

Follow the Leader
Matthew 7:13-27

During this Federal election season, we've all been thinking a lot about what it takes to be a good leader. Some people focus on a candidate's past experience, on his qualifications or on her record of achievements while already in office. Others are more concerned about what we might call matters of style – how a candidate speaks and presents himself. After all, some offices seem to call for a certain amount of dignity or decorum, while others require an ability to engage in sensitive diplomacy – will the candidate's personality allow him or her to play such a role effectively?

And let's not pretend that looks don't matter – statistics show, after all, that successful politicians tend to be taller, because voters quite literally desire to look up to their leaders. And in a close election, personal appearance can even be the deciding factor. For example, those who listened to the 1960 Presidential debate between John Kennedy and Richard Nixon on the radio tended to think that Nixon had given the better account of himself. But those who tuned in to the same debate on television tended to prefer Kennedy. Of course, Kennedy won by the narrowest of margins, and his personal appearance may have actually been his biggest legacy – after all, it was his “dry-look” hairstyle that destroyed a centuries-old tradition of men wearing hats.

We often use the same sorts of criteria where it comes to selecting leaders for the Church. Where it comes to qualifications, some congregations prefer professionals like doctors or lawyers to serve as ruling elders. Some search committees won't consider anyone to fill their pulpit who doesn't have a PhD, while others want a pastor who has been involved in inner-city or foreign missions. And what about style? A young-adult pastor or church planter might point to his tattoos or piercings to prove his ability to relate to the rising generation. A senior pastor might find it easier to find a job if he were to have a thick shock of white hair and a polished preaching style. And I've heard it said that, at least in Presbyterian circles, a proper Scottish accent is worth several thousand extra dollars in annual salary.

But regardless of how thoughtful or how silly our preferences may be, we all need good leaders to help us follow Christ more consistently in our daily lives. After all, Jesus begins this passage by reminding us of just how easy it is to drift along with the worldly crowd, heading through the wide gate and down the broad path to eternal destruction. For it doesn't require any discernment or effort to live according to what feels good or what seems logical, to do what everyone else is doing or has always done.

But following Christ is much harder, especially given what He has taught us in the Sermon on the Mount. For how can we put all of His teaching into practice in the real-world situations that face us every day? How can we truly love our husbands and wives? How can we love our enemies? How can we avoid the snare of pride and keep our focus on glorifying God and seeking the good of others? Every day we face hard choices regarding the use of our time, our talents and our treasure – how can we be sure that we're doing what Jesus would want us to do right here and right now?

That's why we need real-life leaders to help us make those real-life decisions. That's why we need to turn to honest, earnest, knowledgeable, seasoned Christians for advice and counsel, and yes, sometimes for a push to get us heading in the right direction. Godly leaders can help us squeeze through that narrow gate, can help us do the hard work of following Jesus in the real world every day, especially when it means swimming upstream against the ways of an increasingly godless culture, and sometimes even against our own desires and inclinations.

So, what characteristics should we seek in a good leader? Most obviously, it is only those who know the truth of Christ who will be able to teach us the way to follow Him. This is why the EPC does such a thorough job of examining candidates for ordination, as anyone who has attended one of our Presbytery meetings can confirm. We want to be sure that those who are called to proclaim the Gospel not only know the Scriptures but also know the Christ to Whom they all point – we want to be sure that Jesus is in fact their Lord.

But the sad truth is that even those who pass the most rigorous ordination examinations don't always make good pastors. Some young men just don't have the temperament or the patience to defer to the judgment of older, wiser ruling elders in their congregations. Others, facing the pressures of ministry, fall into the most grievous sorts of sins against their spouses or congregations – just this week, Carl Lentz, pastor of the Hillsong megachurch in New York City, was only the latest example of those who have had to step down from ministry because of moral failures.

Yes, as Jesus Himself points out in verses 21 and 22, even the most earnest and knowledgeable professions of faith are not a sufficient test of a Christian leader. For not everyone who calls Jesus, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of Heaven.

And so, instead of just testing a leader's knowledge, we might also want to examine his skills. Now, some denominations look for exactly the sorts of miraculous abilities Jesus mentions in verse 22, expecting their pastors to be able to perform miracles of healing or to cast out demons. We've all seen such "faith-healers" on TV, and some of them have thousands of followers.

