

The Marks of a Spiritual Leader

[January 01, 1995](#) / by [John Piper](#) / Topic: [Spiritual Leadership](#)

I define spiritual leadership as knowing where God wants people to be and taking the initiative to use God's methods to get them there in reliance on God's power. The answer to where God wants people to be is in a spiritual condition and in a lifestyle that display his glory and honor his name. Therefore, the goal of spiritual leadership is that people come to know God and to glorify him in all that they do. Spiritual leadership is aimed not so much at directing people as it is at changing people. If we would be the kind of leaders we ought to be, we must make it our aim to develop persons rather than dictate plans. You can get people to do what you want, but if they don't change in their heart you have not led them spiritually. You have not taken them to where God wants them to be.

Everyone has the responsibility of leadership in some relationships. But my concern in this paper is with the characteristics that a person must have in order to be a spiritual leader who excels both in the quality of his direction and the numbers of people who follow him.

Biblical spiritual leadership contains an inner circle and an outer circle. The inner circle of spiritual leadership is that sequence of events in the human soul that must happen if anyone is to get to first base in spiritual leadership. These are the absolute bare essentials. They are things that all Christians must attain in some degree, and when they are attained with high fervor and deep conviction they very often lead one into strong leadership. In the outer circle are qualities that characterize both spiritual and non-spiritual leaders. What I would like to try to do now in this paper is simply explain and illustrate these qualities on the inner circle and the outer circle.

The Inner Circle of Spiritual Leadership

1. That Others Will Glorify God

The ultimate goal of all spiritual leadership is that other people might come to glorify God, that is, might so feel and think and act as to magnify the true character of God. According to [Matthew 5:14-16](#), one of the crucial means by which a Christian leader brings other people to glorify God is by being a person who loves both friend and foe. "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid, nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house Let your light so shine before men, *that they may see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven.*" This text shows that there is an attitude and lifestyle that is so distinctive that when it appears in the arena of fallen humanity it gives valid evidence that there is a God and he is a gloriously trustworthy heavenly father. When the reality of God's promises to take care of us and to work everything together for our good grips our hearts so that we do not fall prey to greed or fear or vainglory but rather manifest a contentment and a love and a freedom for other people, then the world will have to admit that the one who gives us hope and freedom must be real and glorious.

2. Love Both Friend and Foe by Trusting in God and Hoping in His Promises

But how shall we attain to a love that is strong enough to bless and pray for its enemies? The answer given in Scripture (and this is the third level in the inner circle) is that trust in God and hope in his promises leads to love. [Galatians 5:6](#) says, "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love." That is, when we have strong faith in the goodness of God it inevitably works itself out in love. [Colossians 1:4, 5](#) says, "We have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven." In other words, when our hope is strong we are freed from fears and cares that prevent the free exercises of love. Therefore, a spiritual leader must be a person who has strong confidence in the sovereign goodness of God to work everything together for his good.

Otherwise, he will inevitably fall into the trap of manipulating circumstances and exploiting people in order to secure for himself a happy future which he is not certain God will provide.

3. Meditate On and Pray Over His Word

But how shall we sinners come to have this kind of confidence in God? [Romans 10:17](#) says, "Faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ." And [Psalm 119:18](#) says, "Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law." These two texts together show us that faith in God is rooted in God's Word. When we hear God's Word, especially the preaching of Christ in whom all the promises of God have their yes, we are moved to trust him, but this does not happen automatically. We must pray that our eyes be open to the true significance of the Word of God in Scripture. So the spiritual leader must be a person who meditates on the Word of God and who prays for spiritual illumination. Otherwise, his faith will grow weak and his love will languish and no one will be moved to glorify God because of him.

