

Leadership Qualities: Priorities

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He was Europe's 350-pound wrestling champ a little over two generations ago. His name was Yussif, but people called him the Terrible Turk because of his massive size and awesome strength. After he won the championship in Europe, he sailed to the United States to contend with our champion – Strangler Lewis – a much smaller man who weighed just over 200 pounds.

Strangler Lewis had a simple plan for defeating his opponents. He'd put his arm around the neck of his competitor and cut off the oxygen at the Adam's apple. Many an opponent had passed out in the ring with Strangler's tactics. The problem Lewis discovered when it came time to fight the Terrible Turk was that the European giant didn't have a neck! He just went straight from his head down to those massive shoulders. In the ring, Strangler Lewis couldn't even get a hold, so it wasn't long before Yussif flipped Lewis over on the mat and pinned him.

After winning the championship, the Terrible Turk demanded that every bit of his \$5,000 prize money be given to him in gold. After he wrapped the championship belt around his vast, equator-like middle, he stuffed the gold into the belt and boarded the next ship back to Europe. He had not only captured America's glory, but he possessed her gold as well. He had won it all – except immortality!

Yussif set sail on the SS Bourgogne. Halfway across the Atlantic, a storm struck and the ship began to sink. The Terrible Turk went boldly over the side with his gold still strapped around his body. The added weight was too much, even for the heavyweight champion, and he sank like an anvil before crew members could get him into a lifeboat. He was never seen again.

We hear stories like this – a true story – and think, “How on earth could anyone be so foolish?” But, the truth of the matter is, we all tend to grasp the things of this world and hold onto them even while we're sinking. The story of Yussif the Terrible Turk shows us the tragic consequences that can overwhelm us when we lose our perspective and our priorities.

God calls out to us, “Let go of the things of this world and you will float, you will rise, you will live.” But if we fail to recognize that this world is not our ultimate destination, then we will never be able to risk letting go of the things this world prizes. We will never be able to handle the pressures of this life. Without a clarity of purpose and a proper sense of priorities, our lives will be shaped by the pressures around us rather than by a divine call.

The Richest Fool in the World

Jesus wanted his followers to understand this, so he did what he usually did when he really wanted us to understand something: he told a story. The story is found in Luke 12 about a rich man whose priorities were completely mistaken:

And [Jesus] told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man produced a good crop. He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’

“Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’

“But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’

“This is how it will be with anyone who stores up things for himself but is not rich toward God.”

Luke 12:16-21

Every leader lives under the influence of the Law of Limited Resources. Time, in particular, is one of those precious commodities. The time invested in any project is taken away from some other place in life. The energy invested in one job won’t be there for another one. Particularly as we get older, we realize how precious these commodities are. We discover that our energy is not what it once was, and the time it takes to complete things often grows longer as the days grow shorter. No leader will ever lack for things to occupy his or her time and energy. Because that’s the case, every leader must answer an important question: “Where should I invest my time and energy?” Or to put it differently, “What should be my priorities?” The real issue, as we will see, has to do with the degree to which we have aligned our will with God’s will.

In telling this story Jesus not only warned against the danger of greed, but also pointed out the futility of priorities that are not in line with God’s will. The man in the parable had clear priorities. First, he wanted to accumulate wealth. Second, he wanted to use his wealth to secure his own future. Now, any retirement investment consultant will tell you that saving for the future is a good – even necessary – pursuit. But the rich fool, as he is called in this parable, started with the wrong motives and unfortunately failed to achieve either priority. He died before he could either expand his business or enjoy retirement. Jesus applied this parable to anyone whose priorities reveal a heart absorbed with self instead of God.

Many of us presume that there will be time to take stock of eternal things later in life. But there are two fatal flaws in this thinking. First, how do we know there will be a “later” in life? The man in Jesus’ story had no idea how close his death was. He had no idea that his life would be demanded of him that very night. The reason God calls him a fool is not because God is into abusive language. God chooses his words carefully; he does not call the man evil or wicked, necessarily. He calls the man a fool, because, in all the man’s planning, everything is accounted for except the one inevitability that faces every human being: death. The man failed to consider that at some point, he might actually die. He neglected to plan for the most obvious and predictable event in human existence: We’re all going to die, and we don’t know when.

The second flaw in this thinking is that when the time comes and we want to turn to the eternal, we may not actually be able to do so after having cultivated a habit of avoidance. It's a naïve assumption that a pattern of steadily avoiding God's claims will suddenly be overturned just before it's too late. Our character is shaped by the decisions we make. The longer we allow the habits of our youth to remain unchanged, the harder they are to change.

