

What I'd Say to a Young Leader

Rich Nathan

April 22 & 23, 2017

The Making of a Leader

1 Timothy 1

There's a book on leadership that I read several years ago. It's titled *Reviewing Leadership*. Here is how the book begins:

Talk about leadership abounds today. Voices on many sides deplore its absence or mediocrity, betrayal or corruption. The young are suspicious of it, the middle-aged tend to resent it, and the elderly long for it. Articles in newspapers and magazines, material and surveys and reports, and titles of popular and serious books highlight leadership as this era's most important issue. A growing band of consultants offer advice on developing it, news centers focus on various aspects of leadership continue to appear, and every year a regular round of seminars, workshops, and conferences features well-known experts in the field. It would seem, then, that leadership has become a dominating theme of our culture, one of its pivotal concerns.

Every organization is crying out for leadership – from public schools to university athletic departments to elected officials. What you hear over and over again is, “where are the leaders?”

Have you ever asked yourself why is there so much discussion about leadership at this particular moment in history? Why so many consultants? Why so many books? Why so many editorials and organizations focusing on this one subject, leadership?

I think there are three obvious reasons why we, as a society, are spending so much time talking about leadership. People are usually concerned about leadership in a time of crisis.

So as we deal with the multiple crises of potential war on the Korean peninsula, failing public schools in many cities, and massive divisions in our country there is a yearning for leadership.

There is a second reason why I think leadership is a topic on everyone's mind. The interest in leadership usually emerges during a time of rapid change. So many changes are happening in society so quickly – changes in family structure, changes in moral boundaries, technological changes, global economic shifts, growing economic inequality, radical demographic changes in America. There is a widespread feeling that things are spinning out of control, or at least that things are moving too fast for many people to keep up with them. So in the midst of all of this change, people have a desire for

reliable, dependable leaders, who can help us understand what's happening and how we can navigate all the change.

And I think third, there is a concern about leadership because of the well-publicized failures of many of our leaders. We live in a time when many leaders who have been entrusted with enormous responsibility in government, in business, in media, in athletics, in religion have been involved in shocking instances of sexual harassment, sexual assault, financial misconduct, lying and cover-ups. In this atmosphere of failure there is a yearning for healthy leadership worthy of respect.

I'm going to be starting a leadership series today from the book of 1 Timothy. There are lots of definitions of leadership that we could use. Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, said:

The only definition of a leader is someone who has followers.

You're not a leader just because you have a certain title or position. Drucker has a very functional definition. A leader has followers! In other words, if you think you're leading a parade and you turn around and there's no one in back of you, you're just out for a walk. You're not a leader.

Another very common definition of leadership is that

A leader is someone with influence

Under this definition, you're a leader if you're a teacher, a professor or administrator in a school. You're a leader if you're organizing a Moms play group. You're a leader if you serve as a coach for a team. You're a leader if you're a manager in a business. You're a leader if you run a medical or legal practice or you lead a small group. You have influence.

In this letter, Paul gives Timothy, one of his younger disciples, dozens of lessons in leadership. I've been reflecting on 1 Timothy for the past several months from the perspective of leadership. I'm calling this first talk "What I'd Say to a Young Leader".

Let's pray.

1 Timothy 1:1-7

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

² To Timothy my true son in the faith:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

³ As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer ⁴ or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. ⁵ The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. ⁷ They want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm.

Let me read again to you verses 1-2:

1 Timothy 1:1-2

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope,

² To Timothy my true son in the faith:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul calls Timothy his true son in the faith. If Paul is an authentic apostle, then Timothy is an authentic son of Paul. This idea of *true* son was used of legitimate children in the Greco-Roman World. A true son is a child born of a married couple.

John Stott, the great Bible expositor of the last generation, said that Paul might have been hinting at the circumstances of Timothy's physical birth. Tim's dad was a Greek and Jewish Law would have regarded him as illegitimate because his father wasn't Jewish. But spiritually, Timothy is Paul's genuine son. Partly because Paul was responsible for Timothy's Christian conversion and partly because Timothy followed Paul's teaching and example. Paul is saying to Timothy, "You are a chip off the old block. The life of God that is in me has been reproduced in you."

In Paul's relationship with Timothy, I find the first bit of counsel that I would give to a young leader. The first bit of counsel I would give is:

Find a mentor!

The Bible speaks a great deal about what we call mentoring – passing on experiences and values from one generation to another. We find mentoring relationships among Old Testament prophets. Eli mentored Samuel. Elijah mentored Elisha. Moses mentored Joshua.

