

# Leadership Qualities: Purpose and Passion

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“Just turn right after the railroad tracks. You can’t miss it.” Locals have a quaint way of giving directions to lost motorists. They make a lot of assumptions. “Go past the Johnson’s old farm to where the grocery store used to be.” They forget about the fork in the road or the new traffic signal. “You can’t miss it,” they insist. But the problem is that while *they* may not be able to miss it, *we* often do. And, after traveling 15 or 20 miles out of our way, we have to turn around, go back to that last intersection and ask for directions again.

Sometimes we move through life thinking we can’t miss it. The next turn will be so obvious. There can’t be any doubt which way to go at the next junction. But how many times have we discovered, to our chagrin, that we’re completely lost and should have taken the other fork 20 miles back?

There’s an old story about a pilot who came over the intercom and said, “Good news, ladies and gentlemen: We’ve got a very strong tailwind and are making excellent time. The bad news is that our navigation equipment has gone down, so we have no idea where we are.” Perhaps this is a fitting analogy for many of us. We’re making great time on a road to nowhere. We’re on the fast track, but we don’t really know where all of this is headed. When we finally get what we’ve wanted all these years, we discover that it wasn’t really what we wanted after all. So, we hop on another treadmill, but it leads to the same disillusionment. How far do we have to travel, before we turn around, go back to that last intersection and ask for directions again?

A well-known poem whose author’s identity has been forgotten says it like this:

Across the fields of yesterday,  
He sometimes comes to me  
A little lad just back from play –  
The boy I used to be.  
He looks at me so wistfully  
When once he’s crept within  
It is as if he hoped to see  
The man I might have been.

It is interesting to go back to the days of idealistic youth and recall the things we hoped for, the kind of person we thought we might become. But such nostalgic recollections can be depressing. We wonder where the years have gone and what happened. Could it be that we took the wrong turn somewhere along the line? Is it too late to rectify an error in judgment?

As followers of Jesus, we say that the answer is, “No! It’s never too late.” We always have the opportunity of turning back and getting on the right track. Our source of direction is far greater

than the people who say, “You can’t miss it.” There is a source that can tell us what life is really about. Found in the pages of Scripture, particularly the wisdom literature, are directions not just to “live and learn” but to “learn and live.” The promise of skillful living is made to all those who will “listen to advice and accept instruction” (Proverbs 19:20). God has revealed truths about life; the Bible is a guidebook of sorts, a blueprint to living, the foundation of a well-built life and a roadmap through the maze of confusion that our days often resemble. There is purpose and meaning, clarity and fulfillment in this life. But it is only found as we navigate by the wisdom contained in the word of God.

### ***The Secret to Paul’s Productivity***

The apostle Paul accomplished an astounding amount in two decades of ministry. What made him tick? What drove him to carry out the work that he did? We find the secret in Philippians 3:7-9:

But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

This passage explodes with Paul’s passion for his calling. Effective leaders, like Paul, are those who have figured out what they stand for. They have identified their purpose and pursue it with a passion.

Before his dramatic conversion (Acts 9), Paul followed a different purpose in life. As a Pharisee, Paul had attained the highest levels of status. In this instance he could have boasted about his religious training, heritage and practice. He had been, in every sense, a “Hebrew of Hebrews,” and his credentials would have impressed the most devoted Jew. He was a passionate man, but he was passionate about the wrong things. After his encounter with the risen Lord, Paul considered all he had attained through religious effort to be garbage when compared with the value of knowing Christ. Paul was more than happy to throw away all he had attained in order to know Christ.

Paul preached that in Christ he and all believers possess all the righteousness of God. We can have peace with the one who created us, the one for whom we were made. Because of the infinite worth of knowing Christ, Paul devoted his life to knowing the Savior. That was his purpose and his passion. And that purpose and that passion shaped all he did and influenced all he led.

This is not to say that our purpose eliminates all other concerns. Bills must still be paid; food and shelter do not miraculously fall from the sky. It is even legitimate for us to desire success in business and career aspirations. However, Benjamin Hunnicutt, an authority on the history of work at the University of Iowa, notes that work has become our new religion, where we worship and give our time and energy. As our commitment to family, community and faith shrink, we begin to look to our careers to provide us with meaning, identity and esteem.<sup>1</sup> We must be ever

watchful to keep our calling (something we do *for* God) from becoming a career (something which threatens to *become* god).

