



# **CHRISTIAN CRUSADERS**

**7401 UNIVERSITY AVE., CEDAR FALLS, IOWA 50613**

**(319) 277-0924**

**[INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](mailto:INFO@CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

**[WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG](http://WWW.CHRISTIANCRUSADERS.ORG)**

## Leadership Matters

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Rev. Steve Kramer

TEXT: Matthew 23:1-12 (ESV)

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples, “The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, so do and observe whatever they tell you, but not the works they do. For they preach, but do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to move them with their finger. They do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long, and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others. But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.

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Dearly beloved,

Pastor Stuart Briscoe tells this amusing story in one of his wonderful discipleship books. One of my young colleagues, he writes, was officiating at the funeral of a war veteran. The dead man's military friends wish to have a part in the service at the funeral home, so they requested the pastor to lead them down to the casket, stand with them for a solemn moment of remembrance, and then lead them out through the side door. This he proceeded to do. But unfortunately, the effect was somewhat marred when he picked the wrong door. The result was that they marched with military precision into a broom

closet in full view of the mourners and had to beat a hasty retreat covered with embarrassment and confusion.

This little story from Stuart Briscoe reminds us that leadership matters. It's important whether it's in the church or in business or sports or education or government, just to name a few. As an employer or manager, for instance, it impacts employee turnover, absenteeism, work environment, morale, and productivity. And in sports, captains make such a difference in team unity and harmony and effectiveness on the field. And the church leadership truly does matter a great deal. And we know that there's a Bible verse that says, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." A more modern version of that might be in the church for the church day, "Where there is no pastoral vision, the people leave for another parish." So as a pastor, I've read all kinds of books along the way on leadership, both from church and business leaders, in order to stay sharp and keep my staff and congregation moving in the same direction. I've learned – leadership matters.

It matters in the government, too, doesn't it? Leadership's a topic we hear a lot about these days as we prepare for an upcoming election. "Vote for me," we hear. "Trust me, I'm the leader that this country needs. Just follow me." And we know from past history that leadership really does matter in the running of a community or a state or a country.

Now, maybe you are someone who is a leader or you aspire to be a leader in your church or community or at work. Or perhaps you're a follower who's wondering, "What is a good leader?" Well, you're in luck today. Jesus has a helpful word for you and me. We see Jesus, the world's greatest leader, (after all, He is the resurrected Lord, amen?) addressing the topic of leadership in today's passage as He takes on the scribes and the Pharisees and their leadership of the people. N.T. Wright, in his commentary on Matthew, writes that these words of Jesus speak not only to religious leadership, but also to other areas of leadership in life as well. We need to keep in mind that this is for all kinds of leaders. He writes,

Generations of preachers have used this passage to criticise church leaders who like dressing up and being seen in public. That's fair enough. But we should not forget that the scribes and Pharisees were not simply what we would call religious leaders. They were just as much what we would call social and political leaders, or at least the leaders of popular parties and pressure groups.

People desire positions of leadership in the community: at work and in the church. And we learn from the scribes and the Pharisees today and how Jesus talks about them, that it's dangerous when love for that position grows stronger than loyalty to God, because that's what it happened to the Pharisees and scribes. We know from the chapters before Matthew 23 that these leaders had been criticizing Jesus prior to this and trying to do Him in. So far they have failed in their attempts because He's just too smart for them. So they walk away from Jesus in the temple courts. Jesus turns to the disciples in the crowds and he begins to teach them about good leadership and poor leadership. He uses the scribes and Pharisees as negative examples to teach important positive principles about being a good leader.

For instance, we learn from Jesus in this passage that, number one, a good leader walks his or her talk. See, He says, the scribes and Pharisees, they sit in a place of authority on Moses' seat. They have a head seat at the table in the synagogue. He says, respectfully, listen and do what they teach from the Old Testament scripture. Of course, we know that not all the time did they interpret scripture accurately, according to Jesus, but as far as they are teaching New Old Testament scripture. But He says, "But don't do what they do, don't you copy them." Why? Because they don't practice what they preach. They don't follow God's commandments that they teach about. They love to come up with all kinds of little rules and loopholes and traditions and interpretations to get around them. He says they don't walk the talk. A good leader walks the talk.

Second, a good leader leads with compassion. They have a love for God above all things, and a love for people. These Pharisees and scribes, Jesus says, are doing nothing to help their people that they've been given the job of leading. They lack compassion for them. He says all they do is talk and lay heavy burdens on the people's shoulders that make life all the more miserable for them. And they offer no help, no assistance, not even a living example. They just like to look down on their people and judge them and talk to one another.

Number three, Jesus also tells us that a good leader is humble – he or she has an attitude of humility. Now, these leaders that Jesus described so negatively are anything but humble. He shows us that in His talk today. They show their pride and ego in the following ways. He says they do all their deeds for people's applause – they're grandstanders. Earlier, Jesus talked of them making a show of their prayer life in public in Matthew 6. And they like to show off their authority, He said, in the way they dress

and attempt to look more holy than anyone else: long phylacteries and fringes and bigger prayer boxes and so on, they wear, making their outerwear more ostentatious so that they might draw more attention to themselves. They like the places of honor at the banquets and in the synagogues. They want to be treated as bigshots. They love the perks of the job, the best seats in the House. And they love the titles and salutations from the people. Jesus mentioned three of them: He says, rabbis, meaning “my master,” in those days. They like to be called as master. He said, and “father,” they like being called affectionately and respectfully, like an Abba or a papa. Only God deserves that kind of title. They addressed their disciples as their children. Their authority and honor, they seem to think, placing them on a higher level than their disciples. And Jesus is saying that only God is supposed to receive such superior respect, all of the Christians are peers. Finally, they like to be called “instructors.” Or another word for it, “masters.” It’s an academic term speaking that they’re surrogates, so to speak, for God; substitutes, Jesus says. Or even like maybe like the Messiah – Jesus says there’s only one Messiah. So in summing up the importance of humility, Jesus says, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” By who, do you suppose? By God!