In the New Testament, we find leaders mentoring. Barnabas mentored Paul. Paul mentored Timothy. Part of the hunger that exists among young people to be mentored

is that most of the ways we train today have nothing to do with personal relationship. Most of our learning environments are entirely impersonal. We rely on online videos, classrooms, books. And all of that is good if we're talking about conveying information. But if we are talking about personal formation, shaping another life – that involves relationship!

My favorite book on mentoring is an old book called *Connecting* by Paul Stanley and Robert Clinton. There are copies of it available at the Cooper Road bookstore.

In this book titled *Connecting* Stanley and Clinton define mentoring this way:

Mentoring is a relational experience in which one person empowers another by sharing God-given resources.

The God-given resources could be wisdom. It could be experience. It could be direction. It could be accountability. It could be knowledge. At the heart of mentoring is a relationship which empowers another person. To be able to know or be or do what they wouldn't be able to know or be or do without that relationship. If I was advising a young leader today, I would say "Find a mentor!" Don't just hang with your peers. Find someone who is older than you who is willing to share with you the wisdom, experiences, the lessons they've learned over the course of a lifetime. We don't have to reinvent the wheel in every generation. Nor do we have to run our heads into the same wall.

Of course, the mentoring relationship has to be mutual. Not every would-be mentor has the bandwidth or the desire to mentor everyone who approaches them, but it is absolutely the case that if you are a leader you must be invested, intentionally raising up the next generation of leaders.

Leaders are people who not only have followers, leaders are people who create other leaders.

I have seen as one of the main tasks of my pastoring the need to mentor and to raise up the next generation of pastors, church planters and Christian leaders.

Here's the second lesson:

Don't quit!

Here's what we read:

1 Timothy 1:3

As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer

The longer that I'm in ministry, the more I find myself admiring people who simply show up. Over the years I have met dozens and dozens of people who are super excited about Vineyard Columbus and seem to be everywhere in the church for about six months or a year or even two years and then are never heard from again. People who show up week after week, year after year, people you know you can count on to teach a children's ministry class, to lead a small group, to usher people at a service, to help with the deacon activities in the church, to counsel financially troubled people, to coach troubled marriages. Those are the people I most respect in the church. To use a baseball analogy for those of you who are a little older – it is the Cal Ripkens of the world. The guy who set the record for consecutive baseball games played at over 2,600 games. From 1982-1998, 16 straight years, he never missed one game. Whether he felt good or bad, strained muscles, sore back, sprained ankles, he played and played and played.

Paul tells Timothy, "Stay put in Ephesus! Don't leave the church! Despite all the problems that the church has, don't quit!" In the 21st century, we have forgotten one of the main callings for a Christian is to persevere, to crash through the quitting point.

There are literally dozens of exhortations in the New Testament for Christians to endure, to persevere, to stand firm, to be steadfast. One of the main reasons why people quit a church, a ministry, a mission, a marriage, a job, is because that particular thing is not meeting our expectation. We Christians say to ourselves: if this the Lord, then here's what we're going to see in our group, in our ministry, in our mission – we're going to see spiritual growth, we're going to see numerical growth, we're going to have financial blessing, we're going to experience acceptance, we're going to experience appreciation. People will congratulate us. Our families will be healthy. We'll be recognized. We'll move up in the company. Our salary will get better and better every year.

Let me ask you a personal question: have you ever quit something because it didn't meet your expectations. Paul reminds Timothy that life is hard.

Here's what we read in verse 18:

1 Timothy 1:18

Timothy, my son, I am giving you this command in keeping with the prophecies once made about you, so that by recalling them you may fight the battle well,

You may fight the good fight. Ministry is hard. It's not a career, it's combat. Marriage is hard. There are always thorns and bumblebees in the marital bed of roses. I believe in

the 21st century, many of us have lost sight of one central truth that runs through the whole of the Bible and the whole of history. This applies to people who consider themselves followers of Christ and those who don't consider themselves to be followers of Christ. We've lost sight of one central truth and that is that life is supposed to be hard.

If I were to give advice to a young leader I would say to that young leader: do not allow yourself to succumb to the unbiblical, unreal 21st century ideal that life is supposed to be pain-free, comfortable and easy. I can't tell you how many people I talk with who complain about a difficult circumstance in life. They are planning to quit something – church, a ministry, a marriage, a job. And the underlying presupposition of the complaint is that what I'm experiencing is abnormal. Life is supposed to be hard.

