

# Overcoming the Perils of Leadership by Being a Follower

By Michael Wilkins

Speaker 1:

Professors are excited to give you work. We've just been waiting all summer for this. Welcome back to a new academic year at Biola, and here at Talbot chapels it would be really nice to know how many of you are new students here on the university; any of the schools at the university, if you are new, for students, for the first time here, would you stand up? Just let us know who you are, where you are.

Welcome its great having you with us. We trust that you're settling in and adjusting to the environment here at Biola. I understand we have over 600 new parking spaces. I don't know where they are because the lot back here doesn't look like it at all. I got here at 8:00 thinking I'd be in plenty of time but I can't find a place for my truck. It's just tragic, but I may have to park under the soccer field from now on. We have a few new professors, we have several professors coming into Talbot, but some have been at Biola for some time. But there's Jose Perez, he is new here on faculty. Are you here, Jose? I'm not sure if he is this morning. Okay, and Dr. Kent Edwards in homiletics, I know you are here, welcome. And we're also privileged to have with us on faculty, sort of in a dual assignment, Dr. George Alexander. He's at the school of Intercultural Studies, but he's now department chair of missions here at Talbot. And is George here? Not sure if he is. But welcome to these three and there are others as well, but they are faculty members from other departments. I've been told by Rick Franklin of the Associated Students officers that, for Talbot students, there is a free mug for you. This is for Talbot students now. Sorry about the rest of you in different schools, maybe you can talk to your dean or something and get some of

this going, but these are available for Talbot students in the lounge in Myers Hall along with some coffee and treats after the chapel this morning.

We have a great schedule this year. There are posters available--are they available in the lobby, yet? Okay, in the Myers lobby: chapel posters for Talbot chapels for Tuesdays all year. I just want to share with you, briefly, that the purpose of Chapel here at Talbot is to provide opportunities for worship, instruction, exposure to current issues, ministries, missions, gifted individuals. Now, this is an important part of your educational experience and I think it will contribute significantly to your spiritual growth. I know as a Talbot student at, back in the 70s, chapel--and we had it four times a week back then--was a huge part of my spiritual development. I would not have been prepared for pastoral service had I not been in chapel, it was that critical for me. And I trust that you will catch that significance and bring your friends along with you as well as the weeks continue next week Chad Cunningham, a special appointment faculty member here at Biola with Crown Ministries, is going to be sharing with us regarding stewardship. And there will also be a doughnut Chapel. Now those are, for you new students, chapels where after chapel in the student lounge in Myers we have Krispy Kreme doughnuts--we go to the top here--and Starbucks coffee and all kinds of special treats. There's even some healthy stuff, if you need that. So welcome to this New Year.

At this time, I'd ask Dr. and Mrs. Rigsby to lead us in a hymn of praise. Following that, Assistant Dean Doug Geringer is going to lead us in prayer and following him Dr. Michelle Lee. We'll do the scripture reading this morning. Dr. Rigsby.

Dr. Rigsby:

Hymn number 366. Great hymn by Charles Wesley, and it doesn't show his brother's theology. Would you stand please?

[Song, And Can it be That I Should Gain by Charles Wesley]

Remain standing for prayer.

Doug Geringer:

Will you pray with me? Heavenly Father, holy God, as we convene at the beginning of this academic year we remember our God; that no one is like You. There is no one like You. Who can bring a universe into existence? Who but You is perfect in righteousness and justice? What human is able to offer You wisdom or knowledge? Who has demonstrated mercy and love as You have? We acknowledge that You have first loved us. We delight in remembering the sending of Your Son. We love You by faith, in response to Your love. We also see Your grace at our school, Biola University and Talbot School of Theology, schools birthed to prepare Your people for service in an intellectual climate that rejects, what we believe, are cardinal doctrines. Who but You can preserve an institution that affirms the radical trustworthiness of the Bible and its authority over all life? That affirms salvation by grace, grace and faith alone? That affirms the preparation of its students in knowledge, skill, and character? That affirms that the mission of Your church in this age is to make disciples of all nations, proclaiming the good news of Jesus Christ, and training all those who respond for full maturity and obedience in Christ. God, please give us hearts that value making disciples for Your glory above all else. Change our value

systems as we understand and apply the Bible to living Christianly in the 21st century. Change our value systems as we understand what it means to be a Christian leader. Enable us to follow after Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit that manifests itself in our transformation and in the transformation of others. In Jesus name, amen.