4. Acknowledge Your Helplessness

But finally, we must ask how a person comes to be willing to spend time with and be open to the Word of God? The answer seems to be that we must acknowledge our helplessness. All true spiritual leadership has its roots in desperation. Jesus commended the man who said, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." Jesus said of his own ministry, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous but sinners." This means that the beginning of spiritual leadership must be in the acknowledgement that we are the sick who need a physician. Once we are humbled to that point we will be opened to reading the doctor's prescription in the Word. And as we read the wonderful promises that are there for those of us who trust the doctor, our faith will grow strong and our hope will become solid. And when our faith is strong and our hope is solid all the barriers to love, like greed and fear, will be swept away. When we become the kind of people who can risk our lives, even for our enemies, and who don't hold grudges and who devote our energies to do others good rather than seeking our own aggrandizement, then people will see and give glory to our father in heaven.

The implication of this inner circle of leadership is that in order to lead you have to be out ahead of your people in Bible study and prayer. I think there will be no successful spiritual leadership without extended seasons of prayer and meditation on the Scriptures. Spiritual leaders ought to rise early in order to meet God before they meet anybody else. They will probably want to keep a journal of insights and ideas as they read the Word and pray. They will want to read books about the Bible (for example, books by J.I. Packer and Paul Little and John Stott and dozens of other excellent evangelical authors) and about prayer (for example, the eight books by E.M. Bounds). They will want to take a periodic half-day retreat with a Bible and a notebook and a hymnbook. If you want to be a great leader of people you have to get away from people to be with God.

Hudson Taylor's Example

Dr. Howard Taylor, in *Hudson Taylor's Spiritual Secret* (page 234f.) describes an experience that he had traveling with his father, Hudson Taylor, through China. He writes,

It was not easy for Mr. Taylor in his changeful life, to make time for prayer and Bible study, but he knew that it was vital. Well do the writers remember traveling with him month after month in northern China, by cart and wheelbarrow, with the poorest of inns at night. Often with only one large room for coolies and travelers alike, they would screen off a corner for their father and another for themselves, with curtains of some sort; and then after sleep at last had brought a measure of quiet they would hear a match struck and seek the flicker of candlelight which told that Mr. Taylor, however weary, was pouring over the little Bible in two volumes always at hand. From two to four a.m. was the time he usually gave to prayer; the time when he could be most sure of being undisturbed to wait upon God. That flicker of candlelight has meant more to them than all they have read or heard on secret prayer; it meant reality, not preaching but practice.

The hardest part of the missionary career, Mr. Taylor found, is to maintain regular, prayerful Bible study. "Satan will always find you something to do," he would say, "when you ought to be occupied about that, if it is only arranging a window blind."

George Mueller's Example

George Mueller is noteworthy for his great faith in the work of his orphanages. In his autobiography he has a section entitled, "How to be Constantly Happy in the Lord." He complains how for years he used to try to pray early in the morning and found that his mind wandered again and again. Then he made a discovery. He records it like this:

The point is this: I saw more clearly than ever that the first great and primary business to which I ought to attend every day was to have my soul happy in the Lord. The first thing to be concerned about was not how much I might serve the Lord, how I might glorify the Lord; but how I might get my soul into a happy state, and how my inner man might be nourished . . . Before this time my practice had been at least for ten years previously as a habitual thing to give myself to prayer after having dressed in the morning. Now I saw that the most important thing I had to do was to give myself to the reading of the word of God and to meditation on it, that thus my heart might be comforted, encouraged, warned, reprov'd, instructed; and that thus, while meditating, my heart might be brought into experimental communion with the Lord. I began, therefore, to meditate on the New Testament from the beginning early in the morning. The first thing I did, after having asked in a few words the Lord's blessing upon his precious word, was to begin to meditate on the word of God, searching as it were into every verse to get blessing out of it; not for the sake of the public ministry of the word; not for the sake of preaching on what I had meditated upon; but for the sake of obtaining food for my soul. The result I have found to be almost invariably this, that after a very few minutes my soul has been led to confession, or to thanksgiving, or to intercession, or to supplication; so that though I did not, as it were, give myself to prayer but to meditation, yet it turned almost immediately more or less into prayer. When thus I have been for a while making confession or intercession or supplication or have given thanks, I go on to the next words or verse, turning all, as I go on, into prayer for myself or others, as the word may lead to it; but still continually keeping before me that food for my soul as the object of my meditation.

