

THE CHALLENGE OF SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

SERIES: PREPARING FOR SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP

By Danny Hall

In this message we come to the end of the Upper Room Discourse. What is amazing about this teaching is that it declares that God has chosen to accomplish his work in the world through ordinary people like us. Sometimes we may want to sit down with God and ask him, “What were you thinking?” But being part of the people of God, being involved in the very work of God himself, is something much greater than us. It is an incredible thing that our stories are drawn into God’s story, that we are commissioned and equipped and empowered and sent out by him to extend his love to this world.

The Upper Room Discourse is the final night of teaching that Jesus gives to his disciples. He has taught the eleven around the Passover meal, and they have walked together down through the Kidron Valley near Jerusalem, up into the vineyards, and will end up in the garden where he will be betrayed and arrested. In these last minutes he pours into them his final words of encouragement.

When we think about the setting of this discourse, we can make a very common mistake. We know in one sense that these were just ordinary people that Jesus called to be his disciples, but because there has been a tendency in the history of the church for people to be elevated over time to sainthood, we sometimes come to believe that these people were on a different spiritual plane from us. But the reality is that they were just like us. We know from their own stories that they were sometimes full of fear, insecurity, self-promotion, and ambition. They could go from being extremely cocky and self-centered one minute to being full of cowardice the next.

Yet God’s extraordinary plan for advancing his kingdom, for telling the world of his love, is to do it through ordinary people, to band them together in the body of Christ, to build them up, encourage them, equip and empower them, and send them out. And just as the disciples were the original recipients of that mission so long ago, we too are recipients of that mission from our Lord and Savior.

Jesus has taken the disciples on a journey this last night with them. He has demonstrated servanthood. He has taught them about God’s transforming power. He has talked about God’s presence in the Holy Spirit. He has commanded them to build a community of love. He has warned them of the opposition that will come. Having done all of this, he now gives them a final word of commission. He again highlights a particular fruit of following him that will later be identified as a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and that will help them as they face the task they have been called to do. In the last message (Discovery Paper 4739) there was a similar emphasis on one particular fruit of the Spirit that would give them the ability to go forward, and that was the fruit of joy.

As we bring our study to a close, we are actually stopping short of the grand conclusion. In chapter 17 Jesus is going to pray for these disciples, who are still struggling to understand. We will not go into that chapter, but I encourage you to read how Jesus prays for the disciples and for us to grasp this truth and live out its glory. But his final words of teaching to the disciples are found in John 16:25-33. Let’s read them:

“These things I have spoken to you in figurative language; an hour is coming when I will speak no more to you in figurative language, but will tell you plainly of the Father. In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf; for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father. I came forth from the Father, and have come into the world; I am leaving the world again, and going to the Father.” His disciples said, “Lo, now You are speaking plainly, and are not using a figure of speech. Now we know that You know all things, and have no need for anyone to question You; by this we believe that You came from God.” Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? Behold, an hour is coming, and has already come, for you to be scattered, each to his own home, and to leave Me alone; and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with Me. These things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world.”

In this passage Jesus wants to communicate several things. I will highlight two of them. First, in verses 25-28 he talks to them about the prospect of intimacy with the Father.

A new relationship with the Father

Jesus says there is a time coming, a particular point in the near future, when he is no longer going to talk to them in figurative language, but will teach them plainly. Up until now Jesus has been doing all kinds of teaching with them. He has used parables and figures. This very evening he has taught them through his personal example of washing their feet. He has taught them directly with exhortation, instruction, and even rebuke. He has taught them through metaphors such as the one about the vine and the branches in chapter 15. But now he is saying, “An hour is coming when you won’t need all that.”

What he is pointing out is this: “You still don’t really understand this. But there is going to be a time when I will no longer be teaching this way, because it will be plain to you. You will have a full and complete understanding.” Here Jesus is anticipating, as he has throughout this teaching, the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit will come upon them and open their eyes to all the beauty of the truth that Jesus has been teaching them, and their understanding of who he is will grow.

