

Rules  
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Jeremiah 23:1-13

When we were kids we played the game, “follow the leader” mimicking whatever the designated “leader” did. In life we all play follow the leader. Every organized group of people (government, business, school, church, family) requires leadership. One of the hot topics in the study of leadership is the problem of “narcissistic” leaders. When we say someone is a narcissist what words come to mind to describe them? What about a leader who is a narcissist? Describe them.

*“Narcissism is most often described as unhealthy and destructive. It has been described as “driven by unyielding arrogance, self-absorption, and a personal egotistic need for power and admiration. Narcissistic leadership is a leadership style in which the leader is only interested in him/herself. Their priority is themselves – at the expense of their people/group members. This leader exhibits the characteristics of a narcissist: arrogance, dominance and hostility. It is a sufficiently common leadership style that it has acquired its own name.”<sup>i</sup>*

Author Chuck Degroat adds these characteristics of the narcissistic leader: *“...grandiosity, entitlement, attention-seeking, low empathy...someone who's narcissistic...uses people, gets his or her own needs met by people in and through grandiosity, entitlement, attention-seeking, etc.”<sup>ii</sup>*

We hear those words and naturally think no one would ever follow a grandiose and self-absorbed leader like that, right? Interestingly, scholars and psychologists say we all have the potential to be a narcissist and some of our most productive and revered business and governmental leaders and innovators were/are narcissists. The Harvard Business Review: *“Such “narcissistic” leaders are essential during times of transition. Gifted strategists and courageous risk-takers, they inspire others and drive their organizations toward a compelling future. But they can also be emotionally isolated and highly distrustful, prone to hair-trigger rages and grandiose airs.”<sup>iii</sup>*

It begs the question, when does a leader’s self-confidence and vision cross the line into dysfunction?

In the final days of the nation of Judah, God’s people suffered under some narcissistic kings. During Jeremiah’s ministry as a prophet there were four kings of Judah, one was godly (Josiah) and the last three (his sons and grandson) were evil narcissists. God warned them to repent, they refused, and the whole nation paid the price being destroyed and scattered by the Babylonians.

- God gave these evil kings a chance to change. Look at these verses:

**Jeremiah 21:2 (NLT)** — King Zedekiah sent word to Jeremiah, **2** “Please speak to the Lord for us and ask him to help us. King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon is attacking Judah. Perhaps the Lord will be gracious and do a mighty miracle as he has done in the past. Perhaps he will force Nebuchadnezzar to withdraw his armies.”

The Lord’s reply:

**Jeremiah 22:3–5 (NLT)** — **3** This is what the Lord says: Be fair-minded and just. Do what is right! Help those who have been robbed; rescue them from their oppressors. Quit your evil deeds! Do not mistreat foreigners, orphans, and widows. Stop murdering the innocent! **4** If you obey me, there will always be a descendant of David sitting on the throne here in Jerusalem. The king will ride through the palace gates in chariots and on horses, with his parade of attendants and subjects. **5** But if you refuse to pay attention to this warning, I swear by my own name, says the Lord, that this palace will become a pile of rubble.’ ”

In today’s passage, God’s patience with King Zedekiah ran out and He had Jeremiah proclaim that after the destruction, when Jerusalem was rebuilt, He would send the nation of Judah “responsible” shepherds (see Ezra & Nehemiah) and one day would send the ultimate, righteous King, our Lord Jesus Christ.

The point: We all follow leaders, some we choose some we don’t. The only perfect, righteous leader is Christ. He should be the ultimate leader we follow. As for human leaders, we should only follow those who most resemble the Savior.

**1** “What sorrow awaits the leaders of my people—the shepherds of my sheep—for they have destroyed and scattered the very ones they were expected to care for,” says the Lord. **2** Therefore, this is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says to these shepherds: “Instead of caring for my flock and leading them to safety, you have deserted them and driven them to destruction. Now I will pour out judgment on you for the evil you have done to them. **3** But I will gather together the remnant of my flock from the countries where I have driven them. I will bring them back to their own sheepfold, and they will be fruitful and increase in number. **4** Then I will appoint responsible shepherds who will care for them, and they will never be afraid again. Not a single one will be lost or missing. I, the Lord have spoken! **5** “For the time is coming,” says the Lord, “when I will raise up a righteous descendant from King David’s line. He will be a King who rules with wisdom. He will do what is just and right throughout the land. **6** And this will be his name: ‘The Lord Is Our Righteousness.’ In that day Judah will be saved, and Israel will live in safety. **7** “In that day,” says the Lord, “when people are taking an oath, they will no longer say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who rescued the people of Israel from the land of Egypt.’ **8** Instead, they will say, ‘As surely as the Lord lives, who brought the people of Israel back to their own land from the land of the north and from all the countries to which he had exiled them.’ Then they will live in their own land.”

- In the Old Testament, the kings of Israel and Judah were described as “shepherds.” In what ways would a good leader be like a faithful shepherd? How does a good shepherd attend to their sheep?
- Psalm 23 describes how the Lord as our shepherd provides for our needs, provides for our rest, strengthens, guides in “right paths,” protects, comforts, never abandons, provides an overflowing cup of blessings, goodness, and unfailing love, and eventually a home in His house.
- In John 10 Jesus said, when the sheep are attacked, *“The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep”*<sup>iv</sup> but, <sup>13</sup> *“The hired hand runs away because he’s working only for the money and doesn’t really care about the sheep.”*<sup>v</sup>
- Jesus did more than just risk His life, He GAVE His life for our salvation.
- Much has been said about Jesus as the greatest model for leadership.