The result of this is that there is always a good deal of confession, thanksgiving, supplication, or intercession mingled with my meditation and that my inner man almost invariably is almost sensibly nourished and strengthened and that by breakfast time, with rare exceptions, I am in a peaceful if not a happy state of heart.

Now that God has taught me this point, it is as plain to me as anything that the first thing the child of God has to do morning by morning is to obtain food for the inner man. As the outward man is not fit for work for any length of time, except we take food, and as this is one of the first things we do in the morning, so it should be with the inner man. We should take food for that, as everyone must allow. Now what is the food for the inner man? Not prayer, but the word of God; and here again, not the simple reading of the word of God, so that it only passes through our minds, just as water runs through a pipe, but considering what we read, pondering over it, and applying it to our hearts.

By the blessing of God I ascribe to this mode the help and strength which I have had to pass in peace through deeper trials in various ways than I have ever had before; and after having now above forty years tried this way, I can most fully, in the fear of God, commend it. How different when the soul is refreshed and made happy early in the morning, from what it is when, without spiritual preparation, the service, the trials, and the temptations of the day come upon one!

It should be an encouragement to all of us to persevere in the meditation upon God's Word when we read a letter which, in 1897, George Mueller sent to the British and Foreign Bible Society in which he had to excuse himself from attending a meeting in Birmingham. He said, "Will you have the kindness to read to the meeting that I have been for sixty-eight years and three months, viz., since July, 1829, a lover of the word of God and

that uninterruptedly. During this time I have read considerably more than one hundred times through the whole of the Old and New Testaments with prayer and meditation." If we are going to be powerful spiritual leaders we must move in the direction of Hudson Taylor and George Mueller.

The Outer Circle of Spiritual Leadership

Everyone in the church has one or more spiritual gifts. Everyone should be involved in ministry. Everyone should be seeking to lead others to the point where they bring glory to God by the way they think and feel and act. But there are some people to whom the Lord has given qualities of personality that tend to make them more able leaders than others. Not all of these qualities are distinctively Christian, but when the Holy Spirit fills a person's life each of these qualities is harnessed and transformed for God's purposes.

1. Restless

Spiritual leaders have a holy discontentment with the status quo. Non-leaders have inertia that causes them to settle in and makes them very hard to move off of dead center. Leaders have a hankering to change, to move, to reach out, to grow, and to take a group or an institution to new dimensions of ministry. They have the spirit of Paul, who said in [Phil. 3:13](#), "Brethren, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but one thing I do, forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Leaders are always very goal-oriented people.

God's history of redemption is not finished. The church is shot through with imperfections, lost sheep are still not in the fold, needs of every sort in the world are unmet, sin infects the saints. It is unthinkable that we should be content with things the way they are in a fallen world and an imperfect church. Therefore, God has been pleased to put a holy restlessness into some of his people, and those people will very likely be the leaders.

2. Optimistic

Spiritual leaders are optimistic not because man is good but because God is in control. The leader must not let his discontentment become disconsolation. When he sees the imperfection of the church he must say with the writer of Hebrews (6:9), "Though we speak thus, yet in your case, beloved, we feel sure of better things that belong to salvation." The foundation of his life is [Romans 8:28](#), "God works all things together for good for those who love him and are called according to his purpose." He reasons with Paul that, "He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, will then surely give us all things with him" ([Rom. 8:32](#)). Without this confidence based upon the goodness of God manifested in Jesus Christ the leader's perseverance would falter and the people would not be inspired. Without optimism restlessness becomes despair.

3. Intense

The great quality I want in my associates is one of intensity. [Romans 12:8](#) says that if your gift is leadership, "do it with zeal." [Romans 12:11](#) says, "Never flag in zeal, boil in the spirit!" When the disciples remembered the way Jesus had behaved in relation to the temple of God they characterized it with words from the Old Testament like this, "Zeal for thy house has eaten me up" ([John 2:17](#)). The leader follows the advice of [Ecclesiastes 9:10](#), "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might." When Jonathan Edwards was a young man he wrote a list of about seventy resolutions. The one that has inspired me the most goes like this: "To live with all my might while I live." Count Zinzendorf of the Moravians said, "I have one passion. It is He and He alone." Jesus warns us in [Revelation 3:16](#) that he does not have any taste for people who are lukewarm: "Because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth." Spiritual leaders must go out alone somewhere and ponder what unutterable and stupendous things they know about God. If their life is one extended yawn they are simply blind. Leaders must give evidence that the things of the Spirit are intensely real. They cannot do that unless they are intense themselves.