So this intimacy with the Father will be inaugurated on the Day of Pentecost. Jesus is going to go to the Father, and the Spirit is going to come. He says, “In that day you will ask in My name, and I do not say to you that I will request of the Father on your behalf . . .” What he is saying is that so far their relationship with the Father has been brokered, if you will, through Jesus’ personal presence. It was to Jesus that they went. He prayed for them and instructed them. He was their leader and they depended upon him. But there is a time coming when that will no longer be the case. And he says, “I’m not even going to say that in that day I will pray on your behalf—no, you will pray directly to the Father yourself.” What Jesus is telling them is that they are about to enter into a new experience. The Spirit will open up for them a deep, wonderful, personal relationship with the Father himself. “On that day,” he says, “you will ask in My name”—that is, in the authority of Jesus and in the access to the Father that he will create because of his death and resurrection. Because of Christ’s sacrificial and atoning death for them, the Spirit will come upon them, and they as men and women of forgiveness and regeneration in the Spirit of God will walk in personal fellowship with the Father. They will have complete access to him.

Notice the way Jesus describes this relationship: “For the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me, and have believed that I came forth from the Father.” Now, I know that a relationship with God has many theological complexities that we could think about. But at its heart it’s pretty simple, and he says it right here: “The Father loves you—you particularly, you personally. And you love Jesus, and you believe in him.” There are all kinds of ways we can flesh that out to bring about a larger understanding of it, but when we get right down to it, that’s what it means to be a follower of Christ. The Father loves you, you love Jesus, you believe in him. And when that wonderful little formula comes together, that opens up for us the possibility of a wonderful, personal relationship with God. We enter into a whole new plane in this life.

Now, for the disciples that is still ahead. But for those of us who live in the post-Pentecost age, as we come to faith in Christ, the Holy Spirit is poured out into our hearts and we are made new in him. The Spirit is always present in us, and we enter into that personal, intimate relationship with God. Notice again the words he uses of this relationship. He doesn’t say, “You earned this,” or “If you do all the right things and say all the right things, somehow you’ll build this relationship.” Certainly there are things we can do that make our relationship with God grow, but at its foundation it is about trust in him. It’s not what we do, it’s who we are: the beloved of God. Transformed by Christ as we trust in him, we are made new creatures, living in fellowship with him.

The second thing I want to highlight in this passage is Jesus’ promise of peace. This is the other fruit of the Spirit he gives them in this teaching, as I mentioned.

Peace in Jesus

The disciples are going to live in a chaotic world where their faith is going to be challenged. But notice how Jesus talks about this peace. First of all, it is not based on what they know. In verses 29-30 they immediately respond to what Jesus has just said: “Oh, thank you, Jesus. Now you are teaching us plainly, not in figurative speech. We get it now. We

know you come from God, and so we know that you know everything.” (Of course they don’t get it at all, they are sorting it out.) The disciples do know more about Jesus than anyone else around them. They have been hearing him teach for three years. But they think if they just understand everything, then they will have peace. So Jesus is saying, “No, you’ve got a measure of understanding, but that’s not going to be the source of your peace.”

How many of us have thought, “If I could just get my mind around what’s going on in my life, if I could just understand what God is doing, if I just had a little bit more insight into why these bad things happen to me and to my friends—then I could have peace.” And that’s where the disciples are at this point.

One of my mentors and professors in seminary, Dr. Corky Ferris, a wonderfully creative teacher and preacher, told a personal story that illustrates this point. When I first met him he walked with a severe limp after going through years of rehabilitation from an accident. He had been flying in a small airplane with a friend who was the pilot, returning from a speaking engagement. They were flying over a wilderness area in Texas, and their plane went down. His friend was killed in the crash. When the professor came to, he found that he was paralyzed from the waist down. He eventually gained enough strength to make his way out of there by pulling himself along by his elbows, dragging the dead weight of his lower body along as he went. It took him two full days to get to a road, where he was eventually found by a passing motorist.

