

at my church. It isn't right, and it isn't fair." She was devastated and furious. She wanted to lash out and give the elders a piece of her mind. Then she asked Phyllis to pray with her.

Phyllis said, "Before we pray, Debbie, may I ask you some questions?"

"Sure," said Debbie.

"Is God good?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe He has a plan and purpose for your life?"

"I *did* believe that."

"Do you believe anyone or anything can change God's plan for you?"

"No."

"Does God love you?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe God will use everything in our lives—that He will use even this—for His glory and our good just as He promised? Do you believe you can trust Him with all the details of your life?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Let's pray."

Have you, like Debbie, faced a challenge so big that you had to go back to the core of what you believe about God? Those beliefs are stored in your heart, and they shape you and every relationship in your life.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

As you reflect on Debbie's story, how would you answer her questions today?

- Is God good?
- Do you believe He has a good plan and purpose for your life?
- Do you believe anyone or anything can change God's plan for you?
- Do you believe God loves you?
- Do you believe God will use everything in your life for His glory and your good just as He promised?
- Can you trust Him with all the details of your life?

As Scripture confirms, the beliefs in your heart set in motion your *why*. In Scripture we learn that the heart is so important in our leadership because love is stored in the heart (1 Peter 1:22). We also forgive one another from the heart (Matthew 18:35); words are banked in our hearts (Luke 6:45); Scripture is stored in our hearts (Psalm 119:11); and it is with the heart that we seek and find God (Jeremiah 29:13). The heart includes the will, determination, and soul. It is the seat of all desires; it is the essence of who we are. No wonder we are told to guard our hearts above all else (Proverbs 4:23).

When leaders want to change, they usually focus on their behavior—but behavior can't change until the heart changes. Think about your last resolution to diet or exercise. You focused on your behavior: *This time I'm gonna do it!* But nothing changed until you focused on *why* you wanted to make this change. Whatever the specific situation, remembering what motivates you can result in a change of behavior.

A changed heart means a changed leader. Consider this real-life example. Steve Cartin is both a dental practice consultant and a pastor. Initially, he came to Lead Like Jesus for help with his small church in rural South Carolina, but God had more planned for him. As Steve put it, "Learning to lead like Jesus started changing my ministry; then it changed my business; then it changed my relationship with my wife and my relationships with my adult children. By changing me, leading like Jesus changed everything I touch."

The truth is, leading like Jesus begins with the heart.

WHAT DOES LEADING LIKE JESUS LOOK LIKE?

Jesus replied: “ ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ ”

Matthew 22:37–39

What does leading like Jesus look like? In a word, *love*—but not the soft and easy kind of love that allows those you lead to do whatever they want, neglects strategic thinking, and fails to focus on results. Of course not! That kind of leadership would be easy, but hardly effective. In contrast, leading like Jesus—leading with love—is very difficult. It requires that you love those you influence so much that you help them move from who they are to who God wants them to be, and that process can be painful. Not often seen in the media, the love we are talking about becomes the core value of your life. It influences everything you say and do as a leader and enables you to stand up when everything else falls down around you.

The greatest description of what love looks like is found in 1 Corinthians 13:4–7, which we shared earlier. This beautiful passage describes God’s love and reminds us of what love does and does not do. As leaders who desire to lead like Jesus, we—like Jesus—need the core value of love to be the why, how, and what of all we do.

As a Jesus-like leader, you acknowledge as you lead that God created every person, that He loves them as much as He loves you, and that He has great plans for their lives. As a leader, you need to pour yourself into your relationships with other people just as Jesus did with the disciples. Jesus loved them, served them,

and thereby helped them develop into the people God called them to be.

LOVE-BASED LEADERSHIP IN ACTION

Leading like Jesus means that relationships and results are intertwined. It means being committed to both developing others and achieving results in a way that honors God and reflects your core beliefs about whose you are and who you are. We know many business leaders who lead like Jesus in their everyday work lives. One of the first who comes to mind is James Blanchard (no relation to Ken). Throughout his career, Jimmy never saw any separation between faith and work or between being a servant and being a leader. He chose the Bible as his favorite leadership handbook and Jesus as his role model.

For thirty-four years, Jimmy served as chief executive officer of Synovus, a financial services company based in Columbus, Georgia. During his tenure, the company experienced its greatest growth and prosperity. Perhaps even more significant to this discussion, for several years in a row, Synovus was named by *Fortune* magazine as one of the “100 Best Companies to Work For in America.” Jimmy is a business guy—a great visionary and skilled strategist who never takes his eyes off the numbers—but he loves people and enjoys helping them grow and develop.

Jimmy always led by serving. “We run our company this way simply because it’s right, because every person who works here has great worth and deserves to be treated so,” he said. “Our company is built on these values. They define who we are.”

In 2005 *US Banker* magazine named Jimmy one of America’s “Twenty-Five Most Influential People in Financial Services.” He has won numerous awards but believes his greatest award is being married to his wife, Sis, and enjoying their three children and eight grandchildren. Throughout his career, Jimmy has created great relationships and enjoyed great results. God has honored Jimmy for leading and serving from his core value of love.

Jimmy likes to ask people to read 1 Corinthians 13:4–7 and put their names in place of the word *love* in the passage. He often suggests with a smile, “If you notice tightness in your throat in an area, maybe that one needs some work.” Jimmy’s story is a great example of a business leader living out his faith in corporate America.

