



INTRO

In these first four chapters of Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church, Paul has been addressing a pressing question. What is a Christian leader? What does the task entail? What are the benefits? What are the challenges?

D.A. Carson, in his book *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, says that "Only rarely do those who dream of leadership, but have never experienced it, think through the responsibilities, pressures, and temptations leaders face. Almost never do they focus on accountability, service, suffering."¹ Life together as the church requires leadership, but we often don't have a clue what Christian leadership is supposed to look like.

When it comes to leaders and leadership in the church, we often do today exactly what the Corinthians were doing in their day. We look at worldly examples and standards of leadership, and we import them into the church, and then we attempt to impose them—explicitly and implicitly—on Christian leaders.

¹ (D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Leadership*, p.93)

Many churches, in fact, are run almost entirely on principles gleaned from the business world. I hear this often in my work with pastors. They don't feel they "fit" at the church they're at. They'd prefer to be at a church where their main tasks are prayer and ministry of the word. "That makes sense," I always tell them, "because that, in a nutshell, is the biblical job description for a pastor." And yet in many churches, pastors are expected to be the chief administrators, the CEO or the chairman of a board that runs a charitable organization.

We used to receive annual mailings from a leadership conference that is heavily marketed to churches and church leaders. As I looked at that mailing year after year, I saw many big famous names, and they were almost all business leaders. Good people, excellent in their field, but they are not church leaders, yet they are being held up as examples for church leaders to follow.

That's not to say there is no crossover between good principles in church governance and good principles in business management. But if business principles take primacy over biblical instruction, we will soon be on the road of pragmatism (doing whatever works). We'll be on the scoreboard of false metrics (measuring success by numbers), and when we do this, we quickly descend the slippery slope.

A church is not a business, and it should not be run as if it were. In the world of big business, the giant tech companies, for example, the greatest leaders are those who receive all the perks, benefits, and adoration, admiration, affection, and what borders on worship of their peers and underlings. They are the ones most protected from disaster and sheltered from attacks. They get access to resources that a normal human being can only dream of.

And when we take this view of leadership and impose it on the church, the church fails: Regardless of how much it grows, it fails. Regardless of how much money it raises, it fails. Regardless of how much money it gives away, it fails.

We need our thinking about church leadership corrected today, just like the Corinthians needed the correction then. We suffer under the same misconceptions today that drove the Corinthians to idolize certain leaders, attempting to raise them onto a pedestal of pride.

This type of idolization opens us up to dangers that will eventually result in many negative consequences. **Because it caters to the pride of a leader**, even good leaders can get off track in an environment of leader-worship. **Because it provides an opening for the types of leaders who desire this**, the wrong types of people will be drawn into leadership in the church.

Leadership in the church is supposed to be different. Godly, biblically qualified leaders are not in leadership to enjoy the benefits or the privileges that leadership in the world offers.

Instead... Christian leaders resist the worship of others, even if it's offered as a compliment. Christian leaders put themselves in harm's path for the sake of others. Christian leaders receive the brunt of the attacks that often come against the church. Christian leaders don't see themselves as superiors or overlords, but instead are constantly attempting to get in front of the people to protect them, beside the people to encourage them, and under the people to raise them up.

Paul will correct our misperceptions in these verses, showing us that we must see leaders as servants and stewards of God who are ultimately evaluated by God. And finally, he will show us why we must all be humbled in light of God's great gifts.

1. We Must See Leaders as Servants and Stewards (vv. 1-2)

1 This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. 2 Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful.

This is how you should regard us. This is what you should consider us to be: servants and stewards.

First, servants. Paul possibly introduces a new metaphor to describe the nature of their work. So far, he has described himself and other leaders as planters, waterers, assigned servants, builders—in other words: manual labourers, really, Average Joes but with a great weight of God-assigned responsibilities.

Now he adds, by way of the word he chooses, another conception of their work. The Greek word rendered here as “servant” at that time generally carried the meaning of a minister, officer, or servant. But the etymology of the word leads us back to the concept of rowers, or specifically, under-rowers, rowers who make unseen efforts below deck.