4. Self-controlled

By self-controlled I do not mean prim and proper and unemotional, but rather master of our drives. If we are to lead others toward God we cannot be led ourselves toward the world. According to [Gal. 5:23](#) self-control is a fruit of the Spirit. It is not mere willpower. It is appropriating the power of God to get mastery over our emotions and our appetites that could lead us astray or cause us to occupy our time with fruitless endeavors. In [1 Corinthians 6:12](#) Paul says, "All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything." The Christian leader must ruthlessly examine his life to see whether he is the least enslaved by television, alcohol, coffee, golf, computer games, fishing, Playboy, masturbation, good food. Paul said in [1 Corinthians. 9:25](#), "Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Well, I do not run aimlessly, I do not box as one beating the air; but I pommel my body and subdue it, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified." And he says in [Galatians. 5:24](#), "Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh with its passion and desires." Spiritual leaders ruthlessly track down bad habits and break them by the power of the Spirit. They hear and follow [Romans 8:13](#), "If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body you will live." Spiritual leaders long to be free from everything that hinders their fullest delight in God and service of others.

5. Thick-skinned

One thing is for sure: if you begin to lead others you will be criticized. No one will be a significant spiritual leader if his aim is to please others and seek their approval. Paul said in [Galatians 1:10](#), "Am I seeking the favor of men or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still pleasing men I should not be a servant of Christ." Spiritual leaders do not seek the praises of men, they seek to please God. Dr. Carl Lundquist, former President of Bethel College and Seminary, said in his final report to the Baptist General Conference that there was hardly one of the 28 years in which he served the Conference that he was not actively opposed by many people.

If criticism disables us, we will never make it as spiritual leaders. I don't mean that we must be the kind of people who don't feel hurt, but rather that we must not be wiped out by the hurt. We must be able to say with Paul in [2 Corinthians 4:8](#), "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." We will feel the criticism but we will not be incapacitated by it. As Paul says in [2 Corinthians 4:16](#), "We do not lose heart."

Leaders must be able to digest depression because they will eat plenty of it. There will be many days when the temptation is very strong to quit because of unappreciative people. Criticism is one of Satan's favorite weapons to try to get effective Christian leaders to throw in the towel.

I should, however, qualify this characteristic of being thick-skinned. I do not want to give the impression that spiritual leaders are closed off to legitimate criticism. A good leader must not only be thick-skinned but also open and humbly ready to accept and apply just criticism. No leader is perfect and Jonathan Edwards said once that he made it a spiritual discipline to look for the truth in every criticism that came his way before he discarded it. That's good advice.

6. Energetic

Lazy people cannot be leaders. Spiritual leaders "redeem the time" ([Eph. 5:16](#)). They work while it is day, because they know that night comes when no man can work ([John 9:4](#)). They "do not grow weary in well doing" for they know that in due season they shall reap if they do not lose heart ([Gal. 6:9](#)). They are "steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord their labor is not in vain" ([1 Cor. 15:58](#)). But they do not take credit for this great energy or boast in their efforts because they say with the apostle Paul, "I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I but the grace of God which was with me"

([1 Cor. 15:10](#)). And: "For this I toil, striving with all the energy which He mightily inspires within me" ([Col. 1:29](#)).

The world is run by tired men, someone has said. A leader must learn to live with pressure. None of us accomplishes very much without deadlines and deadlines always create a sense of pressure. A leader does not see the pressure of work as a curse but as a glory. He does not desire to fritter away his life in excess leisure. He loves to be productive. And he copes with the pressure and prevents it from becoming worrisome with promises like [Matthew 11:27, 28](#) and [Philippians 4:7, 8](#) and [Isaiah 64:4](#).