Compared with knowing Christ, my activities from 8 to 5 Monday through Friday don't matter very much. In the end, what will matter is whether or not we know him, regardless of what else is on our resume or in our portfolio. When we stand before God and hear him ask the question, "Why should I let you into heaven?" what will we say? I was a vice president in my company? I did well in the market? I was on the board of the country club? I was active in my church? None of these answers are satisfactory. Only one will suffice: Jesus forgave my sins and gave me his righteousness.

The greatest achievements of this world are fine. There is nothing inherently wrong with them, but in the eternal scheme of things, Paul says, they are rubbish. Compared with the value of knowing Christ, they are trash. Actually the Greek word is *skubala*. It's a hard word to translate, and it's a word that makes a lot of church people uncomfortable. The King James Version renders it "dung," but even that is a mild form of what Paul is saying. Paul is using bumper-sticker language: *Skubala happens!*

### ***The Great Purpose of a Great God***

Rubbish? Dung? How did the world get like this? It certainly wasn't God's purpose in creating the universe. Does Scripture reveal God's intention when he created humans who bear his image? If so, how can we discover God's deep passion and participate in it? Before we get too deep into this, let us recognize that even if God did tell us explicitly why he does what he does, we wouldn't understand.

In the book *A Little Book of Coincidence*, geometer John Martineau reveals the exquisite orbital patterns of the planets and the mathematical relationships that govern them. Through the movement of the Moon, Venus, Mars and Mercury, it becomes clear that Earth is much more special than simply being the right distance from the Sun. From looking into the heavens we realize that we have no idea just how complex the designer of all this must be. Nothing in the universe is random.

So, it's no wonder this magnificent designer would tell us, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the Lord. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts'" (Isaiah 55:8-9). One other Scripture to keep at the forefront of our thinking is 1 Corinthians 13:12: "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known."

These passages highlight the huge knowledge gap between what God intends and what we know of God's intentions. Basically, the difference between God and human beings is greater than that between angels and insects. We simply do not have the capacity to grasp God's ultimate purposes in creating the cosmos. Scripture does, however, reveal fragments of God's purposes that relate to our lives in this world. One such fragment is found in Ephesians 3:2-11. Here we gain a perspective on the purpose and passion of the God of creation.

Surely you have heard about the administration of God's grace that was given to me for you, that is, the mystery made known to me by revelation, as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Spirit to God's holy apostles and prophets. This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus.

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power. Although I am less than the least of all God's people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to make plain to everyone the administration of this mystery, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things. His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.

God's eternal purposes reflect his perfect and eternal wisdom, and he had designed the world in such a way that we are most happy when God is glorified in our lives. For reasons that are incomprehensible to us, God has a passion for intimacy with his people, and we participate in his eternal purposes when we pursue him with an undivided heart.

Sometimes we just read over a statement like that last one and fail to be struck by just how profound and breathtaking it is. God has a passion for intimacy with his people. Singer-songwriter Michael Card put it in fundamental terms when he sang, "Could it be that You would really rather die than live without us?" That's the length to which God will go in his pursuit of fellowship with us. His desire was more than mere words; it prompted him to enter into human history. The apostle John writes, "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (1 John 4:10). God believes intimate fellowship with us to be worth the death of his own son. Who could possibly comprehend that?

You are beautiful beyond description,  
Too marvelous for words  
Too wonderful for comprehension,  
Like nothing ever seen or heard  
Who can grasp your infinite wisdom?  
Who can fathom the depth of your love?  
You are beautiful beyond description,  
Majesty enthroned in love.<sup>2</sup>

This is the God who wants to know us. This is the God who gave his Son as a ransom for us. The God who created billions and billions of stars, the God who arranged the heavens with the ease of an interior decorator hanging curtains, desires intimacy with us to the point that he would

enter our world with all its limitations and allow us to crucify him. If that's true, life can only be truly meaningful when we find that God glorified in our lives.

The obvious question that begs to be asked is: "If a God could create and sustain a universe as amazingly complex as ours, if that same God could put together a plan to redeem lost and fallen humanity, if that God would go to such great lengths to rescue people who don't even know they're in peril, could that God be trusted? Could it be that his purpose for our lives is better than that which we could construct on our own?" The answer is, "Of course!" But before we pat ourselves on the back for having answered correctly, the follow-up question looms large: "So what?" What are the implications of this? How are our lives reflecting this belief?

