



Upside Down Leadership

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

We just finished an important election in our country and one of the big questions we had to ask ourselves had to do with leadership. Who is qualified to lead our country? What do we really need for a leader to do? How you answered those questions probably determined your vote.

Maybe the most basic question is, what is leadership? It's not so easy to define. In an important book on leadership Warren Bennis wrote, "Decades of academic analysis have given us more than 350 definitions of leadership. Never have so many labored so long to say so little." Perhaps the most basic definition is simply that leadership is influence. Anyone who influences someone else to do something, especially something they would never do on their own, is a leader. It's been said that "he who thinks he leads but has no followers, is only taking a walk."

If we define leadership as influence then we have to admit that a leader can do great good or great harm. Hitler influenced a lot of people. So did Abraham Lincoln. One for evil; the other for good. At some point we have to look at what kind of walk a leader is taking. What kind of influence is he having? Is he or she someone we want to follow and should follow?

This morning we're going to see what Moses had to say about leadership. No one can deny that he was a great leader, even though at first it wasn't a walk he wanted to take. But by this time Moses had been leading Israel for over four decades. He'd had some victories as a leader, but he'd made a few mistakes as well. And in the middle of ch.16 he begins to talk about what leadership would look like in Israel after he was gone. What he has to say applies to us as well. As moms and dads, as people trying to influence others in the marketplace, in our schools and on our teams and in the church, what kind of walk is a leader supposed to take?

I. Moses addresses four different leadership roles in Israel.

The section on leadership extends from 16:18-18:22. He deals with four different leadership roles in Israel. First, he deals with the role of judge. Each community had a judge whose job it was to uphold justice and righteousness, especially in the courts. Second, he deals with kings whose

job it was to rule. Next, he deals with the role of priests. These were spiritual leaders who eventually would serve in the temple at Jerusalem. Finally, he deals with the leadership of prophets. These were people who spoke for God. There were times in Israel's life when they needed to hear from God and the prophet's job was to be God's mouthpiece. In this section Moses gives instructions on how each one is to carry out his leadership role.

One of the things to notice here is that leaders are many and varied. That's because there is a need for a kind of balance of power. No single person could hold all these offices. No one office had authority over another. It's like a system of checks and balances. This, of course, is a foundational principle of government in America. That's why we have three branches of government. But it's true in all of life. No one should have absolute power because "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely." That phrase was written by Sir John Acton in 1870 in a letter he wrote to protest the Catholic teaching that the Pope was infallible. He went on to say that the reason this is true is that the human heart is proud and sinful and prone towards selfishness and if you put a person in a position of leadership without accountability he will abuse it.

This was especially true when it comes to kings. We don't have kings today. Our country was born on the principle that we don't want a king. We normally think of kings as people who rule over others. But that's not what God had in mind for Israel. Just like Israel was to be different from the nations around them in terms of their worship, so they were to be different in how their kings led. Their leadership was what you might call an upside down kind of leadership.

"When you enter the land which the LORD your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me,' you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses, one from among your countrymen you shall set as king over yourselves; you may not put a foreigner over yourselves who is not your countryman. Moreover, he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor shall he cause the people to return to Egypt to

multiply horses, since the LORD has said to you, 'You shall never again return that way.' He shall not multiply wives for himself, or else his heart will turn away; nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself. Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. It shall be with him and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left, so that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel" (Deut. 17:14-20).

II. Israel's kingly leadership was to be upside down.

We can divide up this paragraph into two parts. The first part deals with the installation of a king and the second part deals with conduct of a king. In both of these we see how upside down Israel's leadership would be in contrast to the nations around them.

A. The installation of the king: As far as the installation of a king was concerned, Moses says it will take place when you enter the land and you possess it and you're living in it. In other words, when you get all settled then you're going to look around and say, "Hey, we want a king like all these other nations. We want to be legit." In order to appreciate this you have to understand a little history. Israel had never had a king. Israel was what we call a theocracy, meaning they were ruled by God. But there had been hints throughout Israel's history that one day they might have a king. God told both Abraham and Jacob that kings would be among their descendants (Gen.17:6, 35:11). But even with that you have to kind of wonder if this was something they were supposed to do. Weren't they supposed to be different from the nations around them? But Moses doesn't get into that. He just says, "you shall surely set a king over you..." In other words, if that's what you want, go for it!

But one thing he insists on is that the one they install has the right qualifications. And they're very clear. First, he has to be a man God chooses. He doesn't run for office and you don't get to elect him. This is not a democracy. The job isn't given to the most powerful or wealthiest or best looking man. God chooses the king. The other qualification was that he had to be a fellow Israelite. He says "one from among your countryman; not a foreigner." The reason was obvious: if you choose a Canaanite King he'll lead you to

worship Canaanite gods. That would be the worst. So he has to be an Israelite.