Paul may or may not have had that concept in mind here, since that's not the way the word was commonly used in his day, but it would make sense for him to make the connection, wouldn't it? In the great mission of God to rescue humanity, we are not the captain of the ship or even the first mate. We are the under-rowers. We don't devise the mission. We don't call the shots or navigate the mission. We plod along, rowing beneath, while someone else does all the navigating and steering.

Second, consider us stewards. We see the same word in Titus 1:7: *“For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach.”* A steward is a manager of household affairs, but not of a household he owns. The household belongs to someone else. A steward manages the resources of another. This speaks, again, to what we do and do not own. For example, we don't own the church. Not this local church, not any local church. Jesus owns the church and has enlisted us as stewards to manage what he owns.

In the end, Paul goes, again, to great pains to downplay his role and position compared to the role of God. I only plant seeds. I only build on a foundation. I am just a rower beneath the ship. I'm just a steward. I don't own anything; I just manage it.

And what does he manage? It's the mysteries of God. What has been revealed by God about himself and his will, for his glory and our good.

Back in 2:7, Paul mentions the *"secret and hidden wisdom of God."* As a reminder, with the coming of Jesus, something previously hidden was revealed to humanity. Information, revelation, has now been given that was previously secret and hidden. But these are not Paul's mysteries; Paul did not collaborate with God on these mysteries. He has no ownership stake. He simply takes what has been revealed and given to him and delivers it to God's intended recipients.

And so he is a steward of these mysteries. And a steward, one who manages the resources of another, is of little value if that steward is unskilled at management. A good steward must have a track record of faithfulness—a good resume, solid references. A good steward must be known as someone who makes commitments and then keeps those commitments.

In one sense, all Christians are servants of Christ and stewards of God's mysteries, but Paul is addressing church leaders here. And in doing that, he's not saying that church leaders are servants of Christ and other Christians are not, or that church leaders have access to the things of God that other Christians do not. Church leaders are not a special upper class of Christians. There is no aristocracy in Christianity.

When you look at the lists of church leadership qualifications in Titus and 1 Timothy, with one or two exceptions, what's required of church leaders is no different than what's required of all Christians. There aren't different classes of Christians. The difference between someone qualified to lead and one who is not is mostly a matter of consistency. What qualifies someone as a Christian leader is not a special list of extra talents but consistency in meeting the qualifications that apply to all Christians. We call this consistency "faithfulness."

But who determines if a servant is faithful? Is Paul subjecting himself to human evaluation? Is his faithfulness to be determined by their evaluation of him? Paul answers in the next verses, asserting that...

2. We Must Trust a Leader's Ultimate Evaluation to God (vv. 3-5)

3 But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself.

It is a very small thing to me, Paul says. The sense of the word here is not just small, but tiny, smaller than small. It's so small that it doesn't even show up on my radar to be examined or questioned, or judged by you. Why does this matter so little to him? Is this a flex? A claim of superiority? A free pass on accountability?

Now, he doesn't say that their judgments don't matter at all; he says that they matter very little. So while he's not telling them he's beyond their judgments, he is saying that there is a judge of much greater significance, and that if they're not in line with the judgments of this judge, then their judgments are truly useless and completely without power or authority.

What he's saying is that he and the other apostles may be the servants of the Corinthian people, but the Corinthian people are by no means their sovereign masters. They were assigned as servants by God, and only God is their sovereign master.

But wait, there's more, he says. Not only is it a very small thing for him to be judged by them, but he also adds that he doesn't even care for his own evaluation of himself! Why? Because their standards of his "success" are inadequate and insufficient, and even his own standards of success are human and faulty. Paul is saying that not even what he thinks about himself matters much.

Now, this isn't to say you shouldn't do what Paul says elsewhere, to "Examine yourself to see that you are in the faith." We need to do

that, but even that process does not determine how we "measure up" against others, how we meet human standards, or even if we've met our own standards for ourselves. We examine our lives to see if they are in line with God's Word. That's the good kind of introspection. That is the kind of introspection that will lead to true confidence. To place your confidence in any human, even yourself, is to trust in something inferior.

The central point here is this: God's standards matter. God's Word matters. What God thinks of you matters. What God's Word says about the details of your life matters. It's all about God and his Word.