A MOTHER'S SELFLESS LOVE

Our next story is an example of a life role leader, a single mom named Karen, who showed incredible tenacity in loving a son who was hard to love. She established boundaries and expectations that were good for him and important for his life, but even as a little boy, Thom pushed the envelope. As he grew, Thom tried everything—he ran away, dropped out of school, lived on the street, and used illegal drugs.

During those years, Karen knew that God loved her son more than she did and that He had a plan for Thom's life. Karen decided that her responsibility was to be a faithful, loving, and prayerful mother.

Thom's behavior continued to spiral downward. One day, after exhausting all other possibilities for helping her son straighten up, Karen swore out a warrant for Thom's arrest for stealing from her home. Karen and Thom lived apart for many years, but gradually things appeared to improve. Unfortunately, the change did not last long, and Thom left his wife and children.

Karen continued to pray for Thom, but she heard from him only sporadically. She repeated the same prayer many times a day: "Lord, I know You love Thom even more than I do. I ask that You protect both his physical body and his heart for You so that someday he might become the man You want him to be. Do whatever it takes to make this change happen—and give me the strength to endure the wait and the pain. In the name of Jesus, amen."

After thirty years, God answered Karen's prayers. Today Thom is the man God intended him to be: he is a devoted husband to his faithful wife and a loving dad to his two daughters.

Leading like Jesus is not just saying, "I will pray for you" or "God will be with you." Leading like Jesus is loving your spouse, your child, or your friend even when that love requires you to stand in the gap. Leading and loving like Jesus requires a vulnerability and an authenticity that close the chasm between saying and doing. It requires holding loved ones accountable while at the same time extending grace and forgiveness.

The rewards of love-based leadership are long-lasting relationships and incredible transformations that bring glory to the One you follow. This kind of leadership requires a model who transforms you as well as those you influence. His name is Jesus.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

The relationships and settings in these stories reflect the core of leading like Jesus: leading with love. In which of your relationships is leading and loving like Jesus a challenge? Continue to think about those relationships as you read this book and consider how to apply what you learn.

I WANT TO LEAD LIKE JESUS, BUT MY HEART DOES NOT

I love God's law with all my heart. But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me. Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death? Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Romans 7:22–25 NLT

You are a leader who truly wants to lead like Jesus, the greatest leadership role model of all time—but you don't. Why?

Paul had the same problem. He articulated his frustration perfectly in Romans 7:15: "I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do." Does this sound familiar to you?

What is in the heart determines why we do what we do; our hearts are the source of our motivations. What motivates you to lead others? Is your leadership about you? We continue to see that the most persistent barrier to leading like Jesus is a heart motivated by self-interest.

We come into the world focused on ourselves—and some of us never outgrow it. A heart motivated by self-interest looks at life as a "give a little, take a lot" proposition. People with hearts motivated by self-interest put their own agendas, safety, statuses, and gratifications ahead of others'. Cutting people off on the freeway or in the church parking lot, punishing those who disagree with you or challenge your position, and exploiting the weaknesses and fears of others in order to get what you want are actions that come from a heart motivated by self-interest.

YOUR HEART'S EGO—EDGING GOD OUT

The greatest barrier to leading like Jesus is *Edging God Out* of our lives (EGO). We believe you can Edge God Out in three ways: you can replace Him as the object of your worship; as the source of your security, self-worth, and wisdom; and as the audience for and authority over your daily work and life story.

Putting Something in God's Place

You Edge God Out as the object of your worship by putting other things in His place. Whenever anything becomes more important to you than God, that idol becomes your answer to the question, *Whose am I?* You are worshiping something or someone other than God. You may choose to worship an object (money, a house, a car, a business), a person (a spouse or a child), or a desire for power, recognition, or appreciation. A habit that becomes an addiction—exercising, watching sports, eating, sleeping, surfing the Internet—can also Edge God Out and be an idol. You can also find yourself caring most about yourself, your own sense of significance. In Revelation 2:1–7, Jesus called the church at Ephesus to task with the complaint that despite their good deeds and perseverance, they had “forsaken the love [they] had at first” (v. 4). They were no longer passionate about the God they had once worshiped wholeheartedly. Whatever you are worshiping other than God is not worth Edging God Out of your life.

Trusting in Something Other Than God

Another way to Edge God Out is to trust in something other than the character and unconditional love of God as your source of security and self-worth. When you put your sense of security and self-worth in your intellect, your position, your performance, your possessions, or your business and personal contacts, you're counting on things that are temporary and fallible. Instead, place your trust in that which is sure and eternal: God's care for you and the wisdom He provides you.

In his book *The Search for Significance*, Robert S. McGee said, “If Satan had a formula for self-worth it would be: Self-worth equals our performance plus the opinion of others.”¹ Yet our performance is not great all the time, and people are fickle; you can't count on their approval. When we seek to build a secure sense of self-worth on the shifting sands of personal performance and the ever-

changing opinions of other people, we end up being tossed about in a sea of self-doubt and anxiety. We don't have any security at all.

Valuing Others as the Primary Audience for and Sole Authority over Our Lives

A third way to Edge God Out is to put others in His place as the primary audience for and authority over your daily work and your life story. To whom are you playing from the stage of your life? God wrote your story before the foundation of the world, and you have the privilege of His guidance through all of your life if you let Him be your audience and authority.