7. A Hard Thinker

"Be babes in evil, but in thinking be mature!" ([1 Cor. 14:20](#)). It is not easy to be a leader of people who can outthink you. A leader must be one who, when he sees a set of circumstances, thinks about it. He sits down with pad and pencil and doodles and writes and creates. He tests all things with his mind and holds fast to what is good ([1 Thes. 5:21](#)). He is critical in the best sense of the word, that is, not gullible or faddish or trendy. He weighs things and considers pros and cons and always has a significant rationale for the decisions that he makes. Careful and rigorous thought is not contrary to a reliance on prayer and divine revelation. The apostle Paul said to Timothy in [2 Timothy 2:7](#), "Think over what I say, for the Lord will grant you understanding in everything." In other words, God's way of imparting to us insight is not to short-circuit the intellectual process.

8. Articulate

It is hard to lead others if you cannot state your thoughts clearly and forcefully. Leaders like Paul aim to persuade men, not coerce them ([2 Cor. 5:11](#)). Leaders who are spiritual do not muster a following with hot air or waves or words but rather with crisp, solid, compelling sentences. The apostle Paul aimed, like all good leaders, at clarity in what he said. According to [Colossians 4:4](#) he asked the people to pray for him, "that I might make it clear, as I ought to speak." It is astonishing and lamentable how many people today cannot speak in complete sentences. The result is that a great fog surrounds their thought. Neither they nor their listeners know exactly what they are talking about. A haze settles over the discussion and you walk away wondering what it was all about. If no one rises above the muddle-headedness and verbal chaos of "You know . . . I mean . . . Just really", there will not be any leadership.

9. Able to Teach

It is not surprising to me that some of the great leaders at Bethlehem Baptist Church have been men who are also significant teachers. According to [1 Timothy 3:2](#) anyone who aspires to the office of overseer in the church should be able to teach. What is a good teacher? I think a good teacher has at least the following characteristics.

- A good teacher asks himself the hardest questions, works through to answers, and then frames provocative questions for his learners to stimulate their thinking.
- A good teacher analyzes his subject matter into parts and sees relationships and discovers the unity of the whole.
- A good teacher knows the problems learners will have with his subject matter and encourages them and gets them over the humps of discouragement.
- A good teacher foresees objections and thinks them through so that he can answer them intelligently.
- A good teacher can put himself in the place of a variety of learners and therefore explain hard things in terms that are clear from their standpoint.
- A good teacher is concrete, not abstract, specific, not general, precise, not vague, vulnerable, not evasive.
- A good teacher always asks, "So what?" and tries to see how discoveries shape our whole system of thought. He tries to relate discoveries to life and tries to avoid compartmentalizing.

- The goal of a good teacher is the transformation of all of life and thought into a Christ-honoring unity.

10. A Good Judge of Character

Jesus knew the hearts of men ([Jn. 2:17](#)) and he urged us to be perceptive in assessing others ([Mt. 7:15ff.](#)). Leaders must know who is fit for what kind of work. Good leaders have good noses. They can snoop out barnacles in a hurry, that is, people who are forever listening but never learning or changing. They can detect potential when they see it in a beginner. They can hear in a short time the echoes of pride and hypocrisy and worldliness. The spiritual leader steers a careful course between the dangers of rigid pigeonholing on the one hand and indifference on the other hand.