Throughout the Scripture we see how the people God chooses for leadership are different than the ones we would choose. Perhaps you know the story of how David was chosen. God tells Samuel to go to Bethlehem, to the house of Jesse, because he wants one of his sons to be the next king. Samuel goes and asks Jesse to line up his sons. Jesse brings in his seven sons in and parades them before Samuel. They were an impressive lot. But God whispered this to Samuel: "**Don't look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I've rejected him; for God sees not as man sees, for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart**" (1Sam.16:7). We need to let God choose our leaders because God sees what we can't see. I think of how Jesus prayed all night before he chose the Twelve. I think of how Paul laid out a list of qualifications for leaders in the church to help us know what God is looking for. I think of what Paul said to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:28, "**Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...**" Those men were chosen not by a vote of the church but by the Spirit. So before we choose leaders we need to pray like crazy and see if they fit God's qualifications, and we need to ask the Spirit to make it clear who he's choosing.

B. The conduct of the king (vv.16-20): The second section deals with the conduct of the king. This is upside down as well. He says a couple of things about his conduct. First, he says he can't be driven by personal ambition. In other words, he mustn't abuse his position. Every leader knows the temptation to do this. There is something especially intoxicating about being in a leadership position. We can begin to think it's all about us. We can begin to see ourselves as more important than others. This was especially true with Near Eastern kings.

But in contrast Moses puts limits on the king in three areas. First, he says he can't "**multiply horses for himself.**" This is talking about the lust for power. Horses were used for pulling chariots. Fleets of chariots had a great advantage over mere foot soldiers in battle. Horses were especially used in Egypt and so Moses says, "The king can't send people back to Egypt to import horses. I delivered you out of Egypt, so don't go back there looking for horses." This of course would mean that the king would have to trust in God instead of weapons. As a leader, he would have to be a man of faith.

Next, he says "**he shall not multiply wives for himself.**" Kings in that day and age usually had many harems. This would give him opportunity to satisfy his sexual cravings with the most beautiful women in the

kingdom. But more than that this is talking about the lust for status. These women were used as decoration for the royal palace so that when foreign dignitaries came they would be impressed. And there was a political side to this as well. Marriages were usually arranged to strengthen alliances with other nations. Moses warns that all of this will turn the king's heart away from God.

Finally, he says, **“nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold for himself.”** This is talking about the lust for wealth. When I read this I can't help but think of Solomon. He did all of this. He multiplied horses, wives and wealth. More and more he was driven by personal ambition. And his heart was turned away from God. He probably thought, “I'm just trying to do my job. I'm just doing what kings all over the world do. My people need a strong leader. And no one understands the pressure I'm under.” But he forgot that God calls us to something different. He calls us to do leadership in an upside down way.

So leaders must use their position to serve those they lead rather than use them for personal gain. Being a leader is dangerous. When you're in a position of authority you can begin to believe that you have certain rights that others just don't have. You begin to think that since you have the whole world on your shoulders you have the right to be treated differently; you have the right to constantly be served; you have the right to certain perks that others don't have. You begin to compromise and there is no one strong enough or high enough to keep you accountable. It can be a very subtle thing, but every leader who wants to lead for God has to fight this.

At 3:30 p.m. on June 6, 2007, a 21-year-old man with muscular dystrophy named Ben Carpenter drove his electric wheelchair down the sidewalk. As he approached the street crossing a semi-truck came to a halt at the stoplight. Ben began to cross the street in his wheelchair just a few feet in front of the towering truck. When the light turned green, somehow the driver of the truck didn't see Ben in his wheelchair. With Ben still in front of the truck, the engine roared and pulled forward. When the truck struck Ben's wheelchair, the wheelchair turned, now facing forward, and the handles in the back of the chair became wedged in the truck's grille. The wheelchair kept rolling, though, and Ben stayed in his chair. The truck driver was oblivious to the fact that he'd hit the wheelchair. The truck picked up speed, soon reaching 50 mph. Still the wheelchair and Ben were pinned to the front. While the driver continued along in his own little world of the truck cab, people along the road saw what was happening. Everyone seemed to see the drama unfolding but the driver. People waved their arms and tried to get his attention. Two off-duty policemen saw what was happening and began to pursue the truck. Finally,

after two terrifying miles, the driver pulled into a parking lot, still clueless to the presence of Ben Carpenter pinned to the front of his truck. Thankfully, Ben was unharmed.

That picture of a huge truck pushing a wheelchair is a metaphor for bad leadership. Just as a truck driver is in a big and powerful position and a person in a wheelchair is in a vulnerable position, so some people have powerful positions in life and others have vulnerable places. Powerful people have control; vulnerable people are controlled by others. Parents have power, husbands have power, as do employers, leaders, pastors, elders, and government officials. By contrast, those who are small or weak are often vulnerable, as are the sick, the poor, the young, the elderly, the debtors, the uneducated. Power isn't wrong; God gives people power and authority to use for the good of others. When God gives people power, he commands them to use it carefully and responsibly. Upside down leaders are careful with their power. Others resemble this truck driver flying down the highway with a vulnerable person pinned to the grille of their 18-wheeler.

