

TAMEONTA

Bear with the Failings of the Weak: Servant Leadership and the Way of the Cross

By Mark Walker

"We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to build him up. For Christ did not please himself, but as it is written, 'The reproaches of those who reproached you fell on me.'" (Romans 15:1-3 ESV)



Photo taken by the author while hiking

In the last issue of *Tameonta* we briefly discussed the burden of spiritual leadership, and confronted our responsibility as leaders to be examples to the flock, for which we are accountable to God. At the end of that article we said that we would take up the joy of spiritual leadership in this issue. However, as He so often does, God chose to teach me a lesson about leadership in my own life which I was not expecting. I believe it is important enough to justify pressing pause on the plan for this series of articles so I can share it with you. We will return to the issue of joy in leadership in our next issue.

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God seems to like teaching me lessons about my walk with Him while I am hiking in the Colorado mountains. I have no idea why He chooses these times, but it is always a great joy to draw near to Him in the midst of His majestic creation and learn from the One who is "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). Recently, while hiking the Flatirons near Boulder, Colorado the Lord taught me something about Christ-like leadership. This was, in some ways, a painful lesson for me. But once I released some self-centered hurt and anger over the experience, I caught a glimpse of a genuine and significant truth of spiritual leadership that I now want to pass on to you.

This was very different from most of my hikes because I wasn't alone - I was with a large group of Christian brothers and sisters, thirty or more in all. The brothers leading our group had explained the idea of the hike as an opportunity to spend time together as a family in Christ and to have fellowship with one another - while getting some exercise, of course! It sounded great. But almost as soon as our group set out something began to happen. There were some strong hikers among us who made their way to the front of the group and set a very fast pace. I am not a strong hiker; I prefer to hike slowly so I can enjoy nature and talk to God, and I'm not used to racing up the side of a mountain. Soon I found myself with a few people at the back of the group struggling to keep up. After about ten minutes I looked up and most of the group was gone, disappearing up the mountain ahead of us. There were a few people with me, and some who had fallen even farther behind. We struggled our way forward by ourselves, while those who were behind us eventually gave up and turned back.

Some of the people I was with started to become angry at being left behind. I wasn't feeling too good about it myself - I mean, wasn't this hike supposed to be a time of fellowship? Our little group was pretty much left out of the fellowship, weren't we? Did the rest of the group even care whether we were with them or not? What about the people who got so discouraged they just turned around and went home? I was feeling hurt, angry, rejected, and sorry for myself as I pushed my way up the trail. A little further along we ran into a few more people who had been left behind by the main group; they had taken the wrong trail and almost gotten lost. Now they were backtracking, and we all had to figure out which way to go. By the time we made it to the top I was so exhausted and irritated by the experience that I didn't even much enjoy the amazing view of Boulder. Of course, when I arrived everyone else was ready to start back down, so in a few minutes I was left alone again.

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On my way back down I tried to sort through my feelings about the experience. I knew some of it was just self-pity and anger, so I prayed through that for a while, but something was still bothering me. The point our leaders had made about the hike being a family activity kept coming back to me. What sort of family goes on a hike, then allows the older brothers and sisters to just leave the younger, weaker ones behind to fend for themselves if they can't keep up? The more I thought about this and why it bothered me, the more I realized there was an important lesson to be learned here about spiritual leadership - a lesson about allowing the strongest to set the pace.

If God has called you to any form of spiritual leadership, you very likely have areas of spiritual strength that are recognized by those around you. This, of course, does not mean that you are more important than anyone else, or that others do not have gifts that you lack. By strength I simply mean that you have a degree of spiritual maturity, understanding of Scripture, and experience walking with the Lord day by day that is greater than many of those you lead - that is why others follow you. Along with this strength, however, God has given leaders a very clear responsibility that is spelled

out in our opening verse: "We who are strong have an obligation to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves" (Rom. 15:1; cf. 1 Thess. 5:14; Phil. 2:3-11).

The world operates on the principle of survival of the fittest. The strongest, brightest, and most talented rise to the top; they become the focus of everyone's attention, to be celebrated and rewarded, while those who seem weaker and less successful are ignored by society. In prison this dynamic is taken to another level. The strong and violent become shot-callers, feared and respected, while the weak and gentle are used and preyed upon. The kingdom of God turns all this upside down: "But Jesus called them to him and said, 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many'" (Matt. 20:25-28; cf. Luke 22:25-27). Jesus, the strongest spiritual leader of all, came as a servant of weak and sinful human beings like you and me. Now He calls us to serve the weaker brothers and sisters around us.