Dr. Michelle Lee:

A reading from God's word. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 23 verses 1-12: "Then Jesus spoke to the multitudes and to his disciples saying, 'the scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses. Therefore all that they tell you do and observe, but do not do according to their deeds. For they say things and do not do them; and they tie up heavy loads and lay them on men shoulders, but they themselves are unwilling to move them with so much as a finger. But they do all their deeds to be noticed by men, for they broaden their phylacteries and lengthen the tassels of their garments. And they love the place of honor at banquets, and the cheap seats in the synagogues, and respectful greetings in the marketplace, and being called by man, rabbi. But do not be called rabbi, for one is your teacher and you are all brothers and do not call anyone on Earth your father, for one is your Father, he who is in heaven. And do not be called leaders for one is your leader that is Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant; and whoever exalts himself shall be humbled and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.'" May God add His blessing to the reading of His word

Speaker 1:

Dr. Mike Wilkins has served as Professor of New Testament language and literature here at Talbot since 1983. He received his B.A. from Biola, M.Div. from Talbot theological seminary,

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and Ph.D. from Fuller Theological Seminary. Dr. Wilkins specializes in New Testament theology, Christology, and discipleship. He is the author of several books, his most recent being a commentary on Matthew in the NIV application commentary series. I, myself, purchased the handy pocket edition.

[Laughter]

He has published articles in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, Society of Biblical Literature, Anchor Bible Dictionary, Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels, Discipleship Journal, and Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology. He is a member of the IBR Historical Jesus Study Group, and visiting professor at international schools, including: the University of Aberdeen, Asian Graduate School of Theology, Chongshin Theological Seminary, and Sheffield University. Dean of the faculty, and acting dean of Talbot while Dr. Dirks is on sabbatical, Dr. Wilkins is a beloved and much appreciated member of our community, and I would ask you to please join me in welcoming our faith colleague.

Dr. Michael Wilkins:

Thank you very much, it really is my privilege to address you this morning in this capacity that Dean Dennis Dirks normally occupies. He is on a well-deserved sabbatical this semester, so as acting dean it became my lot to give the fall convocation, and I have been told that as acting dean I'm supposed to act like a dean. I don't know what that means, but I'll try.

As I thought about what I might like to address this morning, my mind went immediately to leadership issues. In spite of the diversity of training that you are all receiving, and the

diversity of the potential ministries that you will pursue after you leave here, one common denominator is that you will all become leaders of one sort or another. Leadership is a hot topic in today's world, both in the secular and Christian realm. Leadership will be a hot topic in the public arena all through the next few months as we as a nation select the president for the next four years, and it will be intriguing as to how they define leadership. Leadership will also be a significant topic in evangelicalism the next few years because we're watching a generation of some of the greatest leaders in the 20th century passed from the scene, including, recently: Carl Henry, Kenneth Concer, and, perhaps in the next few years, Billy Graham. Who will step up and be the leaders in the next generation?

What is a leader? And especially for us, what does it take to be a Christian leader? This will be especially important for each of you to understand because in your particular discipline in ministry you are going to be leaders who will set the direction for the next generations. You will set that direction. We just don't know the direction it will take. What does it take for you to be a leader? I've been in positions of leadership for most of my life, in both secular and Christian realms. I'm an intuitive type of leader, although I've been through some really fine leadership training. A working description, not a definition, but a working description of leadership that has guided me throughout most of my life, may get us to start about leadership. I describe leadership in this way: knowing where I'm going, knowing how to get there, knowing my capacity to get there, and then instilling in others the confidence that they can trust me to lead them to where we're supposed to be going. Let me say that again: knowing where I'm going, knowing how to get there, knowing my capacity to get there, and then instilling in others the confidence they can trust me to lead them to where we're supposed to be going. That description has served me well for most of my life, but there is within it a potential for real problems.

In this definition much of the burden for leadership lies in my own knowledge, and abilities, and capabilities. I saw the problem actually unfold this last year when a new senior pastor was called to a local mid-sized church. Within three months, he had asked all the pastoral staff to resign, he had asked all of the Elders to resign, and then changed the church constitution from a plurality of elders to a single rule Elder, and guess who that was. On top of that, on top of that, on top of that, he fired all of the secretarial staff and disbanded the choir. And his rationale for all of this was that, in his view, there had been weak leadership in the church and he was now there to give strong leadership. The necessary balance from a Christian leadership point of view is to emphasize that true leadership must be based upon being a true follower. That is, a true leader is a follower of Jesus, Our supreme leader. How to be that leader-follower is what Jesus leads us to in this passage this morning.