The second thing he says about the conduct of a king is he is to live in submission to God's word. Nowhere is that clearer than in what Moses says a king is supposed to do in vv.18-20. He says he should write for himself a copy of God's law, he should take it with him and he should read it his whole life. The purpose was that he would fear the Lord, his heart wouldn't be lifted up above his countrymen, he wouldn't turn aside from God's word, and his children would have a secure future. It sounds kind of strange as a job description but this is all we get. He had other responsibilities as king but this is what Moses felt he needed to drive home. The one thing the king needed to understand was that he wasn't in charge. God was in charge. He was accountable to God. His job was to live in submission to God's word. It's almost as if his right to lead God's people came out of the fact that he was willing to be led. That seems upside down, but it's true.

Leaders must be immersed in God's word and they should live it. They should even invite people to hold them accountable to it. I love how when Moses says that the king is to write out a copy of the law for himself he was to do it in the presence of the Levitical priest. Why? Because the priest would hold him accountable to write it all down and not leave out what was inconvenient! Leaders need to see themselves as under God's word and accountable to others.

It's like a police chief I heard about in Wisconsin. He accidentally drove past a stopped school bus with its emergency lights flashing. He wrote himself a \$235 ticket, docked himself four points on his driving record and paid the fine. Most people wouldn't have known about the officer's ticket, but his fine appeared in local court records

and a newspaper reporter discovered it. When asked about it, he said he didn't want to take the easy way out by avoiding the consequences because of his position of authority.

We need leaders like that. Leaders who will hold themselves accountable to the standards they are telling others to live by. Leaders who write themselves a ticket. Why? Because the right to lead God's people comes out of the fact that we're willing to be led. We're followers first, and we earn the right to lead because we follow God.

Conclusion
What's interesting is this is exactly what Jesus taught us. He once said, **"Those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you!"** (Mk 10:42-43). Rather than being lords, he went on to say, disciples are to be servants of one another and the greatest is the one who is servant of all.

Jesus says an entirely different system of leadership should prevail among Christians than is used by the world. Authority among Christians isn't derived from the same source as worldly authority, nor is it to be exercised in the same way. The world's view of authority places men over one another, as in a military command structure, a business hierarchy, or a governmental system. But as Jesus carefully stated, **"...it shall not be so among you."** Believers are always in a different relationship to one another than others are. We're brothers and sisters, children of one Father, and members one of another. Jesus said in Mt. 23:8, **"One is your Master, and all you are brothers."**

Throughout history the church has ignored these words. We've repeatedly borrowed from the authority structures of the world and changed the names of kings, generals, captains, presidents, governors and chiefs to popes, patriarchs, bishops, pastors, and elders, and gone merrily on our way, lording it over our brothers and destroying the model of servanthood which Jesus intended. In most churches today an unthinking acceptance has been given to the idea that the pastor is the final voice of authority. Ray Stedman once said, "But surely, if a pope over the whole church is bad, a pope in every church is no better!"

It's clear from the Scriptures the apostles were concerned about the danger of developing spiritual bosses. In 2 Cor.1:24, Paul reminds the Corinthians concerning his own apostolic authority: **"Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy, ..."** Peter warns the elders not to govern by **"lording it over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock,"** (1 Pt 5:3). And John speaks strongly against Diotrephes **"who likes to put himself first, and takes it on himself to put some out of the church,"** (3Jn 1:9-10). These first-century examples of church bosses indicate how easily we can ignore the words of Jesus, "it shall not be so among you."

But if the church isn't to imitate the world in this matter, what is it to do? There is a need for some form of leadership and authority. What is it to be? The question is answered in Jesus' words: **"One is your Master"** (Mt. 23:8). Who would that be? Maybe Jesus! But churches act as if Jesus were far away in heaven, and he's left it up to church leaders to make their own decisions, and run their own affairs. But Jesus himself had assured us, **"I am with you always, even unto the end of the age"** (Mt 28:20). Another time he said, **"where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."** He's present with us. It's Jesus himself who is the ultimate authority within every body of Christians.

The task of the leaders isn't to run the church themselves, but to determine how the Lord in their midst wishes to run his church. Much of this he has already made known through the Scriptures. In the day-to-day decisions which every church faces, leaders are to seek and find the mind of the Lord by searching the Scriptures and praying together. The ultimate authority is vested in the Lord and no one else.

This is upside down leadership. This is the kind of walk leaders are to take. The right to lead God's people comes out of the fact that we're willing to be led. The ability of a leader to influence anyone else doesn't lie in ordering someone around, but by living a life (taking a walk) that is characterized by followership first. And this, of course is what Jesus taught us. Jesus is the fulfillment of every one of these leadership roles. He is the righteous judge, our exalted King, our great High Priest, and the true prophet who speaks for God. But even Jesus submitted to his Father; even Jesus was willing to be led.