Paul continues to address the insufficiency of his own self-assessments...

4 For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.

As far as he is concerned, there is no hidden sin or disqualification present in his life. But he's saying, "I don't even trust myself to my own judgment. Even when I am unaware of any offence on my part, it doesn't mean I'm not guilty."

We don't know what God knows. We don't see everything he sees. You may not be aware of anything that might hinder your witness or ministry, but that doesn't mean there isn't anything. Why? Because you don't have the capacity to see everything about yourself as clearly as God does. And you also can't see and accurately judge what the results, positive or negative, will eventually characterize your ministry.

You need to give up on the metrics and just plod along faithfully. We're supposed to be faithful to what God's calling us to do and let Him worry about the results. You just don't know the impact you're having, but God does, so let him worry about it. Our success is not determined by how others see us or by how we see ourselves, but by how God sees us.

Paul writes that their judgments don't matter to him, and even his own judgments of himself are of limited value because there is a far higher standard by which he is judged. Obviously, then, this is not Paul trying to be let off easy. He's not using this as a shield. No, he's saying that he is even more vulnerable! "You think your scrutiny is extreme? That's nothing, because it is the Lord who judges me." This is the ultimate scrutiny, but it can also be the ultimate comfort. Paul tells us why...

5 Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes...

Therefore, because the preceding is true, if you evaluate the fruit of someone's ministry, do not pronounce the results of your investigation too early; do not pronounce your opinion before Jesus returns. Why? Because you don't know the whole story. Because much of the work is hidden work.

It's important to see church leaders as servants of Christ with a great weight of responsibility. And you should honour and respect those who are put in authority over you. Church leaders are given to the church as servants, but you also need to know that church leaders are not primarily accountable to you. They are primarily accountable and responsible to God.

You're not the ultimate judge. The outcome of each person's work has not yet been weighed on the scales of eternity. And you are not God; you don't see the secrets of the heart. You don't see the acts of humble service performed without mention. Only God knows about these things, and so we leave the final evaluation to the one who has all the evidence.

Back in 1 Cor. 2:15, Paul said that *"The spiritual person judges all things, but is himself to be judged by no one."* We acknowledged then, as we do now, that this does not place us beyond all correction and reprimand. It means that some of the things we do, the way we live our lives, these things sometimes won't make sense to people.

That's ok. If we are discerning clearly and following what God is calling us to, we're not subject to the scrutiny of others.

But this is an exemption only insofar as we submit to the Spirit of Christ and live out the wisdom of Christ. We don't do that perfectly, so we are not above all corrections, regardless of who delivers them. He disallows judgments about church leaders only in areas where the results of their work cannot be immediately determined. To be clear, where there is obvious, outright sin, judge and confront. Where teaching is unbiblical, judge and confront. Where there is laziness or ungodliness, or greed, or deception, judge and confront. There is absolutely no exemption for church leaders from being judged for their sin.

But in all the unseen, hidden things, the instruction is clear: do not pronounce judgment. This is because in the life and work of a Christian leader, you plant seeds, and for a while, nothing happens. You build on a foundation, but the construction process is messy. You faithfully row, and people don't understand why you're not doing "more important things." You are managing someone else's resources faithfully, but people want you to act more like an owner.

But when Jesus returns, as Paul has already written in 1 Cor. 3:13, *"each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done."* Paul reiterates that here, writing that the Lord *"will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God."*

Think of it! On that day, those who have been faithfully plodding along, labouring in obscurity, will have a spotlight shone on them! It will become clear to all that although we didn't notice them, they were giants of faith. And then there will be others, people who promoted an image of themselves as giants of faith, who have been working for Satan while presenting themselves as servants of God.

These people will, finally and permanently, be exposed and condemned.

Those who faithfully served and were often misunderstood will be vindicated. We'll finally understand what they were up to. And then there will be others, people who presented themselves as servants with noble purposes, but who were actually predators who leveraged spiritual authority for personal fleshly gratification. These people will be exposed and condemned.

Because on that day, each of us will be shown openly to be exactly what we are. On that day, those who are truly faithful servants of God will receive God's commendation. They will receive recognition and praise from God. All others will receive condemnation because, in their pride, they refused to give glory to God and kept the glory for themselves.