The passage that was read to us by Dr. Michelle Lee, my dear colleague, is in my view one of the most important in Scripture for understanding Jesus' form of leadership. However, the chapter is one that most of us skim over rather easily. It seems to have no relevance to us in our contemporary world of ministries. It's addressed to first century Pharisees and scribes, who were exercising a specific sectarian leadership role within national Israel. How does that relate to us? Their situation is so different than ours, we might never spend time reading it, let alone attempt to apply it to our own situation. However, as I have spent as of hours studying this chapter for a recent writing project I was convinced that this is one of the most relevant chapters in Scripture for evangelical leaders. But I believe that we, as Christian leaders, may be more like these Jewish Pharisees than we want to admit. Now I mean that in two ways, and I don't mean it totally negatively. In a positive way, the Pharisees had many good things about them: their personal godliness, their commitment to the Scripture, their belief in a coming Messiah, their belief in a

resurrection, in afterlife, in spirit world; their leadership role in the synagogue, their desire to be separate from the evil of this world. We should all relate to those characteristics.

On the other hand, it is well known that Jesus reserved His most scathing criticisms and condemnations for the Pharisees. And one of the most humbling aspects of reading the Gospels, Matthew in particular, is recognizing that many of the criticisms that Jesus lodged against the phari--against the Pharisees, could and probably should be lodged against us. And this is particularly true of those of us who are Christian leaders. We can see in this chapter that Jesus pointed out many troublesome, indeed many sinful characteristics: their pride, their public showmanship, their one-up-manship, their bull-headedness, their politicizing of their position of leadership, and of course, their hypocrisy. These are temptations for more of us than we may want to admit. Throughout Jesus' earthly ministry He had rebuked the Pharisees for abusing that leadership position. As His earthly ministry comes to a close in the Passion Week, Jesus gives this final scathing denunciation of the lead-teachers of the law and the Pharisees as a warning to His disciples and the crowds.

Jesus addresses His denunciation to them for several reasons. In the first place, the Pharisees and the teachers of the law are the most influential leaders of the common people because of their location in the villages throughout Israel and of their participation in the local synagogues. They were the most popular of the sectarian Jewish leaders. We need to be careful of our own popularity because of the greater potential to lead more people astray. The Pharisees and scribes have been Jesus most vocal opponents throughout His ministry. Primarily because He has undercut their oral law, which then threatens their authoritative pronouncements and their esteem among the people. We should be very careful of our propensity to think that we alone are the ones who are always right, when others don't act and think exactly as we do. And in many

ways the doctrinal positions of the Pharisees on crucial items is more similar to Jesus' position than the other sectarians within Israel. Their closeness to the truth makes them dangerous leaders, because it is more difficult for the average people to distinguish truth from error. We should be very careful when we are too confident of our theological accuracy. It is tragically easy to drift into error when we don't rely upon the community of faith to hold us to the truth. So Jesus directs this harsh denunciation in Matthew 23 against the scribes and the Pharisees for the danger they pose to the people and to the future of the nation, because of the abuse of their leadership position.

Now, the chapter can be divided into two primary sections as you can see on the handout, everybody get that blue handout. The first section is verse, is found in verses 1 through 12. It has 4 warnings about the false leadership of the scribes and the Pharisees. Jesus does not want the crowds, nor Jesus' own disciples, to be led astray by the religious leaders. On the other hand, Jesus also warns His own disciples about the propensity that they may also have to fall into the same leadership errors. The second section runs from verses 13 through 36 and has 8 general woes, or declarations of condemnation, about the scribes and the Pharisees. It's a well-documented truth throughout scripture that leaders of God's people receive greater condemnation when they exploit their position. These woes are the condemnation that the scribes in the Pharisees receive for leading the people astray.

Now, we don't have time this morning to study the entire chapter. What time is it? No we don't. Um.

[Laughter]

So, what I'm going to do is briefly look at the first section, the four warnings. And what I'm going to do is describe the warning and then see how it can act as a warning to us, as well as the original Scribes and Pharisees, and then tried to derive some positive lessons for us.

However, one of the reasons I gave the handout was not only to advertise a recent publication, but it was also specifically to give you something to look at in the next few weeks. Because as you develop in your leadership roles, both here while you're at school as well as once you leave, leadership is something you need to give daily attention to. So, I would encourage you to go back to, to the chapter and look at it over and over again, and I would encourage you, regularly, throughout your life of leadership to check yourself to make sure that we haven't fallen into some of these Pharisaic errors.

