

10 Leadership Traits of Jesus

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Who is your leadership idol?

If you're a leader, you probably have a leadership idol. Not in an idolatry way, but more in a model way. We all have a person (or group of people) we consider model leaders.

Perhaps you'd consider Mahatma Gandhi, Winston Churchill, Martin Luther King Jr., George Washington, or Mother Teresa as your leadership model. More recently, leaders try to mimic what they see in John Maxwell, Tim Cook, Sean McVay, Pope Francis, or Andy Stanley.

There are plenty of great leaders from which to learn. If you are a Christian, I'd like to suggest placing Jesus at the top of our list.

I know! This is a given. But is it, really?

Growing in our Christlikeness should be our primary leadership goal as a Christian leader. To do that, we must position Jesus as our leadership hero.

Jesus as a Leader

Entering a world where might made right, Jesus led a powerful movement without leveraging power or positional authority. We rightfully think of Jesus as the Son of God and Savior, but he was a leader, too. Jesus knew that his time on earth would end, but the movement in his name would continue under the leadership of others.

During his three-year ministry season, Jesus loved, lived, and led. **Leading like Jesus means modeling these 10 leadership behaviors:**

1. Jesus always spoke the truth.

Truth defined the words spoken by Jesus. At times, this truth created trouble for him and his followers. At other times, telling the truth illuminated the path forward. **Regardless of the consequences, Jesus spoke the truth.**

Don't think for a moment that speaking the truth is easy or problem-free for leaders. The truth can get you into trouble. It certainly did for Jesus (read about the crucifixion). Telling the truth makes people uncomfortable. Worse, telling the truth might make you look bad. Telling the truth means saying, "I don't know" and "I was wrong."

There are good reasons people don't like telling the truth. Just look at the vast majority of politicians. This is a primary reason we don't have leaders in politics. Our political climate isn't about what's true or even what's right, but about what wins. Politicians are more concerned with winning

elections, gaining power, and promoting a party agenda than being truthful, passing along power, and promoting what's best.

Jesus didn't spin the truth for his best interest. He certainly wasn't concerned with his image. He told the truth. We should, too. Always. **Yes, there is a cost to honestly. There is also a cost for dishonesty. Leaders must determine which price they are willing to pay.**

2. Jesus called his followers to more.

There were many moments when Jesus' closest followers, the disciples, wanted a position of power in what they believed to be a pending, earthly kingdom. Matthew gives us one of the most famous examples (Matthew 16:21-28). I won't repeat the entire interaction, but here is the leadership point:

"Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." – Matthew 16:24

Basically, Jesus looks at these future leaders and says, "if you want to lead like me, die to yourself."

Jesus knew these men would become critical leaders in the movement. These men weren't yet great leaders, but they would need to be in time. Unlike the Roman and Jewish leaders around them, Jesus called his future leaders to lead through self-denial.

Leading like Jesus means putting the benefit of others ahead of yourself. It means sacrificing yourself for the mission and the people. It means being uncomfortable to provide comfort. Leading like Jesus is a call to more than basic leadership.

3. Jesus balanced compassion and conviction.

Nobody on the planet held stronger convictions than Jesus. After all, he was God. He was passionate about people living life to the full and experiencing joy along the way. As a leader, though, Jesus balanced his deep convictions with deep compassion.

You see this repeatedly, mostly in his interactions with people whose lifestyle or behavior irritated the convictions of others. See Jesus' interaction with the woman caught in adultery (John 8:1-11) or with the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42).

Leading like Jesus means holding solid convictions about your mission and vision while maintaining compassion for the people executing and experiencing the mission and vision.

4. Jesus was an authority living under authority.

In all things, Jesus listened to the voice of God. Even though he was the Son of God, He refused to allow his exalted position to determine his earthly power.

The Apostle Paul noted this leadership trait when writing a letter to the churches in the city of Philippi.

*In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;
rather, he made himself nothing
by taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!
— *Philippians 2:6-8 (NIV)**

Every leader needs accountability under authority because no leader is safe outside of accountability and authority. Leading like Jesus means accepting the authority of others and remaining accountable to them. If you have a board, submit to their authority. If you lead a small organization without built-in authority, find people you trust to serve as a personal board of advisors. While they may not have legal authority, you can give them authority.

