

The Exercise of Authority

By Jim Davis

Are you in a place of leadership? Most people want or at least think that they want to be in places of influence. Some have an insatiable lust for power. They are continuously seeking ways to declare their significance in life through lordship over others. What are the biblical principles for the proper exercise of authority? What are some of the responsibilities and benefits of leadership?

Biblical Principles for the Exercise of Authority

Jesus is of course the greatest example of a leader. There has been no other person in human history that has left a more powerful example of submission to authority and to the proper exercise of authority. There are many diverse characteristics that make up good leadership qualities. Yet there are two biblical essentials for a good leader. First, good leaders exercise authority with humility as opposed to pride. Secondly, a good leader must be given to service instead of selfishness.

Humility

We can observe from the account of the temptation of Christ (Matthew 4:8-9) that Satan appeals to the area of pride and lust for power. The offer of all the kingdoms of the world and their glory is certainly not an offer that would be refused by many people. Pride means to raise oneself up or exalt oneself. Humility is the opposite. It means to lower oneself. If ever there was a person that deserved to be born in a palace and enjoy the status that authority provides, it was Jesus, yet we read that He humbled Himself. He humbled Himself by submitting to His parents. He humbled Himself before unjust magistrates and corrupt religious leaders. But more importantly He taught us what it means to humble ourselves before the Father's mighty hand. Jesus declared, "I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me...I always do the things that are pleasing to Him" (John 8:28-29). He humbled Himself in obedience to the Father's will and endured the shame of the cross.

Here are some things that will help us keep a proper perspective concerning the exercise of authority. Recognize that **authority comes from God**. "...For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God" (Romans 13:1). Jesus told Pilate, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). The Bible declares that God is sovereign over all authorities, even the corrupt ones. Every place of authority has been given from above. Where is the place for pride? There is no reality in the idea that there is a self-made man that has pulled himself up by his own bootstraps. No doubt that in Jesus' day Pilate and Herod were so-called self-made men. They were abusers of power exalting themselves over those who were under them. They were probably thinking, all the while in the ambitious climb to power, that they were in control. Pilate boasted of the power to either release Christ or have Him crucified. Jesus on the other hand declared that He personally had the authority to lay down His own life and take it up again (John 10:17-18). God alone is sovereign. Abuse may for a time be permitted but it will always be accounted for at judgment.

Recognize that **we must answer to God for the way we use power**. "Now therefore,

O kings, show discernment; Take warning, O judges of the earth. Worship the Lord with reverence and rejoice with trembling. Do homage to the Son, lest He become angry and you perish in the way, for His wrath may soon be kindled. How blessed are all who take refuge in Him!" (Psalm 2:10-12). The exercise of authority should be approached with humility. Reverence and trembling are the appropriate attitudes of the heart. God became angry with King Nebuchadnezzar and his sovereignty was removed because of his pride. In Daniel 4:30 it is recorded, "The king reflected and said, 'Is this not Babylon the great, which I myself have built as a royal residence by the might of my power, and for the glory of my majesty?'" As a result of his pride Nebuchadnezzar lost his place of authority and even his sanity for a season.

And according to John 19:11 there are degrees of judgment. The sin of Caiaphas and the religious authorities was greater than the sin of Pilate and the civil authorities. The citizens of the cities in Galilee will receive a stricter penalty on the Day of Judgment than those citizens of Tyre and Sidon and Sodom (Matthew 11:20-24). As God's chosen people they were given more truth and more responsibility for that truth. Jesus taught that there is a future Day of Judgment in which all will answer to God for the abuse of authority. So our response should be one of humility and not pride. Acknowledging God's sovereign control and trusting that He will judge every action of man both encourages us to submit to the God-given authority that is over us and to act in humility when we are exercising authority over others.

On the positive side we should recognize that ***honor follows humility***. Pride will ultimately bring the consequences of shame just as humility will bring consequences leading to honor. It is declared in Scripture. "Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time" (1 Peter 5:6). It is also exemplified in Scripture. King David was humbled in the wilderness for a period of time that he might be exalted in the kingdom of Israel throughout the generations. Jesus Christ was temporarily humbled on earth that He might be exalted above heaven and earth as the King of Kings for all eternity. Humility seems to be the necessary process for exaltation.

Good leaders will exercise authority with humility and not pride. They recognize that authority is God-given. They are mindful that we must give account for the use of authority. Honor and glory in the eternal sense is reaped only from the seeds of humility. Closely associated with humility is the second essential for good leadership. A good leader is given to service.

Service

Jesus demonstrated and taught that genuine greatness is achieved through service. He always remained humble and focused on the purpose for which He came down from heaven to dwell among men. He declared that "the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The Bible declares that as Jesus lived out the final hours before the crucifixion His soul became troubled. Adding to the sorrow that He felt while He considered the imminent shame of the cross was the petty contention between the twelve disciples over who would be the greatest in Christ's kingdom. It is stated that on the final evening when He was partaking of the last Feast of the Passover with the twelve that He gave them an example. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into His hands, and that He had come forth from God, and was going back to God, rose from supper...and began to wash the disciples' feet" (John 13:3-5). What a demonstration of both humility and service! And

what a rebuke to the ambitious disciples! But notice that Jesus did not rebuke them for their ambitions. Rather He instructed them as to how to achieve true greatness. “You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

Conclusion

Are you in a place of leadership? Jesus demonstrated and taught that a great leader is one who serves others. One who exercises authority in God's kingdom should learn the example of foot washing. Masters must learn humility and remember that there is one in heaven who judges without partiality.

A sample of some of the great leaders in the Bible includes Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Daniel and Jesus. In each we would find these like characteristics. They know how to submit to God-given authority and they know how to properly exercise authority. We will do well if we learn from their example and if we heed the teaching of God's word. But what do we do about tyrannical and abusive authority? If we are required to be submissive is there ever a time when we should not submit. When and how do we oppose abusive authority? Next time we will consider this issue.