Which brings us to the final point of the passage...

3. We Must Humble Ourselves Because Everything is a Gift From God (vv. 6-7)

6 I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.

Paul assures them that he, Apollos and the others are not exempt from these prescriptions; it all applies to them as well. There's no double standard: one standard for leaders and another standard for "regular Christians." No, as the sentence is rendered in the New Living Translation: "I have used Apollos and myself to illustrate what I've been saying." In other words, "We are living examples of how you should live. You should aspire to live this same way and see things this way. It will be good for you and healthy for the church."

He does this, he says, so that they do not go beyond, or above, what is written. Paul wants their evaluations, their judgments, their very

lives to be focused on the same thing he is focused on: God's Word. Don't go beyond what is written when you evaluate a ministry. Look to God's Word for your criteria.

What Paul is urging the church to do here is to allow their minds and hearts, their every preference and opinion, to be shaped and moulded by the word of God and *nothing else!* Don't go beyond what is written. Don't take away from Scripture and don't add to Scripture. We can go beyond what is written, either by minimizing Scripture or by expanding outside of Scripture. Paul counsels us to avoid both.

Instead, keep it simple: Stick to what Scripture says. In the Scriptures, we find it frequently asserted that God destroys the proud and exalts the humble. Humility is the proper response to the great mysteries that God has revealed to us.

Every other view leads to self-inflation, which leads to disunity and division. Every other view leads to puffing up. Puffing up is trying to make yourself look better, bigger, and more powerful than you are. It betrays an inner desire to inflate your own talents, qualities, and strength of personality. And this can only lead to one thing: a spirit of competition in places it has no right to be—competition in spiritual matters. This *always* causes fractures; it *always* leads to disunity and division.

Paul is circling back around to the main theme of these first four chapters. Church members are pitting them against one another as if it were a competition.

But Paul's plea and his example are all about humility. Here, then, is one of the paradoxes of Christian ministry. Leaders are to be highly esteemed, but we are, in a sense, interchangeable, replaceable. We handle the mysteries of God, but they are his mysteries, not ours. We are to be honoured, respected, and even obeyed, but not because we have taken power in the hierarchy of authority. No, because God has assigned us a great weight of responsibility.

So we need to be careful that we don't raise leaders too high, but also that we don't bring them too low. Both options are pitfalls and

traps, so the wisest path runs in between. So here's the balance: Christian leaders are just servants, which is a low calling, but they are servants of the Lord, of Jesus Christ, and there is no higher calling! Christian leaders are just stewards; they own nothing, but they are stewards of the mysteries of God, which means they have direct access to the greatest treasure available!

In the world's system of values, position is an asset to be exploited for personal gain. Christian leaders do hold a position, even an office, but this position is not an asset to be exploited; this responsibility is a burden to be carried. And if it is to be exploited at all, it is to be exploited for the good of others.

In Luke 18:10-14 Jesus tells this parable: *"Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Every Christian who aspires to be a leader should have that statement memorized, and perhaps even tattooed on the inside of their eyelids: *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted."* So, leader, aspiring leader, don't try to exalt yourself. Don't accept undue praise bordering on worship from other people. And watch out for people who do that - it's a giant red flag.

In the Corinthian church, there's this friction because there's a competition. Paul has already chastised them twice for this behaviour, the whole celebrity worship, "I follow Paul... I follow Apollos... I follow Peter..." The reason they're falling into this ridiculous behaviour is that they're going beyond what Scripture

says. Scripture tells us how we should evaluate Christian leaders, but they want to add another layer of evaluation on top of Scripture that caters to their preferences.

In our world, again mimicking business principles, Christian leaders are often ranked by statistics. "So and so has a church of 10,000..." "Well, this one has 15,000..." "This guy planted 600 churches!" Something like this is in the bio of pretty much every speaker at every conference you go to.

But here's the problem: None of these statistics tells you anything about godly character or biblical qualifications! We assume they do, but they don't. These people may be qualified Christian leaders whom God is blessing with effectiveness and influence. Or, as many have been shown to be, they could be wolves and thieves gathering people just to fleece them. But the assumption in our Evangelical Christian subculture is: big church = godly leader. Well, big thumbs down on that. How many times are we going to fall for this gambit?