If you are anything like me, however, even when you are serving the Lord in ministry you may have a tendency to fall back into a worldly mindset toward weaker brothers and sisters. Have you ever led a group in a study, or tried to teach a challenging biblical truth, or perhaps worked one-on-one with several brothers or sisters seeking to encourage them in their spiritual growth? Do you sometimes find that in the group there are one or two (or more) who learn much more slowly, whose faith is often wavering, who seem to have little motivation to grow in holiness and their relationship with the Lord? When this happens to me I have a tendency to quickly become frustrated, and I think, "What is wrong with this guy? He's holding the whole group back from making progress!" I am tempted to just move ahead with the rest of the group and let him keep up if he can - to let the strongest set the spiritual pace.

The Lord, however, tells us that as servant leaders we have a special responsibility - not to keep up with the pace of the strong, but to "admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all" (1 Thess. 5:14). "Patience is needed when dealing with people's many weaknesses and failures. We must have patience to bear with those who are slow to learn, resistant to change, weak in faith, quick to complain, forgetful of their responsibilities, emotionally unstable, fearful, or wayward" (Strauch 2006, 42).

As spiritual leaders we are not shot-callers - we are shepherds (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:1-4). "Lack of patience is a serious deficiency in a Christian leader. Our work with people is primarily a spiritual work, so it must be done God's way, with great patience and care. An impatient leader is as

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destructive to people as an impatient father is to his children or as an impatient shepherd is to his sheep" (Strauch 2006, 42). In Ezekiel 34:1-10, God condemned the shepherds of Israel for failing to care for the weaker sheep: "The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd, and they became food for all the wild beasts" (Ezek. 34:4-5). If we let the strong

"The way of Christ-like leadership is the way of the cross - of laying down all our gifts, all our strengths, all our goals and our desires, in service to others for His sake. It is dying to self so that those we serve might live through Him."

set the pace and leave the weak, sick, and injured sheep behind to fend for themselves, they will become prey for the enemy, wander from the trail and become lost, or turn back in despair (see Matt. 9:36). I sadly remember a brother who quit coming to a Bible study I was leading because I failed to gently and patiently guide him through a point of weakness.

When we demonstrate patience toward the weaker brother or sister, not pleasing ourselves but seeking to sacrificially serve and shepherd them, we become more like Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:6-8, cf. vs. 3-11; Rom. 15:3). The way of Christ-like leadership is the way of the cross - of laying down all our gifts, all our strengths, all our goals and our desires, in service to others for His sake. It is dying to self so that those we serve might live through Him (2 Cor. 4:11-12; 13:9).

In the end, I think what bothered me about that hike up the Flatirons was the spirit which allowed the strongest to set the pace and was willing to leave the weak behind to make it on their own, get lost, or give up. As we seek to shepherd those the Lord has entrusted to our ministries, walking in the footsteps of the chief Shepherd, may we not give in to the temptation to let the strongest set the spiritual pace. Rather, let us strive in the strength our God supplies to bear patiently with the failings of the weak and lay down our lives in service to them. I pray the Lord would grant that, at the end of our lives and ministries, we might be able to say with Christ, "I kept them in your name...I have guarded them, and not one of them has been lost..." (John 17:12; cf. John 6:39). After all, the goal is not to be the fastest to the top of the mountain, but that we all eventually get there - together.

References:

Strauch, Alexander. 2006. *A Christian Leader's Guide to Leading with Love*. Littleton: Lewis & Roth Publishers.

My Time in Mongolia

By Q. Valdois

Brothers, thanks so much for your prayers as I headed off to Mongolia. My main goal in visiting Mongolia was to help my friend Danny as he transitioned from prison life to life on the streets and, after being in the States for 20 years, to life in a “new” culture. That small landlocked country has one of the richest histories and cultures of any in Asia. Greater than that are the wonderful people of Mongolia. Their history and their nomadic lifestyle, combined with the harshness of their geographic climate, has produced a people that are tough and extremely resourceful, yet with a strong sense of community and care for others.



Q with his friend Danny, Danny's son and uncle

Danny and I worked together to create a résumé, and we checked out a few of the job opportunities too. We also had a chance to travel around the country, and did some very cool things.



Q on a camel

Danny made sure I got immersed in the real Mongolian experience. We played with golden eagles, rode camels and visited herders living in yerts in the countryside. The food was AWESOME. The national dish is a great steamed meat dumpling. I ate mutton, marmot, horse and even sheep’s head and loved it all.