One of our favorite old stories beautifully illustrates who our audience should be if we are followers of Jesus. A famous opera singer was invited to give a command performance in a grand theater in front of a large audience. He rehearsed for months. When the night arrived, every seat was filled with fans and admirers. As the singer finished his performance, he was greeted with a standing ovation and made several curtain calls. When he finally came off the stage, his manager embraced and congratulated him. But instead of acknowledging the praise, the singer told his manager that he had failed.

In disbelief, the manager asked, "How can you say that? You received a standing ovation and three curtain calls!"

The singer said, "But a person in the front row wasn't standing or applauding."

"Why do you care about one person's opinion when everyone else loved your performance?" asked the manager.

The singer replied, "The person who wasn't applauding was my teacher."

The singer had wanted to please his teacher above all others. That's how we need to feel about pleasing God.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Whose praise and affirmation do you seek? Why?

THE RESULTS OF A HEART OUT OF ORDER

“A good person produces good things from the treasury of a good heart, and an evil person produces evil things from the treasury of an evil heart.”

Matthew 12:35 NLT

EGO PROBLEMS: PRIDE AND FEAR

Edging God Out as the One you worship, as your source of security, self-worth, and wisdom, and as your primary audience results in two EGO problems: pride and fear. When false pride and toxic fear enter a relationship, they poison it. When they become the driving force in your leadership decisions, they render you ineffective.

When leaders are filled with pride or fear, they *react* to things that happen to them. They spend little time considering what is in the best interest of others or their relationships. They shoot from the hip and sometimes end up shooting themselves in the foot. Pride-filled or fear-filled people are quick to judge, quick to take offense, quick to speak, quick to blame, and quick to accept praise.

People who want to lead like Jesus, on the other hand, *respond* to things that happen to them. Before taking action, they choose to step back from the emotion of the moment, even for just a second or two, and, desiring to love and serve, run some value checks on the situation. People who lead like Jesus are quick to listen, slow to judge, slow to become angry, and quick to let someone else receive the praise.

Pride

Pride promotes self. It is *more . . . than* thinking. Anytime you find yourself thinking you are more educated than . . . , better trained than . . . , or superior to . . . in any way, the seed of pride has become lodged in your heart. It can take root, grow, and fully bloom if you allow it. As Paul put it in Romans 12:3, pride is “[thinking] of yourself more highly than you ought,” and that is not at all like Jesus.

Here are some of the ways you can tell that pride is at its destructive work. See if any of them seem familiar:

- When you are engaged in a discussion, you resist acknowledging that the other person’s idea is actually better than your own.
- You do all the talking, take too much credit, demand all the attention, boast, show off, or, because of your position, demand special treatment and expect better service.
- You judge the value of an idea based on who said it rather than the quality of the thought.
- You treat people as too far below you in position or credentials by choosing not to seek their input on issues that affect them.
- Your compensation becomes more important as a mark of success than the ethical and relational price you pay to attain it.

The Bible has much to say on the subject of pride. Proverbs 13:10 tells us, “Where there is strife, there is pride.” Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” And Proverbs 16:5 declares, “The LORD detests all the proud of heart. Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished.”

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Identify the last time pride got in the way of your leadership. What action or statement triggered your pride? How did you feel? How did the people around you react to your prideful actions or words? What was the result of your prideful behavior? Invite God to guide your

thinking about the situation—and then follow His lead.

Some people reading about pride will say, “Oh, that’s not me. I don’t have any false pride. I know that everything I am and everything I have comes from God and is on loan to me.” Understanding that is great. But often there is a subtler way in which we Edge God Out—fear. Most people don’t normally recognize fear as a way to Edge God Out, but fear is at the root of many seemingly prideful behaviors.

Fear

The capacity to experience fear is a gift from God. When heeded, fear protects us. Yet what we actually do with fear when we experience it can prevent us from enjoying the good it can bring. So instead of enhancing life, fear has poisoned human relationships ever since man first stepped outside of God’s will. Consider the consequences of Adam and Eve’s eating the forbidden fruit: they immediately became self-conscious, covered their nakedness, and hid from God in fear. Human beings have been hiding ever since, because we fear that our weaknesses and bad behavior will be found out. The irony is, God already sees those weaknesses and knows all about our bad behavior.

Still, every day we face the risk of contracting toxic fear—that dark force that can color our relationships and permeate our souls. Toxic fear is a complete anti-God state of mind. It is a good thing turned bad.

In both the Old and New Testaments, the fear of God and the fear of man are held up as the extremes of good and evil. We are called to hold God in life-giving, reverent awe as the ultimate source of our security and judge of our worth. At the end of Ecclesiastes, King Solomon made this definitive statement: “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind” (12:13).

This fear or awe of the holy God is appropriate and even necessary in our faith—and very different from the toxic fear of man. To avoid that toxic fear, we first have to understand its root cause: our addictive dependence on things and others for our security and self-worth.

A good definition of *addiction* is “an ever-increasing desire for something that has an ever-decreasing ability to satisfy.”¹ Addictions start as voluntary

attempts or choices to experience something desirable, but they end up as compulsions that continually grow stronger and can eventually become completely out of control. When we seek refuge from pain and loss of self-esteem in things like our possessions and our positions, we are vulnerable to having anxiety and fear be key drivers of our thoughts and behaviors.

