other thing. How quickly does that get old? It gets old pretty fast. You have also probably been in a setting where you were surprised to find somebody who was generally interested in you. They asked about your opinion, your experiences, your family, they followed up with questions that were not just going through the motions, but they demonstrated that they genuinely demonstrated they were cornered for you.

They might not have put it in these terms, but they were loving you. You appreciated that because they were loving you. They cared about you.

My dad is a retired senior vice president of BellSouth. The last decade or so of his career he moved to a couple of different positions. One of them was having responsibility of the physical aspects of BellSouth. It wasn’t something he had done in his career until he got that position. That included buildings, trucks, maintenance equipment. One of the things they have is repair facilities for all these vehicles. These facilities can’t work during the day, so they work at night. My dad came down to visit and he found where one of those facilities was in Central Florida. He called the guy up who ran facility and he said he’d love to come by if they have time early in the evening and chat with you.

He went there and spent 30-45 minutes with this gentleman and near the end of the conversation the guy said, you are the first person, the first executive from any level of corporate structure who has ever talked to me in person. Not only that, but in the months to come my dad must have heard from a dozen situations about people…oh, you’re the guy who went to visit the repair facility. Jim told me about that. He told me you came by and talked to him. Why? He took an interest in them personally, lovingly influencing people.

Influencing means to affect them. If you are not influencing or impacting people you are not leading. You may be making a lot of noise and kicking up a lot of dust, but you are not leading if you are not influencing others. Am I seeing that I am having an impact in the lives of others around me? If not, then maybe I need to question whether I am being the kind of leader God wants me to be.

Influencing people to pursue God’s vision; to pursue, being active; there is movement, direction, passion. We do not want to allow people who are in our orbits to stay in the same place. It can be easy to get that way with your kids or wife, and you get things into a nice place, and you are thinking let’s not rock the boat here. Everything seems to be okay. Let’s let the status quo hold on. Of course, the problem with that is if we don’t continue to pursue leadership, if we don’t continue to try to help our wife move forward as a godly woman, if we don’t continue to help move our kids forward, if we say I like it where it is, then things start to fall apart. It may take three months, six months or three years. At some point, the status quo is not the status quo because we have not been leading the way God wants us to lead.

We need to help people pursue and continue to move forward to this higher calling God has for them. This is very important because it is easy for us to lead in other directions than God’s vision. It is easy for us to define what would be good for us. I would like it more if my kids got good grades; or if we could fix this part of our marriage; or if my church had this kind of music or if we made more money at work; or whatever it is. We can easily slip into leading into our goals.

I had a sales manager talk about the ruthless world of sales motivation. He told me about how he used to take all of his sales people and get him on his mailing list for his company and would mail home pictures of the bicycles they could win if they won the quarterly sales contest. Or he would send a picture of the washer and dryer they could win. He would mail this to their wives and kids so they would receive it and be able to open it before the dad got home from work and see the bicycles dad could win for them if they won this sales contest. Talk about ruthless.

That is the kind of motivation many people are living. That is the kind of leadership many people are giving to others. It is not a leadership to pursue God’s vision; it is a leadership to pursue what they want. We have to be careful that we are submitted to God’s vision so we can lead others well.

Jeremiah 23 shows us what happens when we don’t do that. God punishes and brings judgment on the leaders. Even though God brings judgment on leaders, because leadership has consequences, the second thing we see from Jeremiah 23 is that God preserves His people. Look at Verses 3-4. “I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the countries where I have driven them and will bring them back to their pasture, where they will be fruitful and increase in number. I will place shepherds over them who will tend them, and they will no longer be afraid or terrified, nor will any be missing,” declares the Lord.”

You can be replaced as the leader. If God needs to do that to preserve His people He will absolutely do it. You can’t be certain of any of these types of things so I will not be dogmatic about this. I do know of a pastor I was closely acquainted with who was involved in some inappropriate things that were a little bit borderline. They were not obvious things, but it was a pattern over years. This pastor would not listen to people who were saying there was a problem. He wouldn’t listen to authority in his church, he wouldn’t listen to others, he moved from church to church. He went on a mission trip, and on this mission trip he is staying at a home, and somebody knocks on the door, and he opened the door. As a guest, you normally wouldn’t do that. Out there are folks who want to rob them. A shotgun goes off hits them in the knee and just explodes his knee. He has to have all these surgeries and he is out of being a pastor.

I have to tell you when I heard about that I don’t think you can be dogmatic and I don’t think this is something God did, but it entered my mind. He wouldn’t listen. I wonder if God took care of the fact that he would not listen. God will replace leaders. I absolutely believe He will. I don’t know how He will do it or what the methods are, but each one of us ought to remember God can replace us as leaders because He will absolutely preserve His people.

The reason you are hearing this message today is because of our Christmas schedule, I was driving alone for quite a bit of time. Our family was going in different direction. I took my son to a basketball tournament, and as I was driving back I pulled up a message from the Gospel Coalition to listen to. I didn’t know what I was getting. I picked a guy and clicked on it and out came a message on leadership. In my role as president of Man in the Mirror, and especially in the last year with the Area Director initiative and 48 men coming on board all across the country, feeling the weight of all of that, that message convicted me in some very powerful ways; that God cares about leadership. I need to take care of some things in my heart and in my life to be the kind of leader that God wants me to be.

God preserves His people and the way He primarily does that, in Verse 5-6 we see that Jesus is the ultimate leader of God’s people.

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
    “when I will raise up to David a righteous Branch,
a King who will reign wisely
    and do what is just and right in the land.
In his days Judah will be saved
    and Israel will live in safety.
This is the name by which he will be called:
    The Lord Our Righteousness.