Ultimately, our purpose for living should be to bring recognition (honor and glory) to God rather than to bring pleasure to ourselves (see 1 Corinthians 10:31). With that purpose in mind we can set our priorities by discovering what will bring the greatest recognition to God. If we do that, unlike the fool in the parable, we'll be rich in God's eyes.

The promise of God is, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13). A half-hearted search for God will yield a harvest of bitterness, disappointment and despair. You will not find God with a divided heart. The search for God requires a singleness of purpose.

Summum Bonum

As important as success, security and significance are, there is something far more meaningful than these. Philosophers and theologians call it the *summum bonum*, the "supreme good," and they tell us that to miss this is to miss everything. In Revelation 1:8 we find the biblical vision of the *summum bonum*. The apostle John writes, "I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord God, "who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty."

Just as the Lord God calls himself "the Alpha and the Omega, who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty," so Jesus, at the end of the Revelation, says of himself, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End" (22:13). Nothing and no one preceded the Lord, and nothing will follow him. He is the supreme Author of matter and energy, of space and time. The infinite and personal I AM is the ultimate reality, and everything else is derived from him.

If the utmost reality is a timeless, unchanging Person, then the *summum bonum*, the supreme good of humanity, is to know and be known by this Person. The wisest thing we can do is to seek him with whole hearts. He wants to be found, but he also wishes to be sought. He says through the prophet Jeremiah, "You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart" (Jeremiah 29:13).

Scripture reveals that the Son of God has made it possible for us to enter into a genuine relationship with the Father. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27).

This is why it is possible for someone to attain the wildest fantasies of humanity and still lose everything in the end. Howard Hughes was the wealthiest man of his day. He had success, money and the power that comes with it. Yet he died a shriveled husk of a man, insane by all

reasonable accounts. Marilyn Monroe was the most adored woman of her time. Every woman envied her. Every man wanted her. She had beauty, fame and the adoration of millions, but she died alone at her own hand. How many more names must we list? Ernest Hemingway, Vincent van Gogh, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, Lenny Bruce, Virginia Woolf, John Belushi – these men and women were not considered modest successes. They were hugely celebrated artists, having achieved what this world would consider the pinnacle of achievement. And yet can you imagine a more miserable company? The penetrating insight of Jesus rings throughout the centuries to our own generation: “What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul” (Matthew 16:26).

There is a simple two-word question people who cling tightly to the things of this world tend to avoid asking: “Then what?” That’s the question the rich fool in Jesus’ story never asks. When the barn is finally full, when the finances are secured, then what? After the ultimate promotion, the ultimate purchase, the ultimate home, after the ladder of success has been scaled to the highest rung, after the thrill wears off – and it will wear off – then what?

There is a great danger in our society of avoiding or denying ultimate reality. So, I should frequently ask myself, “If tonight was my night, if this was the day my life was going to be demanded of me, what words would I want God to use to summarize my life?” I don’t want them to be “You fool!” I don’t want to get to that point and realize that I’ve wasted my life on stuff that doesn’t matter – cheap baubles and cut glass. The soul does not long for something that’s material. The soul longs for more than that, that for which it was created.

Solomon tells us in Ecclesiastes 3:11 that God “has also set eternity in the hearts of men.” Mark Buchanan says,

Our deepest instinct is heaven. Heaven is the ache in our bones, the splinter in our heart. Like the whisper of faraway waves we hear crashing in the whorls of a conch shell, the music of heaven echoes, faint, elusive, haunting, beneath and within our daily routines....

The instinct for heaven is just that: homesickness, ancient as night, urgent as daybreak. All your longings – for the place you grew up, for the taste of raspberry tarts that your mother once pulled hot from the oven, for that bend in the river where your father took you fishing as a child, where the water was dark and swirling and the caddis flies hovered in the deep shade – all these longings are a homesickness, a wanting in full what all these things only hint at, only prick you with. These are the things seen that conjure in our emotions the Things Unseen.¹

Even the atheist has this longing. When people pursue the things of this earth exclusively, they end up with bitterness at the end of their journey. Life seems empty because they long for more than this life can provide. They long for the one who made them, whether they acknowledge it or not.