When something we are addicted to is at risk, toxic fear can poison our daily decisions and relationships in a variety of ways. Here are some examples:

- Rob is a workaholic who is afraid to slow down and look at the condition of his life. He feels trapped when his wife or kids ask for help or when he is forced into a period of inactivity due to illness. He keeps up a schedule of late hours and early mornings to avoid the gnawing feeling of emptiness.
- Janet is a control freak who is afraid of failure, so she chooses personal exhaustion rather than training people and delegating tasks. By micromanaging and keeping other people dependent on her for information, she seeks to protect herself from becoming obsolete or losing her source of power.
- Craig is a fitness addict who goes into an emotional and relational tailspin at the first sign of his own illness or aging—or the illness or aging of someone he identifies with.
- Cynthia is an approval addict who fears rejection and broods over a 2 percent negative rating on a feedback form or an overheard bit of unfavorable gossip.
- Tracy is a sixteen-year-old relationship junkie who will do bad things with bad people rather than face being alone.

Each of these examples of toxic fear is a variation on a central theme: looking for approval from everything and everyone except God.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think of a time when the fear of rejection or failure prevented you from doing or saying something that might have helped someone else avoid an impending mistake. What excuse did you tell yourself to justify letting your fear control your inaction? Was yielding to your

fear worth the consequences?

THE RESULTS OF PRIDE AND FEAR

It is interesting to see how false pride, fear, and self-doubt play out in organizational leaders. When leaders are addicted to any of these EGO afflictions, their effectiveness drops dramatically.

Leaders dominated by false pride are often called *controllers*. Even when they don't know what they are doing, they have a high need for power and control. They keep insisting they are right, even when it's clear to everyone that they are wrong. They don't want someone else to look capable for fear others might think that person should be the manager. That is why controlling bosses seldom support their people. If everyone is upbeat and confident, the controller puts an end to it. Still, controllers support their bosses more than they support their workplace peers because they want to climb the hierarchy and be part of the boss's crowd.

At the other end of the spectrum are the *do-nothing bosses*, who are often described as "never around," "always avoiding conflict," and "not very helpful." Plagued by fear and self-doubt, these leaders often leave their direct reports alone, even when those people are insecure or don't know what they are doing. Do-nothing bosses don't seem to believe in themselves or trust their own judgment. They value other people's thoughts—especially the thoughts of those with more authority—above their own. As a result, they rarely speak out or support their own people. Under pressure, the do-nothings defer to whoever has the most power.

If any of this makes you squirm a little, don't be alarmed. Most of us have traces of both false pride and self-doubt, because the issue is really the EGO: we Edge God Out as our primary focus in life.

The three primary results of letting our pride and fear Edge God Out of our lives are separation, comparison, and distortion of the truth. Let's look at each of these results.

Separation

Pride and fear always separate us from God, from one another, and even

from ourselves. Here are some common examples of the separating power of pride and fear:

Separation from God

We become . . .

- too ashamed about failure to talk to God
- too arrogant to pray
- too afraid of what the answer might be to ask God a question
- too passionate about our own agendas to wait for God to reveal His agenda

Separation from Other People

We become . . .

- too prideful to say we need help or we don't understand
- too fearful of rejection to take a stand on an issue
- too fearful to say *no* when that is the right answer
- too fearful of losing control to share information or power
- too convinced of our own opinions to consider conflicting information

Separation from Ourselves

We become . . .

- too sensitive about other people's opinions to listen to our own hearts
- too busy fixing others' problems to look at the mess inside us
- too ready to make excuses for our failures and unhealthy or unwise choices
- too resistant to introspection
- too obsessed with our own schedules to wait for God's timing

One of the greatest challenges in seeking to lead like Jesus is the intimacy with Him that this approach requires. The biggest barrier to intimacy is a fear of vulnerability—the fear of having to admit you don't know all the answers, that you may need help, and that your abilities as a leader may be questioned. Here, false pride is fear in action.

When you lose intimacy with God and you distance yourself from His unconditional love, you fear intimacy with others. Like the wizard behind the

curtain in Oz, you hide behind intimidating false fronts and place barriers around yourself rather than risk exposing your inadequacies and needs. The isolation created by the fear of intimacy leaves leaders vulnerable to being blindsided by changing times and circumstances.

Fear of intimacy can weaken a relationship or an organization like a virus. When this fear enters an organization through the heart and actions of a leader, it is particularly nasty and hard to cure.

Comparison

In addition to causing separation, pride and fear bring about unhealthy horizontal comparisons. Instead of measuring success in terms of how well you are following God's plan for your life, you constantly look around to see how you compare with others, usually on a material basis.

Comparing yourself with others and drawing comfort from feeling superior to others are signs of false pride, insecurity, and fear of inadequacy. Seeking to learn from others and aspiring to emulate good role models are signs of healthy humility. Yet EGO issues and the toxic impact of envy, jealousy, or low self-esteem have been polluting human relationships ever since Cain slew Abel. When leaders foster competition and rivalries among coworkers as a way of driving performance, both performance and relationships suffer. "A little friendly competition" rarely stays little or friendly when the leader makes the rewards for winning too great and the price of failure too high.

When you seek to determine your level of self-worth and security by comparing yourself to others, the end result is either complacency or anxiety. In a larger sense, making comparisons devalues the promises and provisions of God, who has affirmed your value and guaranteed you security based on His unconditional love. You are His beloved.