Difficult people are normal. People who break commitments are normal. Not getting your way is normal. Being frustrated is normal. Being misunderstood is normal. It is normal for things in this world to break down. It is normal to have a piece of equipment or technology to fail to function. It's normal to misplace things. It's normal to not have enough money to buy everything you want. It's normal to be hassled at your job. It's normal to have less than perfect relationships in home. Extended family problems are normal! Dealing with ridiculous bureaucracy is normal.

Jesus said,

John 16:33

"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

As I often tell you, we should put that promise on our refrigerators. In this world you will have trouble.

The Apostle Paul said,

Acts 14:22

Strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. "We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God," they said.

It is absolutely the case, friend, that virtually every successful ministry in the world is a long-term ministry. The most successful mission leaders and pastors have served for decades and who have pushed through the quitting point. You say, "But, Rich, there have been some dark times!"

The man who I looked to as my own mentor for over a decade was John Wimber, the founder of the Vineyard movement. Wimber used to say:

“Don’t doubt in the dark what you heard in the light.”

In other words, if God spoke to you plainly and clearly about doing something, if God called you to something, if God promised you something then don’t give up on that call, that promise just because things are really hard now. Don’t doubt in the dark what God told you in the light.

I’m not suggesting that we always stay in our present situations if things are really hard. It is appropriate to go back to square one and ask the Lord, “Did you really call me here? Are you asking me to do this?” Perhaps it was my own good idea. Perhaps I thought that God was calling me when he wasn’t. And there are seasons for everything as Ecclesiastes puts it. Maybe my season in this place is over. But don’t assume that just because things are really hard. Certainly don’t stay at a job where you are repeatedly asked to do something unethical, where the environment is abusive or where there’s a merger and you know that your job is going to be cut. There are times to leave.

But I suggest to you, friends, that God almost never uses hardship or difficulty as his way of calling you to quit something. It may be his way of calling you to do that thing very differently. Hardship and difficulty may be his way of encouraging us to build radically different sustainable practices in our lives. Practices of rest and exercise. Practices of building friendships and prayer. But difficulty by itself is not God’s way of telling you to leave or quit.

Let me apply this in one area before I move on – that is in marriage. You know, most marriages go through rough patches. Some marriages go through storms and a few go through hurricanes. Michael Johnson has written a great deal about commitment in marriage. He got his PhD from Penn State. He says that

Commitment is doing whatever it takes to maintain a relationship.

Michael Johnson said that marital commitment falls into three major categories: personal, moral, and structural. In other words, Dr. Johnson gives three reasons to stay in a marriage.

- Personal – “I want to”
- Moral – “I ought to”
- Structural – “I have to”

Why do we stay married? Well, the best reason is personal – I want to. This is the person I want to spend my life with. Sometimes your want is found wanting. Why should I stay married and not quit when I don’t want to be in this relationship? Because I ought to. Because, bottom line, I made a vow before God and many witnesses that for

better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, I would love and cherish this other person until death. And when I make a promise before God and before my family and friends and church, I want to be a person that keeps that promise.

Sometimes, we feel like we have to. I've invested so much in this relationship. I've got kids and I don't want my kids growing up in a divorced home. I don't want them to have to move out of our house. It's going to cost a huge amount financially. I have to. I want to stay. I ought to stay. I have to stay.

I read about a man who worked on high towers. Sometimes a storm would come up. He was asked, "What do you do when a storm comes up and you're way up high?" He says, "I take every single belt and every single rope and I tie myself on so that I won't be blown off." Sometimes to keep a commitment that's what we need to do. We need to take every single belt, every rope – I want to, I ought to, I have to – whatever I can come up with and tie myself to the tower. The counsel I would give to a young person is find a mentor! Don't quit!

Here's the third thing:

Deal with problems!

1 Timothy 1:3-4

³ As I urged you when I went into Macedonia, stay there in Ephesus so that you may command certain people not to teach false doctrines any longer ⁴ or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith.

When the Apostle Paul talks about teaching false doctrine he uses the present tense indicating that the activity is already underway. The nature of the false teaching that's going on in Ephesus is much debated. There seems to be some legalistic elements. He talks about the inappropriate application of the Old Testament law in verses 7-11. There also seems to be some ascetic elements to the false teaching.

We read in 1 Timothy 4:3

1 Timothy 4:3

They forbid people to marry and order them to abstain from certain foods, which God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and who know the truth.

Paul tells Timothy to deal with the problem. So often, leaders procrastinate, we avoid, even though we know there's a problem in a ministry or in our workplace or in our family. So, we bury our heads in the sand and we feel that somehow the problem will just take care of itself. The truth is serious problems, character issues, significant

behavioral issues, ongoing attitudinal issues – those things just don't go away if we do nothing. Like cancer, they grow.

