

by Lee E. DeRemer, Colonel, U.S. Air Force, Retired

Years ago, a friend and mentor introduced me to the notion that the Christian leader is instructed “to act justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly before God” (Micah 6:8). We had rich and profitable dialogues on the application of this Old Testament commandment in our leadership duties and relationships. For some time, though, I pondered the question: “Yes, but how? How do I do that? What’s the key to unlocking the door to walking justly (before others), to showing mercy (to others), and to walking humbly before God (and others)? I believe the answer is selfless service to others, which is a core value of the U.S. Army but is also expected of leaders in the other services as well. For instance, one of the three U.S. Air Force Core Values is: “Service before Self.”

Emerging secular literature praises the concept of servant leadership, but if publishers continue existing cycles and trends, the book stores will soon move on to “the next big thing” in the field. Scripture, which is timeless, does not move on to the next fad. I propose that, as followers of Christ, we consider the possibility that an attitude of selflessness in our professional service is in fact the current, the next, and the last “big thing” in the field of leadership.

Other leadership attributes are important, to be sure. Subordinates deserve leaders who are confident in their abilities, and demonstrating that assurance, even if it is sometimes displayed with a little “swagger,” can be appropriate. In fact, many would argue that the hallmark of effective leadership is achieving that delicate balance between humility and “swagger.” The purpose of this writing, however, is to provide some thoughts on moving toward the more humble and selfless end of that continuum.

Christ’s example. We are reminded throughout the Bible that Christ-like leadership is selfless. This is a radically counter-cultural notion. It’s considered to be either too naïve or too novel for most to trust as a leadership principle. Let’s be reminded, however, that God’s instructions for life aren’t good ideas just because He says so (though that should be sufficient reason to follow them); they’re good ideas because they work. So it is with leading people.

Three scriptural passages, one model (the organizational pyramid), and one word picture (our relationship with Christ) can help us internalize and reflect a Christ-like attitude of selfless leadership. Some speak of leader development in terms of “being, knowing, and doing.” This is

a useful starting point, because it tees up the issue of attitude. “Who we are” (in Christ) speaks to our attitude, and it’s our attitude or our motivation that is key. “What we know” is important, but it’s not the most important thing; there are too many knowledgeable-but-selfish people who call themselves Christians. “What we do” is important (James reminds that faith without works is dead), but even our actions are not the most important thing. Jesus wants our heart. He wants our love for Him to show in our service to others.

The pyramid. Where to start? Isaiah 9:6 tells us that government will rest on Christ’s shoulders, not that He will sit at the top of government and be served by those beneath Him. This realization can help us appreciate how seriously God takes each leader’s responsibility to serve others. With this in mind, consider the organizational pyramid.

In our personal and professional lives, we participate in organizational pyramids. In our home, in our church, in our community, and in our professional duty, each of us is somewhere on a pyramid. Someone is “in charge,” but many others are supporting the larger mission while being “in charge” of a smaller subset of that mission. The pyramid I call the U.S. Air Force is in fact comprised of thousands of smaller pyramids. So it is with communities, churches and even families. As a man leads his household, his wife plays a crucial role, and each member individually must lead himself.

We can imagine ourselves on one of these organizational pyramids, rising with age, experience, and promotion to increasing levels of responsibility. Here’s where attitude matters. It’s how we view that pyramid that determines hundreds of decisions and actions each day—most of them subconsciously. Do we view ourselves as climbing the pyramid to higher pay, perks and privileges? Those are often part of the journey, and our culture typically celebrates them as both the purpose and the goal. This, however, is unhelpful.

A radical proposal. We can buck the culture by turning the pyramid upside down. Just as Christ has government on His shoulders and not vice versa, we should be prepared to place the organization we lead on our shoulders, and not vice versa.

As we move “up” in rank and responsibility, rather than just celebrate, we and others are better served if we get on our knees. This is the time to pray for the strength and guidance of the Holy Spirit during the unknowable-but-certain challenges in the crucible experience before us. If in our hearts we have an attitude that accepts the welfare, development and dreams of our unit members – and, to some extent, those of their families – as our responsibility, then our actions will more likely reflect the heart of a servant, as we place others’ interests before our own.

Consider the Apostle Paul's guidance to "do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than ourselves...and that each of us should look not only to our interests, but also to the interests of others" (Philippians 2:3-4). We can have this attitude if we can envision that the "higher" we move in our organizational pyramid, which is now upside down, the further "down" we actually are--with more of the pyramid (more people, burdens and dreams) on our shoulders. This perspective can help us cope with the paradox that occurs when we try to reconcile a servant's attitude with promotions in pay, increased impact, and more responsibility.