So let's look at the first warning, which is found, found in verses 1 through 4. And I'm not going to read it again, Michelle did a great job reading it, or Dr. Lee, excuse me. But in this warning it cautions Jesus' followers about the burdens of legalism that the scribes in the Pharisees have imposed upon the people. Because what they are doing is they are abusing God's authority. They rightly teach God's Word, but their intent is not to provide an example of how it works in their own lives, but simply to maintain control of other people's lives through the burden of legalistic expectations. The positive lesson is that we need to live by example God's message of grace. The gospel of the kingdom is grace, not legalistic performance to gain God's favor. But sometimes we leave that alone. Once we enter into salvation and we develop a whole system of works in our ministries. A positive form of leadership is when we demonstrate grace toward God's people; love them, accept them regardless of their performance. We certainly will continue to encourage them toward godliness, and excellence, and will rebuke error. But, the best way to do so is to provide an example of obedience in our own lives. As leaders, we must not try

to maintain control over other people's lives through the burden of legalistic expectations, but rather provide guidance through our own example of obedient godliness.

The second warning is found in verses 5 through 7. In here, this reproves those who perform public, pretentious, displays of piety because in so doing we misrepresent God's authority. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees rightly attempt to incorporate in their lives patterns of godliness, but they are wrongly drawing attention to themselves. Therefore, the patterns are external and manipulated to be seen as godly. But God has not been involved in the process. Jesus' leaders are to be careful of self-promotion at the expense of promoting God's authority. This kind of leader has manipulated the religious system to get respect as one who has supposedly been given authority by God. The positive lesson is a general principle of leadership that you probably have begun to learn early in your life, and will be learned over, and over, and over again. Respect is earned not demanded. Young and inexperienced leaders posture themselves to appear like they know what they're doing, and then they demand respect and honor of those below them simply because they're in a position.

I saw this very clearly my own life when I was put into a position of leadership. I was 19 years old, and I went through some training, and was designated as an assistant Drill Sergeant. Nobody should put that kind of power in the hands of a 19 year old. I had the technical knowledge and I now had the position, but not the other qualities necessary to be a leader. So I postured myself as tough and experienced; trying to demand the respect of the troops. But it didn't work. In fact I lost virtually all respect from those trainees. So I had to learn the hard way, through the next several weeks, what it meant to earn their respect. Jesus' warnings teach respect and honor are earned. We should earn respect by the daily, long term development of our personal godliness. Not in artificial and ostentatious displays of piety, but in developing our

prayer life, in controlling our temper, in maintaining an appropriate demeanor when up in front of people. We can also earn respect by taking the less prominent positions, by going last at church potlucks.

Now, that may seem silly but that was a huge lesson for me because, we had, a in the second church I pastored we had a potluck every Wednesday night. This little town of Caucus California, and this is just the thing: you know most of the people were just about dead there. You know, that people were, I think the average age was 125 in the church. And you know, we just gathered together every Wednesday night as a joyous time, and I had to read the bible study right after the potluck, and so they always pushed me to the front because I had to leave. And after a while I just got so distraught with doing that. And what my wife said is: "Mike, you're prepared. Go last and let the little old ladies who are hot--" it takes, took them about 15 minutes to get from their chair to the table. So I went last. It was, it was for me, one of the most releasing moments in that pastoral experience.

Sit with the children at a Christmas celebration. Share the pulpit with associates who may preach or teach better than we. We can also earn respect by developing a personal transparency that allows people into our lives. It's a temptation to hide behind titles, and positions, and pretentiously posture as a leader. But your people need to just see plain, old you. A regular person, like them. You who are also in process of growing into the image of Christ. We must not demand respect and honor by manipulation or intimidation.