You know, Jesus and the Apostle Paul were among the least conflict avoidant people in the history of the world. They were willing to challenge bad behavior. They were willing to challenge bad attitudes. They were willing to challenge false teaching. They were willing to challenge abusers. May I speak a personal word to small group leaders? Small group leaders, if you are aware of repeated patterns of sin in the life of someone in your group or a plan someone has to violate God's will, speak to them about it. If you're a coach, if you're a teacher at school, don't just allow a student to repeatedly show you disrespect. Deal with those attitudes. If you're a supervisor and you have an employee that never makes a deadline, an employee that simply is not carrying their weight, you have an employee who is a culture-buster because of their passive-aggressive behavior or because of their cynicism or because of their gossip – deal with it!

I have found during over 30 years of ministry that people in every realm of life are desperate for leaders who will deal with bad behavior. People in every realm of life are desperate for leaders who will deal with crummy attitudes. When a leader gets around to dealing with someone, people on the team almost always say, "Finally!" My experience is not that the team says, "Oh, I can't believe you came down on my teammate." If something is really wrong people will say, "Finally, somebody is willing to challenge this person who has made life miserable for the rest of us!" If I was to give advice to a young leader I would say deal with problems.

Here's the fourth thing:

Make the main thing the main thing!

1 Timothy 1:4-6, 15

⁴ or to devote themselves to myths and endless genealogies. Such things promote controversial speculations rather than advancing God's work—which is by faith. ⁵ The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith. ⁶ Some have departed from these and have turned to meaningless talk. ¹⁵ Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

John Wimber, my spiritual mentor, used to talk about focusing on the main and plain. One of the clearest signs to me that someone is not ready to lead in the church is that they are always pursuing some esoteric marginal teaching or some bizarre interpretation of a particular biblical text or practice. It's almost like they have a nose for the weird and they go for it. Have you ever met someone like that?

I've had folks come up to me and say, "What do you think about the fact that the blood moon is happening during the Feast of Tabernacles?" What do I think? I don't think anything about those things because those things are not worth thinking about. During the Iraq war there were all these books out about how Saddam Hussein's name could be rearranged so that it turned out to be the number 666 from the book of Revelation. Could he be the antichrist?

Pastor, I've been listening online to this teacher who says that after you come to Christ you should never ask for God's forgiveness again despite what Jesus teaches in the Lord's Prayer and despite the model of dozens of people in the Bible who ask God's forgiveness and despite the teaching of virtually the entire church whatever the denomination for 2,000 years. Pastor, this teacher online says I don't need to do it so should I?

A leader is somebody who is able to distinguish between the important and the unimportant, between bagging the moose and shooting at every little chipmunk that runs by.

For the church, the Apostle Paul tells us what the moose is:

1 Timothy 1:15

Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.

Christian leader – keep holding up the gospel. Keep preaching the gospel. Keep the church focused on the reason Jesus came. He came into the world, sinners to save.

Here's the last thing. If I was going to give advice to a young leader, I would tell them:

Don't do anything stupid!

1 Timothy 1:19-20

¹⁹ holding on to faith and a good conscience, which some have rejected and so have suffered shipwreck with regard to the faith. ²⁰ Among them are Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom I have handed over to Satan to be taught not to blaspheme.

The heretics rejected conscience. They pushed away from their consciences, something of God wanted to speak to them about. Conscience is like a boat that carries our faith. If you reject your conscience, if you abuse your conscience, you're punching a hole in the boat and your faith will sink.

Your behavior and your belief are linked together. If you repeatedly do something that you know God doesn't want you to do guess what? Over a period of time you're going

to find it harder and harder to believe in the Lord. If you repeatedly neglect your conscience, over a period of time you are going to find your relationship with God becoming more and more distant. Your beliefs and your behavior are linked. Your convictions about God and your conscience are linked.

What I'd say to a young leader is don't do anything stupid! You want to live a successful life, understand that you're not the exception to the rule. The things that have taken down other people – sexual affairs, financial improprieties, pride, or as John Wimber used to tell me “Gold, glitter and gals, Rich!”, affluence, arrogance and adultery. Guard yourself. Tell on yourself. Get help for yourself.

The Apostle Paul says, “Timothy, my true son, I love you.” Listen to the advice of an older leader and you will succeed.

Let's pray.

What I Say to a Young Leader

Rich Nathan
April 22 & 23, 2017
The Making of a Leader
1 Timothy 1

1. Find a mentor!
2. Don't quit!
3. Deal with problems!
4. Make the main thing the main thing!
5. Don't do anything stupid!