Distortion

The third result of addiction to false pride and fear is distortion of the truth. The root cause of toxic fear is the lie that we are not safe living God's way and we are going to miss out on something good. We believe the lie because of FEAR—False Evidence Appearing Real. When pride and fear isolate you from everyone else, including God, your view of reality becomes increasingly misguided, and your decisions are more prone to error.

One of the key distortions affecting leader effectiveness is an EGO-driven fixation on short-term results at the expense of long-term integrity. In today's business world, faster access to information brings with it a demand for faster decisions and faster results. Setbacks are less and less tolerated. Annual reports are ancient history; real-time data streams and analysis make quarterly estimates and weekly performance metrics obsolete. Expectations and anxiety built on instant access to data can turn everything into either a crisis or an exhilarating high for an EGO-addicted leader. Direct reports feel as if they have to be on duty 24/7 and immediately inform the boss of any progress.

Jesus spoke of the perils of the distorted and false sense of security and self-worth that comes when we Edge God Out. He said, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19–21).

EGO-driven distortion is also manifested in an overblown view of your ability to control events. When you think and act as if everything depends on you, you're setting yourself and your followers up for failure in the long run. The truth is, as fallible human beings, each of us works within certain limitations. Factors beyond our control and even beyond our awareness can determine success and failure. That fact does not diminish the importance and value of your efforts, but it puts them in perspective, freeing you to extend grace and lead with humility.

This diagram summarizes the concepts of Edging God Out:

EDGING GOD OUT

As the object of my
worship

As the source of my
security, self-worth,
and wisdom

As the audience and
authority over my daily
work and life story

EXPRESSES ITSELF THROUGH:

PRIDE

FEAR

An overly high opinion of yourself;
exaggerated self-esteem

An insecure view of the future, resulting in self-
protection

“Do not think of yourself more highly than
you ought” (Romans 12:3).

“The fear of human opinion disables” (Proverbs 29:25
THE MESSAGE).

PROMOTING SELF

- Doing all the talking
- Taking all the credit
- Boasting and showing off
- Demanding all the attention

PROTECTING SELF

- Intimidating others
- Hiding behind position
- Withholding information
- Discouraging honest feedback

LEADS TO:

SEPARATION

from God, from
other people, and
from yourself

COMPARISON

with others; discontent

DISTORTION

of the truth; false sense of
security

Now that you understand how your heart Edges God Out and often prevents you from leading like Jesus, we will look at a few of the warning signs of Edging God Out. Let these signs alert you to stop and examine your heart.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

When was the last time you Edged God Out? What was the result?

WARNING SIGNS ON THE PATH TO EDGING GOD OUT

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.

Hebrews 2:1

Warning signs are important: a light on your car's dashboard; the sound of a siren behind you when you are driving; distant thunder before a storm hits. Doctors take your temperature and blood pressure to look for warning signs about the state of your health. We also must check for signs to alert us that our hearts may be out of alignment with God.

What are the warning signs that we may be falling into the trap of pride or fear? And what safeguards can we leaders put in place to prevent this from happening?

WARNING SIGN #1: THE I FACTOR

During a session in which he was receiving counseling, a pastor expressed excitement about his transition to executive pastor of a multisite church. His wife, however, had recently pointed out to him that his tone was curt and his patience was short. She told him his “inner grump” was alive and well. He acknowledged that this was his typical first line of response to challenging circumstances: he was afraid that he was not good enough to do everything the new position required.

His counselor had noticed that, as he was initially describing the situation, almost every sentence he spoke had begun with *I*. The heaviness in his voice

indicated he felt great pressure to have all the answers and to not disappoint anyone: “I’ve got to . . .” “I can’t let people down.” “I have to work long hours, and my family doesn’t understand.” The I factor warning sign was there, suggesting that this pastor was depending on himself instead of on God.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Listen for the I factor in your conversations. Note any words or thoughts that depict you as *less than* (fearful) or *more than* (prideful). Notice whether you too often direct a conversation back to yourself or you interrupt someone’s story to tell your own. Are your conversations laced with *I*, *my*, or *me*? Are you others-focused or self-focused? If the latter, consider this a warning sign that you may be on the path to Edging God Out.

A Challenge of Leadership

The following true story tells of an encounter between Abraham Lincoln and one of his army officers.

During the Civil War, President Lincoln was visited by Colonel Scott, a commander of the troops guarding the capital. Scott’s wife had drowned in a steamship collision in Chesapeake Bay. He had appealed to regimental command for leave to attend her burial and comfort his children, but he was denied. He took his request to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, who also refused. In his ultimate appeal, Scott was the last visitor allowed to see Lincoln in the presidential office late on a Saturday night.

As Scott recalled, Lincoln listened to his story and exploded. “Am I to have no rest? Is there no hour or spot when or where I may escape these constant calls? Why do you follow me here with such business as this? Why do you not go to the War Office where they have charge of all matters of papers and transportation?”

Scott told Lincoln of Stanton’s refusal. The president replied with equal fervor that, during this time of war, everyone had burdens to bear. He sided with Stanton and denied Scott’s request. Lincoln again suggested Scott go to the War

Department and if they didn't help him, Scott was to bear his burden until the war was over. Colonel Scott returned to his barrack, brooding.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Reread the last two paragraphs and notice whether Lincoln's words and suggestions were self-focused or others-focused.