The Good vs. The Best

There is nothing wrong with wanting raspberry tarts or saving for retirement. However, these can never become the *summum bonum* of life. When they do, the good becomes the enemy of the best. Effective leaders have the ability to discern not only the difference between the good and the bad, but also the difference between the good and the best. Since we cannot do everything well, we must carefully choose a few things on which we will concentrate. In 1 John 2:15-17 we find the competing claims of the world and of the Father.

Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world – the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does – comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.

Often we claim to have certain priorities, but our practice reveals something is out of alignment. Our practices reveal what our true priorities are. And the determining factor is our perspective. Our perspective should determine our priorities, and our priorities should determine our practice. Do we have an eternal perspective? Or have we settled for an earthly, temporal perspective?

A biblical perspective informs us that anything which keeps us away from the love of the Father is idolatrous, no matter how “good” it appears to be. In one sense, it is not strictly correct to say that a Christian’s priorities should be God first, family second and career and ministry third. If Christ is our life (Colossians 3:3-4), he is our all, and he brooks no competition or even comparative ranking. A Christ-centered life means that everything else must be seen in relation to his lordship:

Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God.

Colossians 3:1-3

This talk of setting our minds on things above sounds impractical in our day-to-day world. Many of us have even been warned by well-intentioned people that if we become too heavenly minded, we are of no earthly good. How is it possible to set our minds on things above rather than earthly things? More to the point, is it possible to do so without becoming a hermit and living in isolation? Thomas Kelly’s insight is helpful:

There is a way of ordering our mental life on more than one level at once. On one level we may be thinking, discussing, seeing, calculating, meeting all the demands of external affairs. But deep within, behind the scenes, at a profounder level, we may also be in prayer and adoration, song and worship and a gentle receptiveness to divine breathings.²

In other words, God has created us with the ability to be aware of two levels at one time, but many of us are content to think only on one plane at a time. We suffer from a lack of attentiveness – a spiritual attention deficit disorder.

In George Bernard Shaw's play *St. Joan*, one of the characters asks Joan of Arc why God doesn't speak to him the way she claims God speaks to her. She replies, "The voice speaks to you all the time. You just fail to listen." This kind of listening requires us to acknowledge the fact that Immanuel, "God with Us," is, in fact, with us at all times and in all circumstances. Merely acknowledging his continual, abiding presence is a huge step toward setting our minds on things above and allowing those things to order our steps, our words and our thoughts. So this ordering of our minds on more than one level at once, is a skill that can be learned.

Like Martha (Luke 10:38-42), it is easy for us to become distracted by the anxieties and concerns of the world and to miss out on the one thing that is most needful. "'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her'" (vv. 41-42). The worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things have a way of choking the Word in us and making it unfruitful (Mark 4:19).

Any time we allow our hearts to be divided, we will be choked. We will miss out on the best, and we will be worried and upset about many things. James tells us that "a double-minded man," a man whose trust is divided between God and the world, is "unstable in all he does" (James 1:8). Unless we are diligent and watchful, we will miss out on the best in our quest for the good.

"This One Thing I Do"

Life gets confusing and conflicted. We have to decide what matters most, or we become victims of the loudest or latest demands. Paul, whose focused life made him, literally, a world-changer, discovered the key to a prioritized life and shared that key in Philippians 3:10-14. For the godly leader, this is the finish line of the rat race:

I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.

Paul is a man who had much of what this world would say is honorable and good to have. He accomplished an amazing amount in the approximately 20 years he functioned as a leader in the early church. The communities of faith he planted and the letters he wrote have helped shape

Western culture. Part of Paul's ability to accomplish so much is defined in this phrase: "But one thing I do...."

The book of Acts and Paul's epistles reveal that he lived a real life in real circumstances with real options to choose from. He, like everyone else, had to decide what to do and what not to do. He obviously made wise choices. He pursued matters that mattered. When options conflicted he had the ability to choose well. But priorities have to begin with a "This one thing I do." Without a defining, central Priority, there can be no sensible priorities in leading or in life.

Life is too complex to live it by lists of priorities. Paul knew what one thing gave definition to his life, and all his priorities grew out of that central focus. Priorities help us say "yes" and "no" to things that matter and don't matter. Far more, having a consuming priority redefines how we say yes and how we live to make that "yes" a reality. Our lives are to be given over completely to something bigger than ourselves. As George Bernard Shaw said:

This is the true joy in life, the being used for a purpose recognized by yourself as a mighty one; the being thoroughly worn out before you are thrown on the scrap heap; the being a force of nature instead of a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.³

God has a purpose, a calling, a destiny for each of us. Our work is to strain for it, to stretch for it and pour out our lives in pursuit of that one great and glorious thing for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of us. In doing this, we will not find ourselves missing out on anything other than trivial pursuits. God's desire for us is better than anything we would choose on our own. We lack the vision, imagination and creativity to see what he has in store for us (2 Corinthians 2:9).