11. Tactful

Paul said in [Colossians 4:5, 6](#), "Conduct yourself wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, to know how it is necessary to answer each one." And the writer of Proverbs said, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in a setting of silver" (25:11). We must remember that leaders are aiming to change hearts, not just to get jobs done. Therefore, alienating people unnecessarily is self-defeating. Tact is that quality of grace that wins the confidence of people who are sure you won't do or say something stupid. You can't inspire a following if people have to hang their heads in embarrassment at the inappropriate and insensitive things you say or do. Tact is especially needed in a leader to help cope with embarrassing or tragic situations. For example, very often when you are leading a group someone will say something totally irrelevant, which is recognized to be very foolish by everyone in the group. A tactful leader must be able to divert the attention of the group back to the main course of the discussion without heaping scorn upon the individual. Another example, which I recall, comes from my experience at Wheaton College. I was present at the chapel service where V. Raymond Edman had a heart attack in the pulpit and fell over and died. Hudson Armerding, who followed him as president, was sitting behind him when Dr. Edman paused in his lecture, took one step to the side, and fell over. In one of the most beautiful and sensitive demonstrations of tact that I have ever seen, Dr. Armerding quickly knelt beside him as 2,000 students fell silent. Then he stood, led us in a brief prayer committing Dr. Edman to the Lord, and dismissed the students quietly. Dr. Edman died as we walked out.

The tact of a leader must demonstrate itself in forthright confrontation. The person who is unwilling to approach a person who needs admonition or rebuke will not be a successful spiritual leader. Combined with his judgment of people's character, a leader's tact will enable him to handle delicate negotiations and opposing viewpoints. His choice of words will be astute rather than clumsy. (There is a big difference between saying, "Your foot is too big for this shoe" and "This shoe is too small for your foot".)

12. Theologically Oriented

[Colossians 3:17](#) says, "Do all in the name of the Lord Jesus." [1 Corinthians 2:16](#) speaks of the spiritual man as having the mind of Christ. A spiritual leader knows that all of life, down to its smallest detail, has to do with God. If we are to lead people to see and reflect God's glory, we must think theologically about everything. We must work toward a synthesis of all things. We must probe to see how things fit together. How do war and sports and pornography and birthday celebrations and literature and space travel and disease and enterprise all hang together? How do they relate to God and his purposes?

Leaders must have a theological standpoint that helps give coherence to all things. This will give the leader a stability that keeps him from being knocked off his feet by sudden changes in circumstances or new winds of doctrine. He knows enough about God and his ways that things generally fit into a pattern and make sense even when they are unpleasant. So the leader does not throw up his hands but points the way onward to God.

13. A Dreamer

According to [Joel 2:28](#), in the last days (in which we now live), "Your old men shall dream dreams and your young men shall see visions." This is the positive counterpart to restlessness. We must not only be discontent with the present but also dreaming dreams of what could be in the future. In [2 Kings 6:15-17](#), Elisha and his servant were surrounded by Assyrians in the city of Dothan. When the servant sees this and cries out with dismay, Elisha prays and says, "O Lord, I pray thee, open his eyes that he may see." So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha.

Leaders can see the power of God overshadowing the problems of the future. This is a rare gift – to see the sovereign power of God in the midst of seemingly overwhelming opposition. Most people are experts at seeing all the problems and reasons not to move forward in a venture. Many pastors are ruined by boards who think that they have done their duty when they throw up every obstacle and problem to an idea that he brings. That's cheap. Hope and solutions are expensive. The spirit of venturesomeness is at a premium today. O, how we need people who will devote just five minutes a week to dream of what might possibly be. The text says that old men will dream dreams. How sad it is, then, to see so many old people assuming that their age means that now they can coast and turn over the creativity to the young. It is tragic when age makes a man jaded instead of increasingly creative. Every new church, every agency, every new ministry, every institution, every endeavor, is the result of someone having a vision and laying hold on it like a snapping turtle.

14. Organized and Efficient

A leader does not like clutter. He likes to know where and when things are for quick access and use. His favorite shape is the straight line, not the circle. He groans in meetings that do not move from premises to conclusions but rather go in irrelevant circles. When something must be done he sees a three-step plan for getting it done and lays it out. A leader sees the links between a board decision and its implementation. He sees ways to use time to the full and shapes his schedule to maximize his usefulness. He saves himself large blocks of time for his major productive activities. He uses little pieces of time lest they go to waste. (For example, what do you do while you are brushing your teeth? Could you set a magazine on the towel rack and read an article?) A leader takes time to plan his days and weeks and months and years. Even though it is God who ultimately directs the steps of the leader, he should plan his path. A leader is not a jellyfish that gets tossed around by the waves, nor is he an oyster that is immovable. The leader is the dolphin of the sea and can swim against the stream or with the stream as he plans.