5. Jesus led by serving.

Leadership by nature requires followers. As John Boehner famously said, “A leader without followers is simply a man taking a walk.” As a leader, Jesus clearly understood the connection between leading and serving, frequently teaching and saying things like,

“Do to others as you would have them do to you.” — Luke 6:31

To go back to Paul, just before his comments on how Jesus lived under authority, wrote this:

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus. — *Philippians 2:3-5 (NIV)**

Leading like Jesus means serving those who willingly choose to follow you. A Christ-like leader must rid their heart of selfish ambition and vain conceit. Jesus always put others ahead of himself – to the point of death. Serving the people who are following your leadership represents Jesus’ best.

6. Jesus set boundaries.

Leadership can be grueling. When all decisions, responsibilities, and directions ultimately fall on your shoulders, exhaustion is inevitable.

Even Jesus took time away from leadership to recuperate. Often, Jesus would get away from his followers and the mounting crowds to rest, pray, and replenish. How you do this will be unique to you. I wrote about trying to bring my best back home here ([5 Strategies to Bring Your Best Back Home](#)). The advice in this post should better help you set boundaries.

Leading like Jesus means setting boundaries to stay emotionally and physically healthy.

7. Jesus developed leaders through delegation.

Watching Jesus' interactions with the Disciples is fascinating, especially when you know the end of the story. From the very beginning, Jesus led these men with the end in mind. Specifically, Jesus knew that this movement would require leadership after his time on earth ended. During his three-year ministry time, Jesus consistently prepared his followers to become leaders.

Jesus often delegated tasks and authority to people not yet fully prepared for the job. Check out Luke 10:1-17.

Leading like Jesus means intentionally developing those arounds you to lead alongside you. I've found incorporating a system for delegation extremely helpful.

8. Jesus saw leadership as stewardship.

None of us will lead forever. We will leave our role at some point, giving way to a new leader. This reality means that leadership is ultimately a stewardship. During our time in a leadership position, we should steward the role, the resources, and the people as well as we can.

Jesus did this so well. He was missionally minded and understood his time on earth was for a purpose. He stewarded His mission to completion and didn't let anything get in the way.

"Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more..." – Luke 12:48

Leading like Jesus means seeing leadership as a stewardship.

9. Jesus modeled curiosity.

Jesus was the king of asking questions. Sure, many of his questions were intended to make a point (see most of his interactions with the Pharisees). In a way, that is a point for us to mimic.

Asking great questions not only positions us to learn, but it places the receiver of the question in a position to think more deeply. **You've heard it said over and over those great leaders ask great questions. This is true because great questions help leaders learn more *and* help followers think more.**

Leading like Jesus means asking more questions and giving fewer directives. In the end, the results may be equal, but the process through questions gains more buy-in and generates more insight.

10. Jesus encouraged the heart.

Jesus was never concerned with behavior modification over heart transformation. Again, just look at his interactions.

Take Zacchaeus, for example. You can read the full story in Luke 19:1-10. Zacchaeus was a hated tax collector. When Jesus stopped in front of him, with a crowd watching and waiting for a chastising of biblical proportions, Jesus instead spoke to his heart. Zacchaeus' behavior certainly needed to change, but that change began with his heart.

Leading like Jesus means leaning toward people's hearts more than their heads. Christ-like leaders will need to change behaviors, but behavior modification (what) never elevates above heart transformation (why).

In Summary...

There is a common thread throughout these individual leadership traits: **HUMILITY.**

In humility, Jesus thought of others more than himself. In humility, Jesus opted to speak the truth in love, serve others, ask questions, display immense compassion, model curiosity, and encourage the heart. In everything Jesus did, humility was at the forefront.

Christ-like leaders are humble leaders.

Humility is lost in too many leadership circles these days. We rarely see it, so we struggle to model it. In a world full of power and platform-hungry people, humility is the answer to better leadership. And the answer to more Christlikeness.

Humble leaders don't think less of themselves but think of themselves less. Humility means others first. That is Jesus in summary. And to be a Christ-like leader, we must become more humble.

Which means we resist pride. We confront anything that promotes us over others. We refuse to seek personal power over our greater purpose. We admit our mistakes. We ask for forgiveness. We are honest about our shortcomings and surround ourselves with complementary leaders.