Danny and I also visited several churches. We visited one church that was started by missionaries from South Korea. The pastor spoke in Korean and it was translated to Mongolian. The church service had a distinct “Korean” feel and didn’t seem Mongolian at all. Instead of allowing the church to be expressed in the native culture they fully adapted to the culture of their leadership.

Seeing this reminded me of the church in prison. God has placed gifted leaders in the church behind the walls, and built the church in the unique culture of prison. He sends people from the outside to encourage and lead the church from time to time, but continues to preserve the culture and uniqueness of the prison church. Believe me, there’s nothing like you guys out here.



Q in traditional Mongolian garb eating with a farmer and his family in the countryside

Continue to let God use your gifts for His glory in prison. Be encouraged as you see God molding and shaping you in the context of the prison church. Be open to His direction and follow His leading. He has incredible things for you in the future!

You Don't Mean My Whole Heart, Do You? (Part One)

By Nathan Cothorn

I write what I've experienced. Things that God has taken me through personally. This time it's about Trust, and that path from trusting in myself, to finally trusting in Christ. Long and broken was the road...and for a while, a big fat mess.

All By Myself (leaving God out)

"Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." - Proverbs 3:5-6

Do you know what happens when I leave God out? It's simple: I fall. Sometimes, it's just a little stumble. But many times it's a grand and miserable spectacle that shakes up everything and everyone around. I never expect it to be quiet. We make waves when we hit the ground. And those waves almost always crash right through other people's lives. Even years after the waves calm, we can often still feel the ripples. For good or for ill, we affect every life we touch. Leaving God out and trusting in self always ends in a mess.

Trust (the hardest word)

I've always believed in God. And I spent many years claiming (pretending) to be a Christian. I believed in the *reality* of Jesus Christ, but never really *trusted* in Him as my Lord and Savior. Inside, I had a genuine desire to serve God, but I didn't want to give Him too much control. What it boiled down to: I just couldn't bring myself to the point of being able to let go and trust Him to do what only He knows is best for my life. So I didn't.

Instead, I did things my way, but in His name; still seeking His blessing, but not His direction. Now here's where it starts to get messy - I couldn't see it. I didn't know that's what I was doing. At the time, I definitely knew something was very wrong, but I didn't know what. So, my answer was to ignore it and keep telling myself that I was working for the Lord. I'd hold Bible studies, witness to people, and throw around big words like justification, sanctification, and propitiation. But what was that accomplishing? I still felt empty. What was I doing?

"I just couldn't bring myself to the point of being able to let go and trust [God] to do what only He knows is best for my life."

I started asking God those same questions, and over time the answers came. I was making excuses and leaving God out. I was playing at religion. I was a fake. That's all I had. And if you strip that away, I was still the same scared, self-conscious kid that I'd always been. I was still missing the most important thing: and that was a genuine, "I'm trusting in the blood and nothing but the blood" personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Can you guess how far that got me? About as far as my flesh could carry me. And that wasn't far. I'd get started, run out of gas, then give up in frustration.

Without a real relationship with Christ, I was lost. I was still a slave to my sinful nature, and the lifestyle I continued to live certainly wasn't a surrendered, obedient, Christ-like life. No matter what I tried so hard to make the outside look like, the inside was still broken. I lived ugly and selfish, and my heart was clogged with jealousy, resentment, anger, hatred, self-pity, and fear. I knew the Bible said that Christ could take all of that, but I just couldn't trust God and give Him what He really wanted from me - my heart.

That led me to begin asking myself the hard questions, the big "why" questions that would show me the reasons behind everything I had been doing: Why won't I trust God? And why am I trying so hard to convince myself that I'm serving Him, when I'm not?

It took a while, but when the light finally came on, it seemed obvious: the first answer was fear. I wouldn't trust God because I was afraid that He wouldn't have my back, and I was afraid of what He would ask me to do. Second, I was trying to convince myself that I really was serving God when in fact I was just a big faker, because I was running from a very real call to service that I knew I had on my life. All that time, I had been trying to do things that would cover the shame and the guilt I felt for being afraid and for running away.

"I let go of the fear, the anger, the hatred, and the guilt. This time when I asked God to work out His will in my life, I meant it."