Often, in our rush to pursue our own desires, we become like a dog whose leash is wrapped around a telephone pole. We pull harder and harder to free ourselves only to get more and more tangled and choked in the process. The master, in order to free us, must move us in precisely the opposite direction around the pole. Rather than viewing the master as liberator, we mistakenly think he is hindering us in our pursuit of joy and fulfillment. But if we will patiently trust the master enough to obey his calling, we will find that his is the only path to real freedom.

God's call is mysterious. We don't know where he's taking us. We don't know how long the journey will be; it may take a week, a year, a decade, a lifetime. We don't know. The one thing we can know is that his ways are infinitely better than ours. The wise thing, then, is to allow him to guide you in this journey, and resign yourself to the fact that God tends to reveal things on a "need-to-know" basis.

Choosing Wisely

So, how can you choose which task you should devote your time to? Peter F. Drucker gives us some practical guidelines aimed at helping us choose priorities. He observes that "there are always more productive tasks for tomorrow than there is time to do them and more opportunities than there are capable people to take care of them – not to mention the always abundant

problems and crises.”⁴ Drucker urges leaders to determine which tasks deserve priority rather than allowing the pressures to make the decision.⁵

How can leaders make such choices? Drucker provides the following guidelines:

- Pick the future over the past.
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- Focus on opportunities rather than problems.
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- Choose your own direction – rather than climbing on the bandwagon.
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- Aim high, for something that will make a difference, rather than something that is safe and easy to do.⁶
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Choosing our priorities rather than allowing the pressures to choose them is important in the marketplace. In the spiritual arena, it’s crucial. God had harsh words for the ancient religious, military and financial leaders who boasted about their wisdom, strength and wealth.

As we consider his advice we need to be sure to order our priorities according to the words of Jeremiah 9:23-24:

This is what the Lord says:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the Lord.

Their arrogant words revealed that their priorities were out of order. Perhaps they had allowed the pressures of their world to dictate their focus. God urged them to evaluate their lives and rearrange their priorities. They should have chosen to focus first on knowing and understanding God and pleasing him. A leader who applies Drucker’s guidelines to his or her spiritual and business life will discover he or she is choosing what’s important rather than allowing the pressures of life to make the choices.

The spiritual life involves risks. God frequently calls us to do things that seem uncomfortable, risky and downright painful. Generally speaking, the people we find in Scripture who were called by God did not feel up to their calling. Whether it was Abraham’s call to leave home, Gideon’s call to lead an army, Esther’s call to approach the king or Mary’s call to give birth to the Messiah, none of them responded, “Sure, I can do that.” The first response to a calling from God is usually fear. Henry Blackaby writes,

Some people say, “God will never ask me to do something I can’t do.” I have come to the place in my life that, if the assignment I sense God is giving me is something that I know I can handle, I know it is probably *not* from God. The kind of assignments God gives in the Bible are always God-sized. They are always beyond what people can do,

because he wants to demonstrate his nature, his strength, his provisions, and his kindness to his people and to a watching world. This is the only way the world will come to know him.⁷

Think about that: The only way the world will come to know God is if the people he calls actually take him up on the challenge to live the life of faith! God calls us to a grand adventure, a life of trust and risk and fulfillment, a life whose priorities are shaped by God's divine agenda. But if we allow ourselves to be distracted from pursuing God's best plans and, instead, chase after myriad "good" things, we will fail to display the nature, strength, provision and kindness of God to the world. And our world will suffer for it.

¹ Mark Buchanan, *Things Unseen*. Portland, OR: Multnomah, 2002, pp. 29-30.

² Thomas Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion*. New York: Harper Bros., 1941, 12.

³ George Bernard Shaw, introduction to his play *Man and Superman*.

⁴ Excerpt as submitted from *The Effective Executive* by Peter F. Drucker. Copyright © 1966, 1967 by Peter F. Drucker. Copyright renewed 1994, 1995 by Peter F. Drucker. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 632.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 633.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 635.

⁷ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994, 138.