Early the next morning Colonel Scott heard a rap at the door. It was the president. He took Scott's hands and apologized, saying, "I had no right to treat a man with rudeness who has offered his life to his country, much more a man in great affliction. I have had a regretful night and now come to beg your forgiveness." He had arranged with Stanton for Scott to go to his wife's funeral.¹

PAUSE AND REFLECT

We are prone to making poor decisions when we are **Hungry, Angry, Lonely, or Tired**. So we need to **HALT** when any of these factors are present. In the Lincoln case, consider the following:

- What were the internal and external forces that caused Lincoln to first respond in a self-serving way? Note which of the HALT factors might have been present.
- Describe a time when you faced a similar leadership decision. What was your response? Were you a serving leader or a *self*-serving leader? Why?
- What had caused Lincoln to change his mind by the next morning?

WARNING SIGN #2: THE *MINE*

PERSPECTIVE

Have you ever thought, *I would rather do this myself*? Sometimes it seems much easier to do something ourselves than to try to teach someone else to do it. But a critical role for leaders is preparing others to carry on when their own seasons of leadership end. Our leadership legacies are not limited to what we accomplish: they also include what we leave behind in the hearts and minds of the people we work with and teach.

We don't leave much good behind if one of our operating principles is summed up in the word *mine*. The first word of many children is *mine*, and sometimes we don't outgrow that thinking.

Perhaps you haven't thought of your leadership position as a season. But if you reflect on your experience, you probably can see that you have had several seasons of leadership influence in your family, your career, or your volunteer activities. Your personal succession planning efforts speak volumes about your motives as a leader. It is unlikely that anyone involved in the promotion and protection of self—Edging God Out—is going to spend much time training and developing a potential successor. One mark of EGO-driven leaders is this failure to groom someone to take their place. Also limiting the development of those we lead are such behaviors as hoarding information, refusing to empower coworkers to make decisions, and failing to recognize people's contributions.

During His time on earth, Jesus modeled a sacrificial passion for ensuring that His followers were equipped to carry on the movement He had begun. Jesus lived in intimate relationship with the very people He wished to empower by His words and example. In his book *Transforming Leadership*, author Leighton Ford notes, "Long before modern managers, Jesus was busy preparing people for the future. He wasn't aiming to pick a crown prince, but to create a successor generation. When the time came for Him to leave, He did not put in a crash program of leadership development—the curriculum had been taught for three years in a living classroom."²

Whom are you developing in your living classroom?

WARNING SIGN #3: NEGATIVE RESPONSE TO FEEDBACK

Do you appreciate feedback? When we ask that question, most people say, “Yes, but . . .” We hear, “Yes, but not from someone I don’t respect” or “Yes, but only from certain people.”

Maybe you often receive feedback graciously, but in some situations it may not be helpful or it may be out of alignment with your purpose and mission. Everyone likes positive feedback, but you may have a difficult time with negative feedback—especially if your security and self-worth are based on public image, reputation, position, competitive performance, possessions, or personal relationships. If you sense a threat to any of those things you cherish, you may react to criticism in a fearful, defensive way. You may also wrongly conclude that negative feedback means people don’t want you to lead anymore. That’s not always the case. Sometimes the biggest fear is not failure; it is the fear of losing your power and position. The fear is intensified if you have based your self-worth and security on your leadership position and power.

With some honest self-evaluation, you may come to realize that you, too, have an EGO problem. That’s the bad news. The good news is twofold: you are not alone, and what you are struggling with is a treatable condition. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 we read:

No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.

In his classic book *Ordering Your Private World*, Gordon MacDonald says there are two types of people in the world: *driven* people and *called* people.³

Driven people think they own everything. They own their relationships, they own their possessions, and they own their positions. In fact, they perceive their identity as the sum of their relationships, possessions, and positions. As a result, driven people spend most of their time protecting what they own. We see this in a family when a father or mother demands that everyone cater to his or her wishes without questioning that person’s authority. Driven people believe “the one who dies with the most toys wins”—and if you mess with any of their toys, you’re in trouble. The possessions of driven people become an important expression of who they are, and sometimes their possessions end up possessing them.

Called people, on the other hand, believe everything they have is on loan to them from the Lord. They believe, for instance, that their relationships are on loan and are to be cherished; they know there is no guarantee they will see those they love tomorrow. Called people also believe their possessions are on loan and are to be held lightly, to be enjoyed and shared with an open hand. Finally, called people believe their positions are on loan from God, as are the people they are leading and influencing. Rather than protecting what they own, called leaders act as good stewards of the resources and people who have been loaned to them. They are therefore prone to see feedback as more of a gift than a threat. Even if feedback is hurtful or given in a negative way, leaders grounded in God's unconditional love will move beyond the negative emotions and seek to find truth that will help them improve their leadership.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Have these warning signs helped you diagnose a heart problem? The first step toward wellness is admitting that you are Edging God Out with pride or fear. Ask yourself these questions:

- When you consider the I factor, do you Edge God Out more because of fear or pride? Give specific evidence.
- Have you overcome your *mine* perspective? Be honest and offer specifics.
- What is your first reaction when somebody criticizes you or disagrees with your decision? Why? Do you become defensive? If so, why?
- In your positions of leadership, do you have feedback rules? Who can give you feedback? When can they give you feedback? And do those you're leading know these rules?
- What do your answers to these questions show you about your leadership?

