

Characteristics of a Godly Leader: *Moses & an Overwhelming Task* (Exodus 18:13-27)

“The authority by which the Christian leader leads is not power but love, not force but example, not coercion but reasoned persuasion. Leaders have power, but power is safe only in the hands of those who humble themselves to serve.” ~ John Stott

I. Investigation: An Examination of Exodus 18:13-27

Despite the presence of Aaron, Hur, and Joshua in the previous chapter, we find Moses alone as he single-handedly bears the burden of leadership. The lessons he learned in leading sheep, while important, pale in comparison to the “tools” he needs for leading a nation. Similar to the waters of the Red Sea which overwhelmed the Egyptians, Moses appears to be “drowning” in a sea of responsibilities. Another deliverance in the Book of Exodus is needed. This time help comes from a rather unexpected source, a non-Jew—Moses’ father-in-law! Jethro’s advice and Moses’ response to the wisdom given to him provide helpful guidelines in leadership.

v. 13 - During legal proceedings, the judge would sit while the litigants would stand (cf. 1 Sam 22:6; 1 Kgs 3:16).

“from morning until evening” - This phrase indicates that this was an all-day process. The Israelites are not only grumbling against the Lord, but they are also having disputes with their neighbors.

v. 14 - In essence, Jethro is stating, “Moses, what on earth do you think you’re doing?!” The next two questions raised in the latter part of this verse specify the nature of Jethro’s concern.

vv. 15-16 - Moses performs two important roles as leader of the Jewish nation: (1) he instructs the people in God’s word; and (2) he discerns God’s will. The phrase “to inquire of God” accentuates Moses’ role as a judge who speaks for God (cf. Isa 55:6).

One wonders, however, if there isn’t a taint of arrogance in Moses’ response. His use of the first-person pronoun four times within these two verses, could imply that Moses suffers from a “messianic complex.”

vv. 17-18 - “Moses was exercising such an important ministry—the explanation and application of God’s word—that one might have expected his in-laws to be impressed. After all, until now the only thing Jethro had ever seen him do was tend sheep. Now Moses was the prophet for a nation, the most important man in Israel. He had people clamoring for his attention all day long” (Ryken, *Exodus*, 482). And yet, Jethro was emphatic that Moses’ actions were wrong! The Hebrew term expresses a strong disapproval.

Note that Jethro highlights that Moses’ failure to delegate not only affected himself, but also those around him.

“to wear out” - This Hebrew term means “to fall and fade” as a leaf (Ps 1:3) or “to lose heart/courage” (2 Sam 22:46; Ps 18:45).

v. 18 - The term “too heavy” was used to describe Moses’s arms in Exodus 17:12. In both cases, assistance from others was needed.

v.v. 19-20 - The implementation of Jethro’s counsel does not exclude Moses from continuing to lead and to judge—as seen later in the Pentateuch (e.g., how to handle a blasphemer in Lev 24:10-16; what to do with someone who breaks the Sabbath in Num 15:32-36). In fact, Jethro highlights the same three roles Moses highlighted previously in this chapter:

1. Bring disputes from the people to the Lord (vv. 15, 19)
2. Warn the people of God’s regulations (vv. 16, 20)
3. Make known God’s will for godly life and activity (vv. 16, 20)

The metaphorical meaning behind “the way in which one should go” is carried over in the New Testament. Often the term “walk” is used of the believer’s path to godliness (cf. Eph 4:1; Col 1:10; 1 Thess 2:12; 1 John 2:6).

Jethro’s counsel sought to refine Moses’ role as a “representative to God”. This restructuring of the leadership model permitted Moses to continue to lead and the people of God to flourish. Jethro did not seek to remove Moses from his calling, but rather he sought to enhance Moses’ ministry by making it more effective and more efficient.

v. 21 - Observe the characteristics of those whom Jethro recommends Moses appoint.

- “capable men” - “The word describes these men as respected, influential, powerful people, those that will have the needs of the community in mind. They will be morally and physically worthy” (NET notes).
- “God-fearers” - The term speaks of devout and obedient servants of God.
- “men of truth” - This term indicates men must be seekers of truth and individuals who desire true judgement (cf. Cassuto, *Exodus*, 220).
- “hate bribes” - Their hate entails the rejection of any unjust gain.

vv. 22-23 - Jethro’s ultimate desire is to make things less heavy (“make it easier”) for Moses. Observe that Jethro indicates his counsel is in accordance with godly wisdom (“God so commands”).

v. 24 - The idiomatic phrase “listen to the voice of” indicates obedience or compliance.

Why do you think the Lord used Jethro to reveal His will rather than revealing it directly to Moses?

II. Intersect

While we may not have a formal position of leadership in a company or in a local church, we are expected to lead. Whether it is in the home, at work, or in ministry, Exodus 18 provides several important characteristics of godly leadership. Note the following:

A. A godly leader is humble. This entails a realistic view of oneself and a willingness to listen.

1 Peter 5:5 -

In *How the Mighty Fall*, best selling author Jim Collins identifies five stages of decline for a company. The first phase entails arrogance. He writes, "Instead of acknowledging that luck and fortuitous events might have played a helpful role, people begin to presume that success is due entirely to the superior qualities of the enterprise and its leadership" (p. 44).

B. A godly leader recognizes the importance of delegating to others and is willing to share in the responsibilities of leading.

Romans 12:3, 5, 6 -

"Many studies, too many to cite here, have proven that participation improves quality of decisions, performance, employee satisfaction, and commitment, as well as cohesion and community" (Michael Beer, *High Commitment, High Performance: How to Build a Resilient Organization for Sustained Advantage*, 170).

C. A godly leader understands the importance of learning to say "no". A skilled leader knows how to set appropriate boundaries which create a balance with God, family, work, and life decisions.

Luke 5:15-16 -

In *The Puritan Gift: Reclaiming the American Dream Amidst Global Financial Chaos*, authors Hopper and Hopper argue that one of the underlying good practices from the Golden Age of Management was that "leadership as far as possible be collective or 'collegiate'" (p. 281).

D. A godly leader safeguards his relationship with the Lord.

Psalms 111:10 -

"The chief occupational hazard of leadership is pride." ~ John Stott