Practice reveals priorities and beliefs. We can have a cognitive affirmation that God has a better purpose than anything I could come up with, but does it show in our practice? Contrary to public opinion, in releasing ourselves to God's purposes and giving ourselves wholeheartedly and unreservedly to him, we're not *sacrificing* anything other than the illusion of self-sufficiency. We're embracing something altogether wonderful.

### ***Three Dimensions of God's Purpose for Us***

While Scripture provides us only glimpses of God's **ultimate** purposes in creating the cosmos, the Word does reveal God's **universal** purpose for believers. In short, this purpose is to know Christ and to make him known. God does not want anyone to perish, but desires that everyone come to repentance and enter into a relationship with him through the new birth in Christ (2 Peter 3:9). Once a person is born again as a child of God, God wants that person to grow in Christ and be "conformed to the likeness of his Son" (Romans 8:29). Thus, God's purpose for each of us is edification (spiritual growth) and evangelism (spiritual reproduction).

God also has a **unique** purpose for each of us, and this relates to our distinctive temperaments, abilities, experiences, spiritual gifts, education and spheres of influence. Why do you get out of bed in the morning? What is your life purpose? Few people can articulate a clear purpose statement for their lives. It is ironic that people tend to put more effort into planning a two-week vacation than they do in thinking about the destiny of their earthly journey. In Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth we find more of an eternal perspective on this temporal journey:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

This passage provides the context for God's unique purposes for our lives, and reminds us to develop an eternal perspective so that we will have a passion to give our lives in exchange for the things that God tells us will endure.

Biblically speaking, there are two things on this planet that are going to endure: people and the word of God. If we take God's eternal word and invest it in eternal people, then we're leveraging the temporal for eternity. We're actually sending something ahead of us into eternity. It's not what we leave behind that's important; it's what we send ahead.

Our little piles of goods will fall into someone else's hands after we're gone. Someone else will take our possessions and our positions. The world will go on without us, and we will be quickly forgotten. This might be a major cause of depression if it weren't for the fact that God calls us to place our hope on that which lasts and to invest in that which will endure. It's not enough for leaders have purpose and passion; they need to be passionate about the right things. Leaders must come to view this world from eternity's perspective.

With this perspective, we will place more value in people than in possessions. Rather than using people to gain possessions, we will use our possessions to gain people. The marketplace becomes an arena in which we can accomplish things that will last forever. Our associations become areas of influence where we can alter a person's eternal trajectory. There is no secular part of life. When we view others the way God views them, every place becomes holy ground, a place where God is working in us and through us to accomplish his universal purpose of bringing about the abundant life of Christ in men and women. We become people who minister to others by manifesting eternal values and by loving and serving people with eternal things in mind.

Relationships are the currency of heaven. Being rightly related to God and rightly related to others – this is true righteousness. God, who loved us first, makes it possible for us to love him. Loving him makes it possible for us to love others and dwell in a community of believers, united in our love for Christ and one another.

What is your purpose for being on this planet? If you have not developed a purpose statement for your life, ask God to guide you in the process of creating one that fits with your passion and gifts. A biblical purpose is an unchanging reason for being. Your purpose statement must include something of the transcendent. Don't settle for a purpose that only includes excellence in the temporal arena. This is something that will animate you whether you're young or old, single or married, have children or not. This is not something that ends in retirement or changes according to circumstances or season of life. Put this purpose in a transcendent context by adding a spiritual dimension to why you're doing what you're doing. Then you can be sure you're embracing the things that are worth embracing.

### ***God's Promises Breed Passion***

What is it about some leaders? They seem to have that extra "Oohmph!" Their people are unusually productive, grievances from their area are infrequent and quality is high. People from other areas want to be transferred to their departments. What is their secret? Passion!

Enthusiasm! These leaders have a clearly defined purpose that transcends merely pushing product out the door.

One man who lived a hard life found this secret, and at the age of 85, was passionate about his purpose-driven life. No retirement community with shuffleboard for him. His story is a must-read. His name was Caleb, and we find his story in Joshua 14:6-14:

Now the men of Judah approached Joshua at Gilgal, and Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him, “You know what the Lord said to Moses the man of God at Kadesh Barnea about you and me. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly. So on that day Moses swore to me, ‘The land on which your feet have walked will be your inheritance and that of your children forever, because you have followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.’

“Now then, just as the Lord promised, he has kept me alive for forty-five years since the time he said this to Moses, while Israel moved about in the desert. So here I am today, eighty-five years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out; I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified, but, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.”