He said, “During those two days I was alone, my friend was dead, and no one knew where I was. My mind raced to every question I could think of. Why did this happen? Was there some sin in my life that God was trying to bring to my attention to correct? Was the whole ministry endeavor that I was on somehow outside of God’s will? I felt that if I could get my mind around the reason, it would help me deal with it. The most profound spiritual crisis I’ve ever had in my life came at the moment when finally, after going through all those questions, I realized there was no reason.” In the middle of nowhere, paralyzed from the waist down, exhausted and broken, he said, “God, I just have to trust you, because there is no explanation at all for what is going on.”

Somehow we long to have everything explained, and certainly spiritual growth includes an ongoing growth process in our knowledge of who God is. That’s why this church teaches the word so diligently. We want to know more about God and more of him. But we are wrong to think that if we can somehow just figure everything out, then we’ll have peace. Jesus says that’s not the source of peace.

The second thing Jesus says to the disciples about this peace is that it is not dependent on their circumstances. He begins by telling them their world is about to be rocked. In a short while they are going to leave him alone and run in fear. So much of the time we look for peace and joy from our circumstances. How many times we have said things like these:

“Well, if my wife weren’t so crabby...”

“If my husband paid more attention to me...”

“If my kids weren’t so smart-alecky and rebellious...”

“If my parents weren’t so clueless...”

“If my boss weren’t such a jerk and my work so unreasonable...”

“If traffic weren’t always so bad...”

But Jesus is saying, “You are not going to find peace in your circumstances. In fact, the whole world is filled with tribulation.” With the coming of the Spirit, as the disciples step forward in faith and are empowered for ministry, the circumstances of their lives won’t get better, they’ll get worse! Some of them are going to die for their faith. If peace is determined by our circumstances, that explains why most of us aren’t very peaceful.

Jesus says, “Here is where peace is: these things I have spoken to you, that in Me you may have peace.” There is only one place to find peace, and that is in that personal relationship with Jesus Christ, walking in fellowship with him. Notice how he portrays himself: “In the world you have tribulation, but take courage; I have overcome the world. I am the overcoming One. I am the victorious Savior. There are all kinds of chaos, circumstantial problems, tribulation, unrest, and turmoil in the world. The only place to find peace is in me, the One who is the Victor. Your faith is not grounded in a losing cause. It is grounded in my victory!” Jesus knows that in the hours to come, he will go to the cross and win that battle.

The theme of peace runs all the way through the Scriptures. Paul says in Philippians 4:6-7, “Be anxious for nothing, but

in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” We find our peace by having a relationship of dependence on him.

You’d think that by now I’d get all this, wouldn’t you? I preached my first sermon thirty-one years ago this fall. I have believed and taught this material for many years. But like you, I struggle with getting it into day-to-day life. I have plenty of moments of doubt. There are times when I am ambitious and self-centered, or scared out of my wits, times when I am anything but peaceful and joyful. God knows that we live in a world that militates against any sense of this kind of centeredness in Jesus. Yet he graciously calls us back again and again: “Peace is in me.”

So walking with Christ leads to a life not only of joy but of peace in the midst of chaos. It can only come as we walk with him in faith. For the unpredictable will surely happen, but Christ is the steady Rock, and he says, “I will never leave you or forsake you. Walk with me, and in me you will have peace.” These are the final words that Jesus leaves with his disciples.

This whole teaching of the Upper Room Discourse has been about preparing the disciples to walk into the leadership of God’s kingdom. We now inherit that mission. These words are words of instruction to us. So in conclusion I want to summarize this whole teaching as we seek to be the people of God and move out to serve him. There are many more things that could be said, but here are seven principles that are bedrock for us.

Seven principles of spiritual leadership

First of all, our mission in life flows out of our relationship with Jesus. I have already said this, and it is woven all the way through the fabric of the teaching in these chapters. But it bears repeating because it is the foundational principle of this whole teaching. Jesus has died for us and has brought us into personal relationship with the Father. He says, “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you” (15:15). That wonderful, incredible intimacy with the Father that Christ has provided identifies us as his people. And what we do and who we are flow out of that relationship. We are then his representatives, the body of Christ in this world.