This is the obvious outworking of going beyond what is written, which is why we see God's word as the ultimate authority. We say everything it says without apology, but we don't go beyond it because that is a path to disaster. And we live with whatever outcome God sees fit to bring about.

Every other chosen path leads only to the downfall that always accompanies pride. But humility is required to carry the burden that God places on his chosen leaders. The leader who fails at humility fails at leadership. And humility is the only possible response in light of what Paul writes next in v. 7. He asks three questions:

1. For who sees anything different in you?

You're no better than anyone else. Humans are humans, and God is God, and humans are not God.

2. What do you have that you did not receive?

Everything is a gift, and you know it. What do you have that God didn't give you? Answer: nothing.

3. *If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?*

Stop pretending. Every good thing in us is in us because of the goodness and mercy and grace of God. It *all* belongs to Him, and he is gracious enough to give you access. Grab hold of it, but don't pretend you're the source.

CONCLUSION

From what Paul writes here, we can see that the Corinthians' views and assumptions about Christian leadership were bathed in worldliness. Has this changed? Aren't we still prone to gravitate toward those who are "natural leaders" in the world's eyes? The strong leader, the leader with charisma, the bold leader? As if appearing to be strong, charismatic, and bold guarantees that someone is a godly, qualified leader. These are external traits that may accentuate underlying good qualifications, but they can just as easily mask underlying weaknesses.

These qualities are not to be part of the grading scheme. When these are the primary elements of evaluation, we will be blind to impostors. We will elevate the bold because of their boldness, but we are in danger of raising up bold fools. And if we do that, more bold fools will enter the gates because they know this is a place where they can be exalted. Boldness is only good when you are bold about the right things.

We Must See Leaders as Servants and Stewards (vv. 1-2)

Bold or not, we are looking for faithful servants and stewards. Christian leaders are servants; this is true, but they are servants of Jesus Christ, the Saviour of the world. Church leaders are not the masters of the church; they are servants of Christ. Many church leaders forget that they are given to serve the church.

And the type of service they're involved in is one of stewardship. They are to steward the greatest treasure: God's mysteries. Leaders

must manage this resource and dispense it in a way that will bring a profitable result, by God's standards!

We Must Trust a Leader's Ultimate Evaluation to God (vv. 3-5)

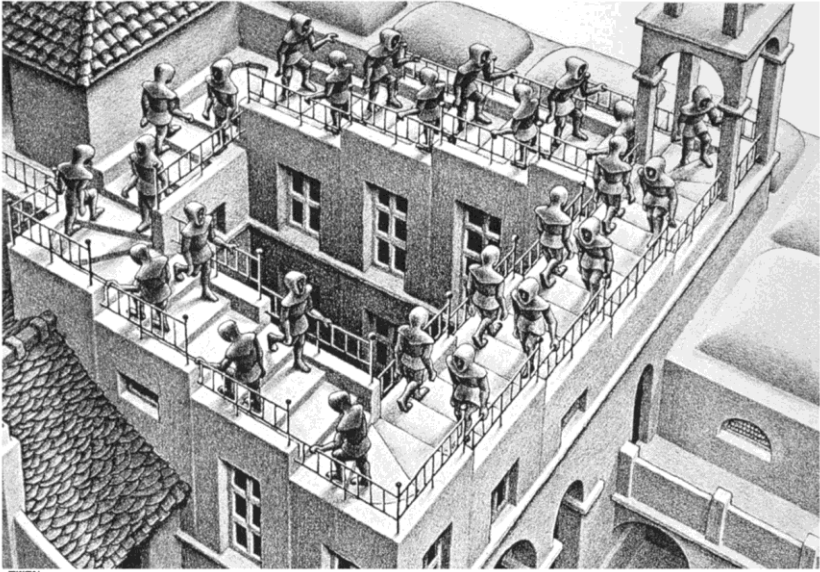
The Bible is consistent in its teaching about judgment. We can judge, but we must not judge based on our human whims or our human wisdom. If judging is to be done, it is to be done either by God directly on the last day or by God through His word through His messengers. Paul may listen to their concerns, but God's concerns come first.