Then Joshua blessed Caleb son of Jephunneh and gave him Hebron as his inheritance. So Hebron has belonged to Caleb son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite ever since, because he followed the Lord, the God of Israel, wholeheartedly.

There is the key. Three times his brief biography states that Caleb “Followed the Lord...wholeheartedly” (vv. 8, 9, 14). He embraced God’s promise and followed him with a holy abandon. Now, in his twilight years, at a time when most people might think it’s too late, Caleb is enthusiastic, gutsy and passionate about proving what the Lord could do through one who trusted him completely. In the end, Caleb does lay hold of that for which he was laid hold of!

Passion and clear purpose served Caleb well for his many years. And these two qualities are still an essential part of great leadership. For Caleb, that purpose and its consequent passion were transcendent. They were greater than any product of promotion or profit. He found a life-consuming passion: “I followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.” No higher purpose and no greater passion exist. This purpose gives maximum meaning to whatever a leader does.

### ***Purpose and Strategy for This Life***

We've learned that, as godly leaders, our purpose in life needs to be directed toward God and his kingdom. Does that mean we sit idly by and wait for Christ's return? No. The apostle Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 5:9 that we need to please God both in this life and the next: "So we make it our goal to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it."

Paul knew that one day the Lord would replace his earthly body with a resurrection body. While Paul didn't want to be separated from his present body, he longed to be clothed with his new one. Such a longing didn't lead the apostle to try to escape life or dismiss it as meaningless. On the contrary, that hope spurred him to please Christ.

As followers of Christ our passion for the Savior needs to both drive and define our purpose for living. Brennan Manning, in his book *The Lion and the Lamb*, writes about two ways of discerning our passion and purpose. First, he advises us to recall what has saddened us recently. He asks,

Was it the realization that you don't love Jesus enough, that you don't seek his face in prayer often enough, that you can't honestly say that the greatest thing that ever happened in your life is that he came to you and you heard his voice? Or have you been saddened and depressed over a lack of human respect, criticism from an authority figure, financial problems, lack of friends or your bulging waistline?<sup>3</sup>

Then he asks the question,

What has gladdened you recently? Reflection on your election to the Christian community, the joy of praying, "Abba, I belong to you?" The afternoon you stole away with the gospel as your only companion, the filling awareness that God loves you unconditionally, just as you are and not as you should be? A small victory over selfishness? Or, were the sources of your gladness enjoying a new car, a suit, a movie and a pizza, a trip to Paris?<sup>4</sup>

By asking ourselves these questions we come face-to-face with what makes us tick as individuals. What are the primary motivations in our lives? Then we can begin to take our personal passion and purpose and apply it organizationally.

In his excellent book *The Purpose Driven Church*, Rick Warren articulates the importance of translating our purpose into practical strategies. Among other things, he suggests the following:

- Program around your purposes. Design a program to fulfill each of your purposes.
- Educate your people on purpose. Change doesn't happen by chance; it occurs as leaders cultivate settings and procedures that facilitate the education of those they serve.
- Start small groups on purpose. Rather than forcing everyone to conform to a "one size fits all" mentality, he urges people to choose the type of small group that best fits their needs.
- Add staff on purpose. Rather than just hiring people who possess character and competence, he urges leaders to look for staff with a passion for the purpose of the church. People are self-motivated about an area where they have passion.

- Structure on purpose. Develop structures or teams that work together to systematically fulfill the purpose of the church.
- Evaluate on purpose. Consistent effectiveness in an ever-changing world requires continual evaluation. Warren notes that “in a purpose driven church, your purposes are the standard by which you evaluate effectiveness.”<sup>5</sup>

There is a lot of talk about vision in leadership circles these days and rightly so. However, much of the organizational malaise found in companies, churches and families is not caused by a lack of vision but by a lack of strategy. If we fail to strategize according to an overarching purpose, we will never accomplish the things God wants for us.

The overall purpose of our lives must match up with his agenda. Otherwise, we will live out our lives in frustration and futility. God has structured reality so that when he is honored first and foremost, satisfaction comes as a byproduct. May he grant us the courage and grace to honor him in all our ways.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, *Work Without End: Abandoning Shorter Hours for the Right to Work*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Altrogge, “I Stand in Awe,” 1987, PDI Praise.

<sup>3</sup> Brennan Manning, *The Lion and the Lamb*. Grand Rapids: Revell, 1986, 43.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Adapted from Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995, 137-152.