The second principle is that our mission is to be the people of God, the builders of his kingdom. That seems obvious, but I would suggest to you that many times churches shift their mission to building the church. How big can they grow? How efficient can their programs be? How lovely can their buildings be? Churches get off into all kinds of things. But we have been tasked with the preaching and proclamation of the gospel of Christ, the forgiveness that we ourselves have experienced in him. In our words and deeds and the way we live out our lives, this is our commission.

The third principle is that our identity with Jesus means that we must follow him in at least two specific ways. Twice in his teaching he makes the statement “A servant is not greater than his master. If I do this, then you must do it, too.” The first is in chapter 13 when he is washing the disciples’ feet. So following Jesus means that we must radically serve each other. Washing feet is a symbol of humility before one another. That requires that we break out of our proud, self-centered worlds and give ourselves to one another. That is part of what it means to follow Jesus. The second time Jesus makes that statement he says, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you...” (15:20). We have to expect that. If we live our lives out by radical faith in God, the whole world is not going to love us. In many cases it is going to oppose us. So it takes the courage that comes of trusting Christ as our Savior and leader to empower us to walk into that.

Fourth, we are adequate for the task because of two important things: the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, and God’s transforming work in our lives. All of us question whether we have what it takes to really be the people of God, to minister to one another and to our world. When we think about the task that God has called us to do, it’s easy to shudder and say, “How can I do that?” Jesus has told the disciples over and over in this teaching, “You can do it because of these two important things: God will be present in your lives and he will work through your lives in the power of the Holy Spirit; and he will continue his transforming work to build you more and more into the people he has called you to be.” We saw that wonderful picture in John 15 (see Discovery Paper 4735) of the vine and the branches, and of the vinedresser, God, who prunes and cleans us up, raises us up to be the kind of people we need to be, and continues to work in us. We often talk about whether we are committed to God, when the greater truth is that God is

committed to us. That transforming, ongoing work of God is the expression of his grace. He is building us into the people we ought to be individually and collectively. So we are adequate for this task because of these two things.

Fifth, the starting point for our mission is to build a community of love. “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you” (15:12). Building the kingdom of God is not a lone-ranger project. It is a project that flows out of the community of love and fellowship. If you and I are truly going to make a difference in our world, we have to be people who are deeply connected to one another, loving one another as Christ loves us, sacrificing ourselves for one another so that we can encourage and build one another up. It was no accident that Jesus sent the disciples out in pairs on their first mission (Mark 6:7). It is a rare calling of God when he sends us somewhere alone. God’s pattern is to send us in as community, to demonstrate love for one another and encouragement of each other, to help us to be the people of God.

Sixth, we move out in faith because we follow a victorious Christ. Sometimes Christ’s claim of victory appears to fly in the face of all evidence. Many times it looks as if evil is winning. But “the ruler of this world has been judged,” Jesus said (16:11). Jesus has overcome the world. I love that picture of overcoming. The word translated “overcome,” which is sometimes translated “victor,” is from the Greek root from which we get the name Nike. Nike is the Greek god of victory. The world has certain ideas about victory and power and strength and achievement. But Jesus said, “I am the Victor. I have vanquished the foe. It is a done deal.” The battle has been won.

And finally seventh, this confidence we have consists of at least four important fruits in our lives: hope, joy, peace, and courage. It is hope because Christ is victorious. It is joy because of his personal presence and because we know that we are part of something greater than ourselves, because we can get beyond our circumstances and trust the victory of God. It is peace as we walk in fellowship with him. And out of all of that is born a courage to step forward, not out of self-sufficiency but out of dependence on his presence and power. “Take courage,” he says, “because I am the Overcomer.” And with these, and other fruits in our life produced by God’s presence, we are commissioned by Christ to be his people in our world.

It is our turn. We have been tasked with the glorious privilege of being the communicators of his love. It’s not an easy thing, and we are frail and human, just like these disciples. But praise God, he is adequate, and he has called us, equipped us, and commissioned us. We can walk in strength and purpose.

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