Now Jesus is talking about the last day, when He comes with His new Heaven and new Earth, and all the nations stand before him and his judgment seat. We have also seen that truth, though, played out even while we wait for that day. A funny story I heard a long time ago:

A new colonel had just moved into his new office, had a bit of an ego, and he wanted to make an impression on this young sergeant who was approaching his office that day. Right before the sergeant opened the door, the colonel picked up his phone and started pretending to be on an important call. “Yes, General Schwarzkopf, thanks for your confidence in me. I’ll do my best. I won’t let you down.” He motioned the Sergeant in and he covered the mouthpiece of his phone. He said, “What do you want, Sergeant? Can’t you see I’m on an important phone call?”

The sergeant smiled and replied, “I’m sorry, sir. I’m just here to hook up your phone.”

He who exalts himself will be humbled. And there are some sad and not so funny stories about leaders who got so full of themselves that they fell and great was their fall.

So what is humility, healthy humility? Is it looking down on yourself? No, it's not that at all. Cornell West, in an article in "Christianity Today" magazine from years ago describes humility this way: "To be humble is to be so sure of oneself and one's self mission that one can forgo calling excessive attention to one's self and status. And even more pointedly, to be humble is to revel in the accomplishments or potentials of others, especially those with whom one identifies." And then he goes on to say,

It means two things, actually. One, a capacity for self-criticism. The second feature is allowing others to shine, affirming others, empowering and enabling others. Those who lack humility are dogmatic and egotistical, they feel the success of others is at the expense of their own fame and glory. If criticism is put forward, they're not able to respond to it well. And this produces, of course, an authoritarian sensibility – and that describes the Pharisees and the scribes and their leadership to a "T", Jesus says.

So what does a humble leader look like? Well. I like this story, I came across years ago by Ramez Attalah, he's a General Director at the Bible Society of Egypt. He had attended an international conference, the Lausanne Conference with Christian leaders back in 1974 and was thrilled to be with top-notch leaders from around the globe, sharing and reading papers on interesting subjects. But the most meaningful insight actually came to him on the flight home from that conference.

It was a long flight back to Canada, (that was where he was working at the time,) I had many papers to go through. I had taken a lot of business cards from all sorts of important global leaders that I had met. We all know we collect these cards. We put them in our pockets and often forget about them. As I looked through my cards or Lausanne, I notice one that was not very well printed. And I looked at it carefully – and I get emotional when I remember this story. It broke me. At Lausanne we had small groups every night. About 10 of us met in our dormitory rooms to pray and share together. The first night we introduced ourselves: "president of a seminary," "pastor of a church with two thousand people," and so on. Everybody was busy showing how great they were. I said I led the IntersVarsity movement in the province of Quebec, Canada, (it was actually a very small ministry, but it sounded good.) One African man who was with us said, "I'm a pastor in Kenya." During the week we all listened to each other. I didn't pay much attention to the pastor from Kenya. I wanted to get close to the important people, but I was moved by this pastor's stories of how God had touched him as a school teacher during the African revival and changed his life. I

thought he was a deep man. I pictured him working in a humble little village in Africa. But when I picked up his business card on the plane back to Canada, I discovered that it said Festo Olang', Archbishop of Kenya. Well, Olang' was a man who could pull rank on anybody in our group. He was a bigwig, but we didn't know it and he did not tell us. He did not use his position to secure his identity. He was a simple pastor who loved Jesus. I'm still moved to the core when I remember this incident 32 years later. I said to myself on the plane, "That's the kind of leader I want to be. That's leadership Jesus-style."

And finally, Jesus tells us a good leader is a servant to those he or she leads – that he or she exercises servant leadership. That's looking out for the welfare of others that you're leading ahead of yourself. You're not to be a celebrity, but a servant. Not to be a superstar, but a servant, helping others to be all that God intended them to be: self-giving to others, a total commitment to others, self-sacrificing, sacrificing your own agenda if you have to, for the sake of others; selflessness, for the sake of the cause, just like Jesus. Remember His words?: "For I did not come to be served, but to serve and to give my life as a ransom for many." There you have it. That's a good leader.

I find this to be valuable instruction for pastors and politicians and bosses and captains and other kinds of leaders and followers of leaders, especially if we're followers of Jesus. His words as our Lord are meant to be taken seriously and followed. And of course, we won't be perfect in doing this – like the old song says by Mac Davis, "Oh, Lord, it's hard to be humble." And we like to be served because we're still sinners, aren't we? Pride and ego and selfishness still raises its ugly head inside of us. I know the truth of what I am saying here, because I am describing myself, friends. I'm describing myself. So I do believe maybe I'm describing you, too.

A word of grace is needed at this point of our message as we consider leadership and our failures. Thank God we have one perfect leader: Jesus Christ, son of God, Lord of the nations. And He issues these denunciations today and these directions not from great pompous heights, but on the way to a cross which awaited Him in just a few short days. He had already promised that His load is easy and his burden is light, and that people carrying heavy loads ought to come to him and carry His instead and follow Him. Now He's on His way as He speaks these latest words. He's on His way to shoulder the heaviest burden of all: our sin; so that His people would never again have to be weighed down by it. And God raised Him from the dead on the third day, (Give

me an “amen”!), announcing to the world Jesus Christ is the leader you can trust. Listen to Him. Listen to Him. He knows what good leadership is all about.

So let us constantly turn to Jesus in humble confession and trust in Him for our salvation and forgiveness and help as we strive to follow His instructions on leadership in every area of our lives.

Amen.