

March 4, 2018 – Exodus 20:1-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, John 2:13-25

What are the qualities of a good leader? People of just about every time and place have wrestled with that topic. It's one of the fundamental questions of human society. Who should I follow? Why should I follow them? What would make others follow my leadership?

Back in 1989 there was a very popular book published, entitled, "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" by Stephen Covey. And it was basically a book on leadership in modern, Western society. It listed the qualities in a good leader.

And it included personal attributes like being proactive and tackling problems before they come. Having good goals and managing your time well. It also included many interpersonal attributes like encouraging compromise, listening to those around you, and building strong, effective teams. And then, finally, it said that a good leader always seeks to improve himself. Mentally, physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

Covey's book was really, really popular. It has sold over 25 million copies. It ranks as one of the best selling nonfiction books of all time. And Stephen Covey himself has become a guru of business management. In fact, I had to read "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People" as part of a seminary course on church leadership. That's how far his reach has gotten.

But as I was reading our lessons this morning, I began to wonder... what would Stephen Covey think of some of the leaders in the Bible? Would he consider them "highly effective people?" Would he compliment their habits?

I really doubt it. Because, frankly, the leaders of God's people are a pretty motley crew. Old and New Testament. They're not always the smartest bunch of men and women. They don't always have the best personal or interpersonal skills. And they rarely show many signs of self-improvement.

I mean, look at the three men in our lessons today. Moses, Paul, and Jesus. Honestly, if you were going to make a list of the three most important men of the Bible, these might just be your three names. Huge portions of the Bible revolve around their stories. Huge portions of Scripture contain their words.

Now, of course, our Old Testament Lesson doesn't directly discuss Moses. But you can't talk about the Ten Commandments without talking about Moses. The two go hand in hand.

Moses, who did everything he could to talk God out of making him the leader of the Israelites. Moses, who was terrified to speak before Pharaoh. Moses, who spent most of the Exodus complaining about these horrible people that he had to lead.

Yes, that same Moses was given the honor of seeing God's glory on Mount Sinai. Of hearing God's voice as He spoke the Ten Commandments. Of being handed two tablets of stone with the law of God written on them by the finger of the Lord.

And what did Moses do with those Ten Commandments? He broke them. Literally, smashed them. He came down from the mountain, proudly holding these precious gifts from God himself. But when he saw the people worshipping a golden calf, it infuriated him. And threw the tablets on the ground. Shattering them in his anger. Not exactly the actions of a wise, proactive leader seeking to instill confidence in those around him.

Then again, Paul wasn't much better. Paul whose resume to be an apostle includes arresting, torturing, and murdering Christians. Paul, who spent his life training to be righteous through his good works and then ends up preaching a message condemning righteousness through good works. Paul who, by his own admission, is constantly guilty of breaking God's Law.

This same Paul decides that the church in Corinth needs to be encouraged in their faith and unified in their ministry. They need to compromise and work together. Even Stephen Covey would applaud that.

But Paul decides that what should bind them all together as a church is that they are all nobodies. “Not many of you are wise. Not many of you are powerful. Not many of you are noble. Everyone thinks you’re pretty foolish and weak. And if I’m really being honest, most people think you’re pretty pathetic. And they kinda despise you.”

“But God chose you anyway! Because if he can make something out of a bunch of losers like you guys, well then he can do it with anybody!”

That is Paul’s idea of a motivational speech. That is how he thinks you build unity and compromise and teamwork. If you take away everything that a person is proud of, then they’ll have nothing left to divide them.

And yet, he’s in good company. Because if there is anybody who knows how to tear a person down, it’s Jesus. Yes, Jesus. The ultimate leader of God’s people. The one we typically look at as the epitome of love and wisdom and grace toward sinful humanity.

That same Jesus spends our lesson attacking a crowd of people. Overturning tables. Pouring out money bags. Driving people out of the temple courts with a whip. Yelling at them, *“Take these things away! Do not make my Father’s house a house of trade!”* Hardly an image of patience and compromise.

By human standards, by human wisdom, the Bible is full of some pretty lousy leaders, who do some pretty foolish things. And yet, each one does so for a reason. This foolish leadership isn’t foolish at all. This foolish leadership is exactly what God’s people need most.

Because after Moses breaks the Ten Commandments, he takes those pieces, he gathers them up, and he puts them into the Ark of the Covenant. And for the rest of Israel’s history they sit inside the Ark as a reminder of how easily, how quickly the Israelites broke God’s Law. And yet, how God still remained with them every step of the way, all the way into the Promised Land.

After Paul belittles and humiliates the people of Corinth, he tells them that they can boast. They can boast in the Lord. They can boast in the wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption that Christ has given them. Which makes them wiser than the wise and stronger than the strong. Because it is Christ living in them who gives them wisdom and strength.

And after Jesus finishes rampaging around the Temple courts. Tearing their stalls apart because of their greed and idolatry. They ask him why he’s doing this. Why are you so angry with us? And he tells them, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”*

You see, it wasn’t just the sin displayed in the Temple courts that made him smash their tables. It was the fact that he knew they were going to do the same thing to him in the end.

He had destroyed their false temple to their false god. But they were one day soon going to destroy the true temple of the true God. They were going to destroy the temple of his body. The place where God himself dwelled. And in three days, it would be rebuilt. Resurrected to new life.

They wanted a sign to prove that Jesus had the authority to judge them like this. And Jesus would soon give it to them. A sign that only his disciples understood. A sign that only we understand. The sign of Easter morning.

Because we are God’s people. And we are also sinners. We make false gods for ourselves and must be reminded of how we’ve broken the Law of the one true God. We divide ourselves with petty arguments and pride and must be told how little we really are. We allow ourselves to be consumed by greed and idolatry and must face God’s judgment in all its frightful power.

And yet, still, we are God's people. And though we break his law, he remains with us. Though we have nothing to boast about, he lets us boast in his power. And though he tears us down for our sin, he soon also rebuilds us in his own image. He dies for us that we might rise again.

He leads us to new life. Not in the way the world leads us. Not with the leaders the world gives. No, he doesn't lead us in ways that are effective. Actually they are distinctly ineffective by worldly standards. Because they lead us straight to the cross. And yet, it is through the cross that God raised Jesus from the dead on the third day. And it is through the cross that he raises us from the dead, first in the waters of Holy Baptism, and fully on the Last Day.

The example of God's leaders throughout scripture is not that of people who are effective, but of people who are chosen. Called by God to deliver a message of Law and Gospel. To a people who have broken his commandments and yet have received his grace. A people just like us. Amen.