It was January of 2013 when the Lord showed me that. But wow, what a bumpy ride it had taken to get me there! I'd been at odds with the law for years, been in a high speed chase, been shot numerous times, been in more fights than I care to remember, almost overdosed on a number of different drugs, and lived like the devil in prison for 18 years. But now, I was finally at that place, so I prayed and asked Christ to save me. I let go of everything that I had been holding onto so tightly for so long. I let go of the fear, the anger, the hatred, and the guilt. This time when I asked God to work out His will in my life, I meant it. I had finally stopped running.

"But as many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name: which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God." - John 1:12-13

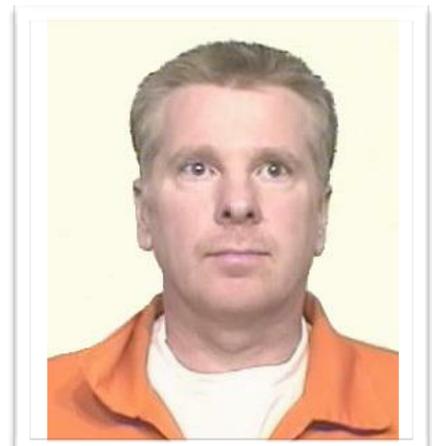
The Bible also says that if you are His, it is because He called you. And I was finally ready to answer the call that I had been running from for the better part of my life...*"No man can come to me, except*

the Father which hath sent me draw Him: and I will raise him up at the last day." - John 6:44 "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are called according to His purposes. For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the First-Born among many brethren. Moreover whom He did predestinate, them He also called: and whom He called, them He also justified: and whom He justified, them He also glorified." - Romans 8:28-30.

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Ministry Updates

- Craig "Martin" Tessier, a good friend of The Cell Church and the author of *Reaching Out from a Bleeding Heart*, died at Territorial Correctional Facility on Sunday, February 22, 2015 after a long struggle with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease). His joy in God, love of Christ, and passion to share the truths of Scripture with others remained vibrant right up until the moment he went home to be with the Lord. Please praise God with us for Martin, and pray for the Lord's presence and comfort for his family. Look for an article celebrating his life and ministry in the next issue of *Tameonta*. If you knew Martin and would like to write something in memory of him feel free to send it to us, and we will try to include it in the newsletter.



Brother Martin Tessier

- **What does "Tameonta" mean?** We get this question so frequently that we have decided to include the answer in every issue from now on! The name is a transliteration of a Greek phrase found in 1 Cor. 1:28 which means "things that are not." Read 1 Cor. 1:26-31 for a better understanding of why we selected this name for our newsletter.
- **Year in Review:** The Lord has greatly blessed our ministry over the past year in many ways. Thank you all so much! We are grateful to God for the partnership, prayers, and support of each one of you who have been a part of this ministry. We wanted to celebrate the Lord's faithfulness, and invite you to praise Him with us, by sharing a few of the past year's accomplishments:
 - We started The Cell Church in January of 2014 as a Colorado non-profit corporation
 - We built a website to give everyone access to the ministry and our activities
 - We were approved by the federal government in November, 2014 as a 501(c)(3) tax exempt public charity

- We became an approved satellite of The Urban Ministry Institute (TUMI), purchased all the Capstone Curriculum materials, and submitted our program proposal to the Department of Corrections to start our first TUMI site at Buena Vista
- We have published 9 booklets and tracts of prisoner writing, and made original artwork and music available
- We started our mentor ministry, and the first mentoring relationships are growing
- We have been blessed with great relationships with several other prison and re-entry ministries
- We have worked with a few paroled brothers to encourage them during re-entry and help them connect with churches
- We are corresponding with prisoners in more than 10 prison facilities in Colorado and Arizona
- We have provided prisoners with books and study Bibles
- We started this newsletter!

Letters from the Church

January 17, 2015

"Thank you for your letter and offer to help me with my ministry...I am writing you because the joy of sharing in fellowship and serving our Lord, Christ Jesus, is now my full-time life other than normal daily routines. Our God is at work through all things for the good of those that love Him and are called according to His purpose. Though I cling to Him in prayer for healing and will never give up faith, hope, and trust, my approach is balanced by the fullness of Scripture built together into His big picture of light. So I follow in His footsteps, too, with 'Let Thy will be done, not mine,' and I seek out all He is showing me and teaching me through this experience. I must tell you that now I am being filled to overflowing with His Word of Life, and am being transformed in His image in an incredible and very fulfilling way. So I am writing a lot of letters to everyone, to give and serve as much as I can."

- Craig "Martin" Tessier (July 11, 1959 - February 22, 2015)