Look at the contrast of leading like Jesus versus the narcissistic leader:

**Humility - Philippians 2:6–7 (NLT) — 6** Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. **7** Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. When he appeared in human form,

**Modesty - Isaiah 42:2 (NLT) — 2** He will not shout or raise his voice in public.

**Empathy - Isaiah 42:3 (NLT) — 3** He will not crush the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle. He will bring justice to all who have been wronged.

**Optimism - Isaiah 42:4 (NLT) — 4** He will not falter or lose heart until justice prevails throughout the earth...

**Anointing - Isaiah 42:1 (NLT) — 1** “Look at my servant, whom I strengthen. He is my chosen one, who pleases me. I have put my Spirit upon him. He will bring justice to the nations.

**Mercy and Justice - Ezekiel 34:16 (NLT) — 16** I will search for my lost ones who strayed away, and I will bring them safely home again. I will bandage the injured and strengthen the weak. But I will destroy those who are fat and powerful. I will feed them, yes—feed them justice!

**Loving Correction - Galatians 6:1 (NLT) — 1** Dear brothers and sisters, if another believer is overcome by some sin, you who are godly should gently and humbly help that person back onto the right path. And be careful not to fall into the same temptation yourself.

**Servant Leadership - Matthew 20:26–27 (NLT) — 26** But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, **27** and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. **John 13:14–15 (NLT) — 14** And since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other’s feet. **15** I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.

**Committed to Doing God’s Will - Mark 14:36 (NLT) — 36** ...Please take this cup of suffering away from me. Yet I want your will to be done, not mine.”

**Benevolent Toward Others - Luke 6:31 (NLT) — 31** Do to others as you would like them to do to you.

**Compassion - Matthew 9:36 (NLT) — 36** When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

- God also told Jeremiah to call out Judah's flawed, fake religious leaders.
- If anyone should lead like Jesus, it should be church leaders.
- The sins of the false prophets literally made Jeremiah physically sick.

**9** My heart is broken because of the false prophets, and my bones tremble. I stagger like a drunkard, like someone overcome by wine, because of the holy words the Lord has spoken against them. **10** For the land is full of adultery, and it lies under a curse. The land itself is in mourning— its wilderness pastures are dried up. For they all do evil and abuse what power they have. **11** “Even the priests and prophets are ungodly, wicked men. I have seen their despicable acts right here in my own Temple,” says the Lord. **12** “Therefore, the paths they take will become slippery. They will be chased through the dark, and there they will fall. For I will bring disaster upon them at the time fixed for their punishment. I, the Lord, have spoken! **13** “I saw that the prophets of Samaria were terribly evil, for they prophesied in the name of Baal and led my people of Israel into sin.

John MacArthur writes, *“Under the plan God has ordained for the church, leadership is a position of humble, loving service. Church leadership is ministry, not management. Those whom God designates as leaders are called not to be governing monarchs, but humble slaves; not slick celebrities, but laboring servants. Those who would lead God’s people must above all exemplify sacrifice, devotion, submission, and lowliness. Jesus Himself gave us the pattern when He stooped to wash His disciples’ feet, a task that was customarily done by the lowest of slaves (John 13). If the Lord of the universe would do that, no church leader has a right to think of himself as a bigwig.”*<sup>vi</sup>

So, What’s the Takeaway?

- Narcissistic leaders led the whole nation of Judah to destruction.
- God gave them multiple chances to repent and they refused.
- What about the leaders we chose to follow?
- In a world of narcissistic leaders, Jesus should be our ultimate leader, but when it comes to human leaders, we should follow those who most resemble Him.
- Let’s be real. Ever hear the sales pitch: *“Don’t settle for cheap imitations?”* Compared to Jesus, we are all just imitations. That’s why He had to die so our sins and shortcomings could be covered by His righteousness.
- But, because He gives His followers His Holy Spirit, we don’t have to be “cheap imitations,” we CAN be sincere imitators of Him (sanctification.)
- That applies to all of us and to the human leaders we choose to follow.

- No leader will be perfect like Jesus; the question is whether they are striving to be like Him?
- Leadership and innovation takes courage, boldness, and vision but there is a difference between “healthy narcissism” and “destructive narcissism.”
  - Does the leader have self-confidence or is it grandiosity?
  - Does the leader use power wisely or live for power above all else?
  - Is the leader concerned for others or do they exploit them for gain?
  - Are the leader’s values consistent or do they change on a whim?
  - Does the leader listen to feedback or never have ears to hear?
  - Are they humble? Or are they arrogant, attention-seeking, addicted to honor and prone to rage?
  - Specific to Christian leaders: Do they strive to lead like Jesus? Do they display the fruit of the Spirit?
- Jesus should be our ultimate leader and when choosing a human leaders to follow, vote for, or imitate, we should follow those who most resemble Him. God help us to do that.

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<sup>i</sup> Neider, Linda L. (2010). *The Dark Side of Management*. Charlotte, North Carolina: Information Age Publishing. p. 29. ISBN 978-1607522645.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://careynieuwhof.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CNLP\\_581—With\\_Chuck-DeGroat.mp3.pdf](https://careynieuwhof.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/CNLP_581—With_Chuck-DeGroat.mp3.pdf)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://hbr.org/2004/01/narcissistic-leaders-the-incredible-pros-the-inevitable-cons>

<sup>iv</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Jn 10:11). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>v</sup> Tyndale House Publishers. (2015). *Holy Bible: New Living Translation* (Jn 10:13). Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers.

<sup>vi</sup> <https://www.gotquestions.org/Christian-leadership.html>