15. Decisive

In [1 Kings 18:21](#) Elijah cries out, "How long will you go limping with two different opinions: if the Lord is God follow him; but if Baal then follow him." A leader cannot be paralyzed by indecisiveness. He will take risks rather than do nothing. He will soak himself in prayer and in the Word and then rest himself in God's sovereignty as he makes decisions, knowing that he will very likely make some mistakes.

16. Perseverant

Jesus said in [Matthew 24:13](#), "He who endures to the end will be saved." Paul said in [Galatians 6:9](#), "Let us not grow weary in well-doing." We live in a day when immediate gratification is usually demanded. That means that very few people excel in the virtue of perseverance. Very few people keep on and keep on in the same ministry when there is significant difficulty. Vision without perseverance, however, results in fairy tales not fruitful ministry. My dad once told me that the reason he thinks many pastors fail to see revival in their churches is that they leave just before it is about to happen. The long haul is hard, but it pays. The big tree is felled by many, many little chops. The criticisms that come your way will be long forgotten if you keep on doing the Lord's will.

17. A Lover

Here I am speaking directly to men who are husbands and leaders. Paul said in [Ephesians 5:25](#), "Husbands, love your wives!" Love her! Love her! What does it profit a man if he gains a great following and lose his wife? What have we led people to if they see that it leads us to divorce? What we need today are leaders who are great lovers. Husbands who write poems for their wives and sing songs to their wives and buy flowers for their wives for no reason at all except that they love them. We need leaders who know that they should take a day alone with their wives every now and then; leaders who do not fall into the habit of deriding and putting their wives down, especially with careless little asides in public; leaders who speak well of their wives in public and complement them spontaneously when they are alone; leaders who touch her tenderly at other times besides when they are in bed. One of the greatest temptations of a busy leader is to begin to treat his wife as a kind of sex object. It starts to manifest itself when the only time he ever kisses her passionately or touches her tenderly is when he's trying to allure her into bed. It is a tragic thing when a wife becomes a mannequin for masturbation. Learn what her delights are and bring her to the fullest experience of sexual climax. Talk with her and study her desires. Look her in the eye when you talk to her. Put down the paper and turn off the television. Open the door for her. Help her with the dishes. Throw her a party. LOVE HER! LOVE HER! If you don't, all your success as a leader will very likely explode in failure at home.

18. Restful

We began with the quality of restlessness and we end with the quality of restful. "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain. It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives to his beloved sleep" ([Ps. 127:1,2](#)). The spiritual leader knows that ultimately the productivity of his labors rests in God and that God can do more while he is asleep than he could do while awake without God. He knows that Jesus said to his busy disciples, "Come away by yourselves to a lonely place and rest a while" ([Mk. 6:31](#)). He knows that one of the Ten Commandments was, "Six days shall you labor and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God" ([Ex. 20:9,10](#)). He is not so addicted to work that he is unable to rest. He is a good steward of his life and health. He maximizes the totality of his labor by measuring the possible strains under which he can work without diminishing his efficiency of unduly shortening his life.

Conclusion

There are no doubt many other qualities which could be mentioned which, if a person has, would make him an even more successful leader. These are simply the ones that came to my mind as I was pondering this subject. one need not excel in every one of them. But the more fully each one is developed in a person the more powerful and fruitful he will be as a leader. Let me emphasize again that it is the inner circle that makes the leadership spiritual. All genuine leadership begins in a sense of desperation; knowledge that we are helpless sinners in need of a great savior. That moves us to listen to God in his Word and cry out to him for help and for insight in prayer. That leads us to trust in God and to hope in his great and precious promises. This frees us for a life of love and service which, in the end, causes people to see and give glory to our Father in heaven.

© Desiring God

Permissions: You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that you do not alter the wording in any way and do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction. For web posting, a link to this document on our website is preferred. Any exceptions to the above must be approved by Desiring God.

Please include the following statement on any distributed copy: By John Piper. © Desiring God. Website: desiringGod.org