A HEART TURNAROUND

Jesus said to his disciples, “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Matthew 16:24

Leading like Jesus is not easy. It demands intentionality and commitment as well as an ongoing relationship with the model you are trying to follow. Frankly, it can be easy to lose focus due to hectic schedules and great demands on your time. The temptation to put something else in God’s place—to choose another source of security, self-worth, or wisdom and another audience and authority for your life—is constant. A life intentionally lived with a focus on Jesus and a deep commitment to Him will help you move from Edging God Out to Exalting God Only.

CHOOSE GOD AS THE OBJECT OF YOUR WORSHIP

We know we should place God above everything else, but we don’t always do so. Ensuring God is in His right place and you are in yours is always a heart issue.

Adam and Eve thought they knew better than God and became the first people to Edge God Out. Your beliefs about God are stored in your heart, but shiny things can pull you away. We can too easily fall into worshipping, for instance, success, power, money, family, education, reputation, and good works, instead of God.

Only when you really know God will He truly be the object of your worship.

When you know God is good, when you know He loves you with no strings attached, and when you know that He will never leave you, then you can trust Him above all others and you will worship Him more freely. When you are in deep trouble and the only One you can call on is your heavenly Father—the One who put the stars in place, who loved you first, who created you, and who has a perfect plan for your life—then you will worship Him more wholeheartedly. We come to know God through our experiences with Him, and our worship of God increases and is enriched as we come to know Him better.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Think about a time in your life that seemed hopeless. Maybe you experienced the death of someone you loved, a divorce, a job loss, or separation from friends or family. We often come to know God in a deeper way when we experience Him in the hard moments of our lives.

Now think about a time when life was so good that you couldn't find words to express your gratitude. Maybe the blessing was the birth of a child or grandchild, a promotion you worked toward for a long time, or your child's marriage to a wonderful, God-honoring person. Knowing God better also happens as our gratitude at seeing His goodness overflows.

Finally, when did you experience a time when you tried to find things and people to fill you up, but your tank stayed empty? Knowing God better happens when you learn that nothing can truly satisfy you except a relationship with Jesus.

Scripture reminds us:

His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises. (2 Peter 1:3–4)

As Peter proclaimed, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life, a life of worshiping Him more fully as we come to know Him better. So if we want to lead like Jesus, we will be intentionally focused on knowing God. This intimate knowing will prompt us and enable us to worship Him with our lives as we spend time with our families, at work, or serving at church or in the community.

CHOOSE GOD AS THE SOURCE OF YOUR SECURITY, SELF-WORTH, AND WISDOM

Choosing God as the source of all you need changes your perspective, your purpose, and your goals. Believing that your security and self-worth are not up for grabs every day and that He will give you wisdom in every moment of your life brings peace and freedom.

Everyone wants to feel secure in this world of uncertainty. You have a sense of how your life will unfold; you think you know pretty much what it will look like. But then something changes—your spouse wants a divorce, you lose your job, or you are diagnosed with a life-changing or life-threatening disease—and you have to reframe your ideas and expectations. You will no longer feel secure unless the source of your security is God. When you Exalt God Only, you answer the question *Can I trust God?* with a definite *yes*. You have come to know Him intimately, and you know you can trust Him no matter what the circumstances of your life. God is the source of your security, and He will never fail you.

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Psalm 20:7 says, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, but we trust in the name of the LORD our God.” Where do you place your trust?

Self-worth is not just feeling good about yourself; it comes from a healthy

sense of your identity and purpose. When you Exalt God Only, you are mindful that you belong to God. You trust Him with your life, and you trust that you are who God says you are. You find your purpose and identity in Him: you are beloved, forgiven, righteous, holy, acceptable, and more. Your purpose is sure because you trust God to keep the promises made in Scripture. Ephesians 2:10 reads: “We are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago” (NLT). When God is the source of your self-worth, you are no longer imprisoned by the pressure to do more and try harder. You can actually be a human *being*, not a human *doing*, and you can relax in who God has made you to be. In doing so, you exalt God.

Choosing God to be the source of your wisdom means you are no longer focused on the world’s view. You have a different perspective and set of priorities. Scripture says you have the mind of Christ, and you recognize the Bible as the only playbook for your life. When you Exalt God Only, you are focused on Him: you lean in to Him in order to hear His wise counsel. You have come to trust God enough to wait for His answers. You understand that in the waiting, He is growing you to trust Him more.

Jesus is the supreme example of how to depend on God the Father as your source for everything—including self-esteem and security. Jesus said:

“The Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, and he will show him even greater works than these, so that you will be amazed. . . . By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me.” (John 5:19–20, 30)

CHOOSE GOD AS THE AUDIENCE FOR AND AUTHORITY OVER YOUR DAILY WORK AND LIFE STORY

Choosing God as your audience means that your eyes are on God, not on people. He is your Audience of One; like you, everyone else is a member of the cast. The scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day didn’t play to the Audience of One,

however, and Jesus was scathing in His judgment of them. He called them hypocrites because they did their good deeds to be seen by men:

“Everything they do is done for people to see. . . . They love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called ‘Rabbi’ by others.” (Matthew 23:5–7)

When you choose God as the authority for your life, obedience to His Word is your standard. The first step in living out this choice is to return to Him the love He has shown us, and that means obeying Him. Jesus put it this way: “Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them” (John 14:23). Now, that is a great deal!

