

leadership: performance

Caleb Owomoyela encourages us to emphasise our identity in Christ



How many times do we read the exploits of some leaders in the Bible and ask ourselves, *what were they doing?* King Saul, Israel's first king, can fall into that category. In 1 Samuel 15, we see God give Saul clear instructions to thoroughly defeat the Amalekites (a nation that had tried to destroy the Israelites shortly after their exodus from Egypt). However, Saul spared their king and allowed his soldiers to keep some of their animals. After being confronted by the prophet Samuel, Saul initially defends his position but eventually appears to repent and show remorse.

He says to Samuel, 'I have sinned. But please honour me before the elders of my people and before Israel; come back with me, so that I may worship the LORD your God' (1 Samuel 15:30). His comment speaks volumes about the mind and character of Saul. He was conscious of and sensitive about the elders' opinions. But more than that he highly valued their assessment of him. He sought to please them to uphold his reputation. As Christian leaders, it can be easy to be critical of Saul, but perhaps first, we should reflect, be honest with ourselves, and seek out the lessons we can learn from his life.



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Saul's failures hit close to home. Over the course of my medical school years, I have come to realise that one of the idols of my heart is my own reputation and pride. Psychologists refer to a concept known as 'the imposter syndrome' – the idea that people can feel a deep sense of insecurity and doubt their abilities. To avoid getting 'found out', we may compensate by trying to live up to an idealised image of ourselves, which may take many forms.¹ On a personal level, this has manifested itself academically by achieving high grades and accolades; socially through my image and status; and religiously, by doing things to try and curry favour with God. I found myself like Saul being conscious of and highly sensitive about the opinions of others, particularly regarding my performance. This created a real sense of drive in me and made me work harder. However, this mindset meant my mood and self-worth largely depended on how well I was doing. Since there was always a better grade or status, it meant I was never truly satisfied.

As Christians in leadership, we are to push back against the way the secular world approaches performance. Effective leadership shouldn't be measured by how much we achieve or produce, but instead by our maturity in faith and knowledge of Jesus.² The highly competitive nature of many industries and workplaces means there is an emphasis on constant improvement and growth, both individually and corporately. However, what happens when we begin to internalise this performance mindset and it starts to contribute to our fundamental sense of worth? Tim Keller, author of *Counterfeit Gods*, gives a sign that one has made success an idol: '...when we are unable to maintain our self-confidence in life unless we remain at the top of our field'.³ This is not to criticise the growth mindset but rather to emphasise that despite the busyness of life, we are called to a different kind of growth, one that influences our hearts and

transforms our minds.⁴ Peter Scazzero, author of *The Emotionally Healthy Church*, puts it this way: 'When our life *with* God is not sufficient to sustain our work *for* God, we will eventually struggle.'⁵

called to rest

There is a collective shift in today's culture towards 'workaholism' as we have come to associate busyness with importance. We are impressed by the surgical SHO that can work twelve-hour shifts without a break. It is almost used as a status symbol: the busier I look, the more important I must be. Many of us now possess apps on our smartphones that help us relax and remind us to take breaks. Considering all of this, perhaps the fourth commandment should come as no surprise – 'Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy.' (Exodus 20:8)

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Rest and stillness were created to be a fundamental part of our everyday lives. I believe over the last few months, God has been teaching me a profound lesson about the notion of rest. Compared to my early years in medical school, I now make sure I prioritise downtime. I find this routine indispensable. It teaches me to humble myself before God and reminds me that ultimately, what I do and how well I do it, isn't necessarily out of my strength, but God working through me.⁶ When we stop micromanaging our lives and set aside time to rest and be still before God, we practice faithful humility. In that moment, we surrender all and recognise God's sovereign power and rule over everything in our lives.

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit,

while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful... Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me'. (John 15:1-4)

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As we live for Jesus in leadership, we should remember to remain in him for we cannot bear fruit by ourselves. Jesus Christ, the model of the perfect leader, was always connected with the Father. Throughout the gospels, the authors emphasise Jesus' intimate relationship with his Father. Our natural abilities as leaders are God-given, but we need to be empowered by the Holy Spirit to cultivate these abilities to glorify our Father in heaven. As Oswald Saunders puts it, *'new birth in Christ does not change natural qualities but brings them in line with holy purpose; when they are placed under the control of the Holy Spirit, they are raised to new effectiveness'*.⁷ We must remember that, *'every branch that does bear fruit he prunes'* (John 15:2). Our heavenly Father does the pruning, the shaping, the character-building, and the cleansing that we all require to be fruitful branches. This is all dependent on remaining in the vine, which is Jesus Christ.

called to work

The work we do as leaders has eternal significance; it is a privilege to play a role in the bigger story God is writing in his world. However, we are called to spend time with Jesus before we are sent out by him. According to Mark's account of the calling of the twelve disciples, Jesus chose them first *'that they might be with him'*. Second, that *'he might send them out to preach'* and third, *'to have authority to drive out demons'* (Mark 3:13-15). Before the apostles received the privilege or power to perform signs and wonders, they were first to be

with him. Our work isn't for earthly accolades, but for doing the will of our heavenly Father with a servant heart.

In leadership, we don't achieve in order to receive affirmation. When Jesus was baptised, the Father spoke from heaven of his acceptance and affirmation as God's Son.⁸ It was only then that he started his ministry. His achievements flowed from his acceptance of his identity as God's Son. In the same way, our achievements should flow from being accepted as children of God, rather than trying to use our achievements to gain the acceptance that we already have because of Jesus.

The amazing and awe-inspiring truth of the gospel has radically transformed my approach to work as a leader. I am starting to internalise the fundamental truth that because of what Jesus has done, God delights in my very existence.⁹ My performance as a Christian, leader, or student doesn't justify me. My justification comes directly from the outpouring love of God, through Jesus Christ. Because of this affirmative truth, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, I can be used as an instrument for his holy purpose.¹⁰ This principle contends directly with today's worldview, but as Jesus encourages us in his prayer recorded in John 17, we are not of the world but have been sent into the world just as he was.¹¹ As we live our daily lives and lead others, this radical truth of our acceptance by God means we are free to do the *'good works God has prepared in advance for us to do'*. (Ephesians 2:10) ■

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