Jesus is the ultimate leader of God’s people. In Isaiah 9:6, there is that famous passage that probably many of us heard in the last few weeks with the Christmas holidays here.

For to us a child is born,
    to us a son is given,
    and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
    Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
    Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Of the increase of his government and peace
    there will be no end.

The government of Jesus. He is the ultimate leader of God’s people. He is the one who brings about the final redemption and the powerful final transformation God wants to see in the lives of people. It ultimately doesn’t rest on us, it rests on Jesus.

That is what we see in Jeremiah and in this passage. So much so, that in Verse 7-8, in Jeremiah it talks about the rescue Jesus is going to bring, and He has brought, and looking forward to a new heavens and new earth, because it talks about bringing all of God’s people together, that the rescue Jesus brings replaces the rescue from Egypt as the touchstone that people will remember. You see that in Verse 7. No longer will we say just like God brought us out of Egypt. That was an incredible miracle. The most powerful king in the world, the Israelites were in slavery, God delivers them, the Red Sea, the water is crushing the Egyptian army. All of that an incredible miracle, but Jeremiah says is what God does in Jesus is so much better than that it will be the touch stone everyone will remember. It will become the thing we talk about the way God bring the descendants of Israel together through this righteous branch. Jesus is our ultimate leader. He lovingly influences us to pursue God’s vision. That is what Jesus does.

Next week we will talk about being a good leader is not primarily dependent on your ability to lead, but it is mostly dependent on your ability to follow Jesus. We will show you this next week. Just imagine a gondola at a ski resort, or somewhere you get in a big cabin, and it is hooked to the big cables and you have a chance to ride up and see some views or do some skiing. If you think about how that lift works, the gondola is not actually the thing that is moving you up. The gondola is completely dependent on the motors and the gears that are in the terminal house at the bottom or the top of that lift. The gondola is simply along for the ride. That is the way our leadership is before Christ. We are completely dependent on His work in us, and His work through us, in the lives of people around us. Yes, we are important. Jeremiah says leadership is important, leadership matters but it matters as we allow ourselves to be used by Jesus Christ to accomplish what He wants us to accomplish in the lives of people.

We are a representative that Jesus wants to use as a leader. How do we lovingly influence people to pursue God’s vision? We do this as we follow moment by moment in the footsteps of Christ. Where has God made you a leader in 2013? Where does He want you to have influence? Some of you guys have been sitting in the sidelines at church. Maybe you have gotten frustrated with some of the decisions they have made. It is easy to talk about those guys and what they choose to do and I can’t believe they spent the money that way, and I would never have hired that person, or whatever. You know what? God is calling you to make a real investment in your church. Some of you need to step up in leadership even though it is messy, even though you don’t agree with everything, even though there are relationships tough to work with God may want you to step up and make a difference in your church.

Some of you may be hoping that living life and living by the rules is enough for your marriage or your kids. You try to spend time with your wife, you communicate you provide, you have a date night. You say I’m doing pretty well. I’m doing better than most guys I know who stop off at the bar on the way home. That is not enough guys. God wants us to step up as leaders to lovingly influence our wives to pursue God’s vision.

Some of you are just going along at work. You’ve been beaten down, you have a lot of bad influences or have people who are negative, or you have a situation that you feel like I can’t get out of this, I have to keep my head down to go along to get along. Let the river take me wherever it will, I just need a job. Maybe God is calling you to stand up and be a leader in that situation in 2013. God made us for more than just going along with this world. He made us to represent Christ. He made us to serve Him as we lead, as we follow Christ so that we could help others.

If you are running from some of those responsibilities let me encourage you – stop. Your heart wants you to make a difference. You want to be a man of influence. That is what God made you for. You don’t need to run away from that. You can become that man by following Christ. If you are being seduced from other things drawing you away from this, if you got into pornography or are flirting around with another woman, or so focused on business success you don’t have time to do anything related being a leader for Christ, then repent. Your heart wants this. This is what God made you for. Follow Jesus and He will enable you to lovingly influence people to pursue God’s vision. As Isaiah 9:7 says, “The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

I am so grateful when I think about the issues I am facing. When I think about the things in my heart I can root out so I can love Christ well, focus on Him and not be distracted by things. I think about the decisions, just practically speaking, that we face at work that I have no idea which is the right way to go. When I think of the relationship struggles at my church and the decisions we are making and how are we going to get on the same page, it is so easy to get overwhelmed by that.

I can turn to that passage and realize it is the zeal of the Lord Almighty that will accomplish this. All I have to do is try to be faithful. I have to be at the right place and the right time with the right heart, and then Jesus will do the rest. Will you join me in that in 2013 to become the leader God wants us to be in 2013? He wants us to lovingly influence people to pursue His vision. What is leadership? **Lovingly influencing people to pursue God’s vision.**

Let’s pray.

**CLOSING PRAYER**

Father, we thank You so much for today. I thank You for these men, the calling You have given to us as leaders. Perhaps many of us don’t think about it very seriously very often, and we don’t think about how seriously You take leadership. Yet here in Jeremiah, You said You would remove the wicked leaders, You will remove the ineffective leaders, and You will bring judgment against them. We don’t want to be that kind of leader. We want to be the leaders who trust You and walk in the footsteps of Christ, submitting ourselves to you who are having the kind of influence You want us to have. We know we can’t do that through willpower, we know we can’t do that through our own strength. We thank You that You are the trailblazer, that You are the one who ultimately leads Your people.

Lord, I pray today whether we need to be convicted, challenged, encouraged, or need to repent, I pray You will help us to see how great, big and powerful You are. I pray that we would seek Your face and that we would seek Your love and glory in our lives and through our lives in the way that we live in 2013; in such a way that we can literally see America turned upside down by men who are passionately following You. We pray this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.