Our obedience is born out of our love of God. We Exalt God Only when we choose to live in His love. That choice is easier when we remember that God has already chosen us and, through Jesus, made Himself and His love known to us. Exalting God happens when we understand that Jesus is the gift that becomes our audience and authority.

RESULTS OF EXALTING GOD ONLY: HUMILITY AND CONFIDENCE

If God is the object of your worship, the source of your security and self-worth, and your audience and authority, then humility and God-grounded confidence will replace false pride and fear. Instead of Edging God Out because we are driven by pride and fear, our relationships and leadership will be renewed with humility and God-grounded confidence as we seek to Exalt God Only. The challenge is first to understand the nature of the journey we must travel and then to commit to taking the initial steps.

Humility

Leading like Jesus means leading with humility, the first attribute of a heart that Exalts God Only. Humility requires knowing *whose you are* and *who you are*. You are called to be a good steward of your season of influence,

remembering there is a plan that was set in motion long before you were born. By God's grace, your influence will extend beyond your tenure in the hearts and minds of those the Lord entrusted to your care.

Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. (Romans 12:3)

As a leadership trait, humility is a heart attitude that reflects a keen understanding of your limitations and even inability to accomplish something on your own. When a victory is won or an obstacle overcome, humility gives credit to people and forces other than your own knowledge and effort. According to Jim Collins in his book *Good to Great*, a leader with a humble heart looks out the window to find and applaud the true causes of success and in the mirror to

find and accept responsibility for failure.¹ A leader who does that is not suffering from low self-esteem! In fact, as Ken and Norman Vincent Peale said, "People with humility don't think less of themselves; they just think of themselves less."²

Leading like Jesus also requires humbly accepting and honoring the nonnegotiable boundaries He has set so you can accomplish true and lasting results. Jesus said to His disciples, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

There is, however, a difference between putting on the appearance of humility before others and being truly humble in the presence and before the purposes of God. You are not to be piously humble about what He has given you or what you have done. In *Breakfast with Fred*, Fred Smith said it well: "People with humility don't deny their power; they just recognize it passes through them, not from them."³

Humility is realizing and emphasizing the importance of other people. It is not putting yourself down; it is lifting others up. It is saying to yourself and to others, "I am precious in God's sight—and so are you."

The humility Jesus demonstrated did not rise from a lack of self-esteem, love, power, or ability. His humility came from the fact that He knew whose He was, who He was, where He came from, and where He was going. That understanding freed Him to treat people with love and respect.

God-Grounded Confidence

Humility rooted in a secure relationship with His Father allowed Jesus to approach every situation with God-grounded confidence, the second attribute of a heart that Exalts God Only. Jesus always knew His Father unconditionally loved Him. That gave Him confidence to stay focused on the reason He had come to earth.

Minister and author Norman Vincent Peale often said the toughest test of self-esteem is bowing your head, admitting to God that you fall short of perfection, and accepting Jesus as your Savior. Norman told Ken that at times people would say to him, “Christianity is for weaklings.” Norman said when that happened, he would reply, “That’s furthest from the truth. The human EGO does not want to admit any weakness.” Moving from self-confidence to God-grounded confidence takes a big person and an even bigger, loving God.

One of the by-products of God-grounded confidence is the “peace of God, which transcends all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). Jesus promises to give us this peace when we surrender our lives to Him: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

Clearly, Exalting God Only will make you a different kind of leader. Humility and God-confidence will mark your leadership and have an impact on those you influence. Pride and fear no longer hold you captive: you don’t have to prove anything to anyone, and you can rest in knowing and worshiping God, trusting Him as your source, your audience, and your authority. Jesus came to set the captives free, and freedom comes when we give ourselves totally to God and exalt Him only.

When we Exalt God Only, our perspectives change. Edging God Out separates us from God, from others, and from ourselves; prompts us to compare ourselves to others; and offers only a false sense of security. But when we Exalt God Only, we move toward community and transparent relationships rather than toward separation and isolation; from comparisons of ourselves to others to contentment with whose we are and who we are; and from distorted thinking about God and about ourselves to the truth of God’s love for us as a basis of decision making and leading.

EXALTING GOD ONLY

As the object of
my worship

As the source of my
security, self-worth,
and wisdom

As the audience and judge
of my life decisions

EXPRESSES ITSELF THROUGH:

HUMILITY

Something to hope for but never claim;
something to observe in others

“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or
vain conceit. Rather, in humility value
others above yourselves” (Philippians
2:3).

Looking out the window, not in the
mirror, to praise

A kingdom perspective

GOD-GROUNDED CONFIDENCE

Resting assured in God’s nature and goodness;
proceeding in faith one step at a time

“So we can confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper; I
will not fear; what can man do to me?’ ” (Hebrews 13:6
ESV).

Promoting others

Protecting others

LEADS TO:

COMMUNITY

Drawing near to
God and to others

CONTENTMENT

Being satisfied in all
circumstances

TRUTH

as a basis for decision
making

PAUSE AND REFLECT

Imagine sitting down with Jesus just before He sends you off to
represent His kingdom where you work and in all your personal
relationships. Here are some questions Jesus might ask to make sure
you are ready to head out:

- Do you love Me?
- Do you trust Me?

- Will you serve Me by serving others?
- Do you believe that I will always love you regardless of your performance or the opinions of others?
- Are you willing to set aside recognition, power, and instant gratification to honor Me by doing the right thing?