If we can change our attitudes toward our organizational pyramids, we can better understand our roles as selfless leaders and demonstrate the quality of Christ-like leadership Paul envisions, in which we truly believe that other people's interests and development are more important than our own.

But what does this look like? I've seen it done both poorly and well, and you probably have, too. When a rising leader is more concerned about a parking space, a job title, or an office size, than he is about his people and his peers, then he's on his way to becoming a toxic leader, instead of a servant leader. He will harm people and poison organizations well beyond his tenure. On the other hand, a leader after Christ's heart is willing to put people before perks; to defer credit to others on his team but accept any blame himself; to listen when others speak; to spend more time and energy on his subordinates' futures than his own; to lose an argument when the relationship is more important than winning; to send subordinates home when they're too loyal or dedicated to leave work before he does. He does not exercise a selfishly demanding leadership, but a virtuous leadership, in which subordinates are so aware of his servant's heart that they respond by giving even more and taking ownership of even more of the mission, the vision and their roles in the organization. In time, Christ's work through this selfless leader results in a culture of service toward others.

Shrinking in Christ. One step remains: Getting from here to there. If we agree that a leader should "act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly before God," and if we then accept that this is best demonstrated through an attitude of selfless service and the actions borne from such an attitude. And if we further accept that such an attitude places the interests of others before our own and causes us to lift others in prayer and take their burdens as our own—then, well, what do we do? Let's get personal. How do I – a sinner in a fallen world – get beyond the pride, ego, arrogance and hubris bred into me by a society that preaches self-promotion and that feeds my own selfish desires in the daily trials and temptations of this crucible we call "life"?

One day, a passage struck me powerfully. It was there all along of course, but I couldn't recall having ever noticed it. John 3:30 records John the Baptist's saying of the coming Messiah: "He must increase and I must decrease." In 21st century America, this isn't just radical; it's revolutionary!

Like others, I've occasionally shared with friends how I'm "growing in Christ" or "growing in my understanding of our Sovereign Creator God and His majesty." These are great and hopeful statements, but for me, John 3:30 invites me to shrink—to shrink in Christ. To wrap myself in Him, in the confidence that all I do will be of more use in His Kingdom if He is working through me than it can be if I am trying to do it on my own strength with my own finite understanding and strength.

Imagine if we could shrink to a small dot in Christ's world, rather than grow to a large circle in our own world. Imagine if we could shrink in Christ, get out of His way and let His Spirit do the work through us. The less it is "all about us," the better others are served. Might this not be the key to living with a godly attitude in a narcissistic culture?

Such humility does not equate to being a human doormat. Nor does it imply that Christian leaders should not be aggressive or strong-willed. Rather, the effective leader who follows Christ's example directs these traits toward the well-being of his unit and his people and not toward personal aggrandizement. More than 20 years ago, Major General Clay Buckingham, U.S. Army, captured all these ideas in a concise way that I still find instructive and inspiring.

When you take command, you should do so with the desire to make your subordinates successful in their jobs. You must be ready to defend their legitimate interests, to share their hardships, to be the first to move forward under fire, the last to go through the chow line, the first to take the blame for failure, the last to seek credit for success. You must be ready to have the willingness to administer justice with compassion, the willingness to ensure that your people get the proper training, that they have adequate recreation, that their supply is sufficient, that they get proper medical care, that they have the opportunity for additional education, that they are properly sheltered, fed and bedded down.

Three components provide the foundation for successful leadership and command. Integrity—an overriding, integrating belief and trust in Jesus Christ. Mission—accepting our assignment as our Christian vocation, and therefore turning in the best performance that we can. Servanthood—accepting command with a vow of poverty, asking only for the opportunity to

serve, using our rank only in the performance of our mission, and not prostituting it for personal gain. –Major General Clay Buckingham, U.S. Army, Retired, in an article first printed in *Command* * magazine in 1985

Shrinking in Christ can mean more of Him and less of us. Shrinking in Christ can translate to turning the pyramid upside down in our attitude and actions so we can realize Paul's instruction to consider others better than ourselves and to place others' interests above our own. Turning the pyramid upside down can translate to living out Micah's vision of acting justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly before God in any leadership or command role He entrusts to us. Will you consider shrinking in Christ?

Lee DeRemer retired this year as a colonel in the United States Air Force. He had 3000 flying hours, and he commanded an Air Refueling Squadron, an Operations Group, and an Expeditionary Operations Group. His last active-duty assignment was service on the faculty of the U.S. Army War College (AWC) as the Director of Strategic Leadership. He now serves as a faculty member in the Department of Command, Leadership, and Management at the AWC, as Professor of Ethics and Strategic Leadership.

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Selected Quotations:

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