But even those Christians who are skeptical of such dramatic displays are still interested in our leaders' abilities, aren't we? Some congregations insist that their preachers have good voices, perhaps even breaking into song during their sermons. Others look for those who can parse Greek verbs and quote from ancient scholars' commentaries on the Scriptures. Still others admire the inspirational way that their pastors lead in worship. But none of us are immune from the "wow" factor – we all want leaders that we can admire, those who make us wonder how in the world they can do all those marvelous things.

But Jesus warns us that even the greatest of skills are not a sure-fire guarantee that anyone will actually lead us in the right direction. After all, in verse 22 He says that even some of those who speak words from God and who cast out demons and who perform miracles will eventually be turned away from the gates of Heaven. And remember: Jesus would eventually give all twelve of his disciples the power to do these same miraculous things on the mission trip they would take in chapter 10. But Peter would go on to deny Him, and Judas would end up betraying Him. No, talents and gifts alone don't qualify anyone to be a Christian leader.

And so instead of just looking at our leaders' knowledge and abilities, Jesus urges us to go a step further and examine their actual deeds. Giving an example from the natural world, Jesus reminds us that the best way to identify a plant is to see what kind of fruit it bears.

Is that a grapevine? Sure, you can examine its woody, papery stem, and its serrated leaves, but the best way to be sure is to see if it bears grapes. In the same way, if you want to know whether someone's profession of faith is genuine, you can quiz him on his knowledge or admire her ministry skills all day long. But the only way to be sure of his faith is to see him living it out, to see how she follows Jesus in her daily life.

But where it comes to our leaders, we need to go a step further, don't we? For we don't just want to know if they are true Christians – they need to have the kind of exemplary faith and life that we want to emulate. They need to set the kind of example we need to follow. Or, as Jesus put it, we need

to know not just that it's a fig tree, but that it is a healthy, vigorous fig tree. And once again, the way to test its vitality is to inspect its fruit.

Growing up in Valdosta, Georgia, my house had been built in an old pecan orchard. There were seven mature trees on our lot, so we always had plenty of nuts to collect, and to eat. But even though all the trees were doubtless planted at the same time, and were thus about the same size, and even though all of them looked equally healthy, two of them produced the most nuts. Yes, we soon learned that if we wanted to fill our sacks quickly, we should look under those two trees first.

Of course, the sad truth is that even those two trees produced fewer nuts as the years went on. And as they began to drop larger and larger limbs, one by one we had to take them down. Now, only one of the seven remains, and the few nuts it produces are black and bitter on the inside.

In the same way, some people who call themselves Christians, some people who know a lot about Jesus, some people who have lots of gifts for ministry are nevertheless bearing the bitter sort of fruit Paul describes in our responsive reading from Galatians. Focused on the things of this world, they are jealous and angry, disputing with one another, splitting into factions, desiring only to fulfill the pleasures of the flesh. People who bear that kind of fruit are really just ravenous wolves wearing sheep's clothing. So even though they call themselves Christians, we follow them at our peril.

So, what kind of leader should we follow? What kind of fruit should every true Christian bear? Paul tells us that the indisputable evidence of a Spirit-filled life is the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. So, we should seek to follow leaders who not only tell us to live in those ways, but who demonstrate those characteristics in their daily lives.

And why does this kind of fruit give such especially clear evidence of a healthy, vibrant faith? Well, isn't that the way Jesus lives? Isn't He patient and kind and gentle with sinners like us? Doesn't His love for us call us into peace with God? Doesn't He promise that all who trust in Him as Savior and bow the knee to Him as Lord will share in His joy and His goodness?

So, if we really want to build our lives on the firm foundation of Christ alone, we not only need to identify leaders who demonstrate the character of Christ in their daily lives. For the best leaders won't do us any good unless we follow them. And the best teaching won't do us any good unless we put it into practice.

So we must follow our leaders as they follow Jesus. We must not only believe the truth of what Jesus says in His Word – we must do what He does and live as He lives. For if we're not living the life of Christ, if we're not bearing the fruit of the Spirit of Christ, if we're just doing what makes sense to us or what feels right to us, or if we're just drifting down the broad path through the wide gate along with everyone else, then we're actually building the house of our life on shifting sands. And it won't take a Hurricane Katrina to knock down such a flimsy structure – the slightest crisis will cause such a self-centered life to collapse.

So, even if it involves following our leaders on the narrow way, wouldn't it be better to build our lives on the firm foundation of the Gospel, living not for our own pleasure or profit but for the glory of God and the good of others? Wouldn't it be better for all of us, elders and deacons and regular-old church members alike, to be filled with Jesus' love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Wouldn't it be better for all of us to follow Jesus?