The third warning, found in verses 8 through 10 is directed toward those who wear titles that usurp God's authority. The teachers of the law and the Pharisees rightly have studied carefully to know scripture, to become a rabbi. They rightfully have become trusted caretakers to whom people could turn as the strength of a father. And they rightly have given themselves to

provide guidance for the community to become a leader. But when they elevate themselves by accruing to themselves these titles, they usurp God's authority and assume it themselves. The warning is not so simple as to suggest that titles are always inappropriate. No, the warning is directed against three issues that stifle our discipleship to Jesus and for our leadership. The titles are rabbi. In our desire to teach and provide others with insight in the Word of God. We should be careful to avoid academic arrogance. We should be careful never to supplant Jesus as the teacher who will guide His disciples into all truth through the Spirit guided Word of God. It is simply our privilege to study and declare the word of God. Secondly, father in our desire to protect and nurture others, we should be careful to avoid religious elitism. All Jesus disciples are as brothers and sisters, and we should never elevate ourselves to the place where we supplant our Heavenly Father. And master, or leader. In our desire to guide and lead others into the fullness of discipleship, we should be careful to avoid authoritarian dominance. Jesus is the pre-eminent master-leader; the One who has all of authority, who is Lord, and head of the church.

The positive lesson here is that we should wear lightly any titles that we have earned because each points to some aspect of God's relationship with His people and to flaunt our titles usurps God's authority. The way to exercise this form of leadership is to understand the responsibilities of a title. Help the people to respect the office it lies behind a title, but don't command authority by a title that will usurp God's authority. It's quite easy to be known by who we are and what we know, or the degrees that we have. But this easily produces arrogance and cockiness. We must never forget what Paul declared: that knowledge puffs up, but love builds up. Don't use your titles, or degrees, or education, to manipulate people said that they will follow you. Use it to bless them, so that they can be drawn into an even more intimate relationship with

Jesus. Wear your titles lightly. By allowing them to make you wiser, more understanding, more effective as a servant to your people.

And Jesus concludes His warnings in verses 11 and 12 by harking back to the saying that earlier corrected the disciples inappropriate concern for positions of prominence, they're always asking "who is the greatest?" And Jesus says, "The greatest among you will be your servant." And like the warnings that have been directed to these religious leaders, Jesus warns His own disciples about trying to thwart this new servant leader paradigm. He says "whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted." If they follow the world's thirst for power, and prestige, and attempt to exalt themselves, they will be humbled. The positive lesson defines what it means to be a new kind of leader for Jesus' kingdom program. And it is simply servanthood. This new type of leadership involves empowering others to do God's will. For those who have been placed in positions of prominence, such as a teacher, or a minister, or an executive, the goal of each position is to advance the Kingdom of God. And the means of doing so is by giving ourselves to all of those under us, so that they can best accomplish God's calling in their life as a worker in the kingdom of God. Anyone who promotes himself or herself to positions of authority for the acclaim and the honor that it will give to them will find that position taken away, and will find themselves set aside from service in the kingdom of God. The person who cares only to serve God will find himself or herself elevated to the level of equality. Equality with our brothers and sisters, with no prominence given to anyone but Jesus Himself. We must arrange our lives with the ambition to give our self for the benefit of others which ultimately will empower God's people to advance the Kingdom of God.

These are only beginning lessons on leadership from Jesus. Our time together this morning looking at this powerful chapter is just that: it's only a beginning. And you: you don't

feel like it possibly. You probably feel pretty old, but you're only just beginning. Most of you will be in positions of leadership for the rest of your lives; whether it's in a church or a Bible study. You will be in a position of leadership in your own home as you raise your children to be disciples of Jesus, whether you work in a secular business, or you find yourself in an academic setting. I encourage you to pay attention to what kind of leader you are becoming continually as you go along through life, and never stop learning from Jesus how to be a kind of leader that He desires for you to be. I've been in positions of leadership for most of my life, in both secular and Christian positions and I am learning daily. Seriously, I am learning daily what it means to carry out my leadership role under Jesus. You will hear of many types of leadership styles and methods. You should learn from them all, but continually go back to God's word so that with every step of your leadership you are actually becoming more fully a follower of Jesus. That's my challenge for us, not just you, for me as well for this coming year.

Please join me in prayer. Father, with every day I grow older, I look with more passion upon these, your servants. With every day that I grow older I recognize that I am closer to the time when I will no longer be in this position, and You are right now, Father, training these women and men to serve You by leading Your people. Father, I pray that they learn not to take themselves too seriously, but to take Your calling upon their lives with deadly seriousness. The souls of people in this world depend upon their leadership. And Father, I pray that as we recognize the incredible privilege that we have to be here to study to exercise our gifts to be trained for positions of leadership. Father, I pray that we do not take that privilege lightly and instead, with every day that passes as we near the time when we will be in those official positions of leadership, we become more humbly followers of Jesus. I pray this in His name. Amen.

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God bless you.

[Applause, organ music plays]