My, how we need more Christian leaders like this today! We need leaders who will lose their love for the sweet taste of the opinions of other people about them. We need leaders who will be so laser-focused on what God is calling them to that they will walk through thorns and fires and the opinions of man to get there. And the only way anyone becomes like this is by allowing themselves to be shaped and trained and liberated by God through His Word. And when we do this, we will become faithful stewards of the mysteries of God.

We Must Humble Ourselves Because Everything is a Gift From God (vv. 6-7)

Finally, again, we must humble ourselves, all of us, because everything is a gift from God. In Luke 7:28, which was a passage in our group reading plan this week, we find the essence of the paradox of greatness in the kingdom of God. Jesus, speaking of John the Baptist, says this: *"I tell you, among those born of women none is greater than John. Yet the one who is least in the kingdom of God is greater than he."*

This is something we should ponder. There is no room for pride when one can be the greatest and the least at the same time. If we try to visualize this idea, it turns into an **Escher drawing like this one:**



People appear to be ascending to new heights, but, reaching the top of the circular staircase, they find they are behind those only beginning their ascent.

If your goals and expectations are to continually rise in the hierarchy, reaching ever-higher levels until you reach the supposed "top," you will be constantly befuddled and confused. The paradox of Christian greatness destroys all motivation for competitiveness, selfish ambition and conceit since greatness is connected to humility and not to accomplishment.

This is a badly needed word in the systems of esteem in the Christian church today. Churches are filled with worldly "corporate-ladder" thinking, with people trying to make their way to the "top" of the organization. And yet to really reach the "top" is not to live more and more like a king, but to live more and more like a servant, remembering our great Servant-King, who laid down his life for us, we now lay down our lives for him and for others.

May our churches be led and filled with people who seek greatness by way of humility and not worldly standards of accomplishment.

And may we all be found, on the last day, to be faithful servants of God and faithful stewards of his mysteries.

Let's pray.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER AND DISCUSS

Introduction

1. How does our modern culture's expectation of a "CEO-style" leader conflict with the biblical expectation of a church leader, and what are the dangers of treating the local church like a business?

Point 1: We Must See Leaders as Servants and Stewards (vv. 1-2)

2. The sermon used the historical image of an "under-rower" to describe a servant of Christ. How does this image of someone plodding along below deck challenge the way we typically view prominent Christian leaders today?
3. What does it practically mean that church leaders are "stewards" who manage the household of God but do not own it?
4. The "mysteries of God" are the secret and hidden wisdom of the gospel revealed in Jesus. Why is it significant that leaders are called to steward *these* mysteries rather than their own creative ideas, programs, or strategies?

Point 2: We Must Trust a Leader's Ultimate Evaluation to God (vv. 3-5)

5. Paul says it is a "very small thing" to be judged by the Corinthians or even by himself. Why is our own self-assessment often an inadequate or faulty measure of our spiritual faithfulness?
6. While we aren't to judge hidden things, we *must* judge and confront obvious sin or false teaching. How do we balance discerning unbiblical behaviour with the command not to "pronounce judgment before the time"?
7. Why is it comforting to know that God sees the faithful acts of service performed in total obscurity that no one else notices?

8. How does trusting God as the ultimate judge protect leaders from becoming people-pleasers or being crushed by the harsh criticisms of others?

Point 3: We Must Humble Ourselves Because Everything is a Gift From God (vv. 6-7)

9. The sermon points out the Evangelical subculture's assumption that "big church = godly leader." Why is this a dangerous false metric, and what biblical metrics should we be prioritizing instead?
10. Christian leadership involves holding a position, but the sermon argues this position is a "burden to be carried" rather than an "asset to be exploited." How does this reshape your expectations of those in spiritual authority over you?

The content of this booklet was written by Michael Krahn, lead pastor of Community Bible Church in Ilderton, Ontario. We are a gospel-centered church devoted to the faithful teaching of Scripture, the building up of believers, and bearing witness to Christ in our community and beyond. To learn more, join us for a Sunday service, or connect with us directly, scan the QR code or visit: cbcilderton.ca/contact-us

