

Reprinted from the Christian Science Journal, January 2004.
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Learning to lead by following Jesus

By Elise L. Moore

“If you need a title to have people follow, you're not really a leader,” my boss said. I was a young businesswoman struggling to carve a place in an all-male environment. Faced with open hostility from male colleagues and borderline sexual harassment from subordinates, I guess I was hoping a title would rescue me like Maid Marian in a Robin Hood tale. But my boss would have none of it. Perhaps he knew better than to rescue me from an opportunity to develop leadership ability. Instead he offered simple advice.

"People follow success," he said. "Be successful in your job, and then help *them* be successful in theirs."

His comments reminded me of what Jesus' said, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me." ¹ Jesus' success in healing disease and lifting others up, drew multitudes to him. The Gospels speak a lot about the inner circle of 12 disciples who followed Jesus almost everywhere he went.

Still there were hundreds, even thousands, of people who came to Jesus to be healed, and to learn more about spirituality and eternal life.

As I pondered Jesus' incomparable leadership ability, it seemed the multitudes followed Jesus for two reasons:

- 1) He was successful. Jesus demonstrated the divine power to heal and save, and people yearned to feel this Christ-power in their lives.
- 2) Jesus could effectively help others bring more spirituality to their lives. He had the ability to communicate spiritual ideas in simple ways that people could understand. And Jesus was such an effective leader that millions of people are still following him 2000 years after he preached, taught, and healed.

I'm not sure my boss was thinking of Jesus as a role model for leadership skills in a young female supervisor working in a national corporation. But I

can think of no better model or mentor than Jesus to nurture leadership qualities.

This idea isn't novel. An entire industry has built up in recent years asking the question, What would Jesus do? Books have been written, seminars given, and sermons preached to help individuals follow Jesus' teachings and example. But being a follower of Jesus doesn't necessarily translate into becoming an effective leader.

What helped me was putting into practice some of the qualities Jesus taught and used during his ministry. There are many qualities that could be included, but seven appeared to me to be most important—discernment, willingness to take responsibility, practicality, perseverance, fearlessness, unselfishness, and self-sacrifice.

Discernment. In the book *Be the Leader You Were Meant to Be*, Leroy Eims wrote, "A leader is one who sees more than others see, who sees farther than others see, and who sees before others do." ² Jesus epitomizes this statement. His discernment enabled him to know the thoughts of those around him as well as to anticipate future events. He could pray and prepare for circumstances before they occurred. His perceptive ability came from his willingness to listen to the universal divine Mind. And, if God is Truth, that implies this divine Mind is aware of every true and right idea. By becoming more sensitive to God, or Mind, an individual can then be more spontaneously aware of solutions to, as well as discernment of, potential problems.

Willingness to take responsibility. When the going gets tough a leader doesn't quit. That's what my boss was trying to teach me. I had to take responsibility and forge forward with what I thought was right, rather than blaming others, or having my boss do my job for me. Taking this a step further, Jesus taught that taking responsibility meant doing God's will. He said, "I can of mine own self do nothing: . . . I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me." ³ As a person realizes that God is able to overcome human obstacles, it becomes easier to face challenges with confidence. Seeking God's guidance lifts the heaviness of responsibility and leaves the blessing of responding to God's unending ability.

Practicality. Leaders translate inspiration into practical solutions. Mary Baker Eddy, an apt follower of Jesus' teachings who became a world-

renowned religious leader wrote, "God gives you His spiritual ideas, and in turn, they give you daily supplies." ⁴ She proved this throughout her life. The spiritual ideas God gave her to write in her book *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, she relied on to supply her need for housing while writing the book. For example, she relied on God's practical inspiration in relations with her publisher. As she wrote in her autobiography, "I had already paid him seven hundred dollars, and yet he stopped my work. All efforts to persuade him to finish my book were in vain." As the result of her prayer, she began writing an additional chapter. The result was that the printer resumed his work and met her unannounced at the train station in Lynn. "We met at the Eastern depot in Lynn, and were both surprised,—I to learn that he had printed all the copy on hand . . .—he to find me *en route* for Boston, to give him the closing chapter of my first edition of *Science and Health*. Not a word had passed between us, audibly or mentally, while this went on." ⁵ Holding on to inspiration often clarifies one's vision until the practical solutions appear.

Perseverance. "Between 1850 and 1860, Harriet Tubman guided out [of slavery] more than 300 people By the start of the Civil War, she had brought more people out of slavery than any other American in history—black or white, male or female." ⁶ Leaders persevere in their purpose. Mrs. Eddy persevered in healing, teaching, and writing *Science and Health* so that others could be freed from the slavery of sickness and sin. Jesus persevered and even overcame death. His victory, and the indomitable spirit of women like Harriet Tubman and Mrs. Eddy, continue to inspire people to persevere in their mission and purpose. And Mrs. Eddy's book, *Science and Health* provides insights into health and leadership that continue to help people everywhere, just as the book helped me.

Fearlessness. A leader needs to face his or her own fears and overcome them before he or she can help others. One way to overcome fear is to feel that actions are in obedience to God. As St. Paul said, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" ⁷ If people feel that they are acting in obedience to God's will, an inner confidence and strength develops that gives courage to endeavor. Certainly the conviction that her book was God-inspired enabled Mrs. Eddy to be fearless under severe challenges.

Unselfishness. J. Oswald Sanders in his book *Spiritual Leadership* wrote: "True greatness, true leadership, is found in giving yourself in service to others, not in coaxing or inducing others to serve you. . . . the true spiritual

leader is focused on the service he and she can render to God and other people, not on the residuals and perks of high office or holy title." ⁸ Helping others achieve their goals defines the long-term leader. People who lead for their own benefit may be successful today, but will find staff unwilling to follow tomorrow.

Self-sacrifice. As unappealing as it sounds to the comfort-oriented 21st century, self-sacrifice was the cornerstone of Jesus' career. Without self-sacrifice Jesus wouldn't still be acknowledged as a leader worth emulating and following. A leader must be willing to sacrifice personal views for the benefit of others. Otherwise he or she will stumble from egotism and pride. Mrs. Eddy summarized the value of self-sacrifice by speaking of her own life: "Regardless of what another may say or think on this subject, I speak from experience. Prayer, watching and working, combined with self-immolation, are God's gracious means for accomplishing whatever has been successfully done for the Christianization and health of mankind." ⁹

It took months for me to learn even a few of the leadership qualities that Jesus lived. Yet they are so powerful that one day I realized I was being accepted as a leader by the men in my department without having a title. Age, gender, race, had become inconsequential. I had begun an adventure in learning about leadership that still continues—learning to lead by following Christ Jesus.

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¹ John 12:32, ² Quoted in John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership Workbook* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2002), p.39. ³ John 5:30. ⁴ *Miscellaneous Writings*, p. 307. ⁵ *Retrospection and Introspection* p. 38. ⁶ Maxwell, p. 78. ⁷ Rom. 8:31, ⁸ J.Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership: Principles of Excellence for Every Believer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), p. 15. ⁹ Science and Health, p. 1.