

The Character of Leadership

NINE QUALITIES
THAT DEFINE GREAT LEADERS

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CHAPTER ONE

The Quest for Character

IN MY TWENTIES, I was determined to change the world. In my thirties, I tried to reform the church. In my early forties, I discovered I was the problem.

That was a difficult day.

Like most young leaders, my early ministry was marked by a passion to change something. My decision to change the world obviously didn't work. Then I decided the church was the problem. So I started a new one. While it grew into a strong healthy church, something was still not right. No matter how hard I tried to restructure the people and circumstances around me, I was still deeply frustrated.

Through a painful series of circumstances, some of which you will read about in this book, God brought me face to face with this hard reality—my problem was me! So, for the past decade my focus has been on *becoming* the leader God intends me

to be rather than *doing* the leading God intends me to do.

Don't misunderstand—I am very busy doing! I am committed to energetically applying myself to the work God assigns me. People who evaluate me give me high marks for industry, dependability, and attention to duty. Finding enough to do is not and has never been my problem.

If you read anything in this book that leads you to shirk your responsibilities, delve into some ethereal justification for ineffectiveness, or drift toward laziness in ministry, then you are misreading me. God wants you to work hard and to study how to improve your skills so you work more effectively. Other books, other very important books, will help you do that. Most schools, seminaries, and seminars focus on these skills. Many of them are helpful. But this book is not about how to *do* leadership. It is about how to *be* a leader.

The reality is too many young leaders start out like me. They believe if they learn enough facts and accomplish enough tasks, they will not only satisfy God, their followers, and their peers—they will also find deep fulfillment. I no longer believe that. Now I know that deep fulfillment comes from knowing God intimately, understanding his purpose to shape me into the image of Jesus Christ, and discerning how he is using his Word and my circumstances to shape me toward that purpose.

Becoming the Leader God Intends You to Be

God Has a Clear Purpose for You!

God has an ultimate purpose for you. Simply put, he wants to shape your character to make you like Jesus Christ. Romans 8:28–29 summarizes this purpose: “We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God: those who are called according to His purpose. For those He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.”

These verses are packed with meaning! While volumes have been written about them, let’s summarize the key points as they relate to character development.

God has a definite purpose. That is clear in these verses. We are called “according to His purpose,” therefore God must have one. God is doing something specific in each one of us.

God’s purpose is to conform us to the image of Jesus. This is also very clear. We are to be “conformed to the image of His Son.” God is busy remaking his children, including all of us leaders. He is busy making us more and more like Jesus.

God is intentional about his purpose. Romans uses strong theological language—“... those He foreknew He also predestined.” God knows and

determines, in ways we can never understand, that we *will* be conformed to the image of Jesus. God is relentless in this endeavor. He wills it—and what God wills, he accomplishes. Long ago, God reminded Isaiah, “I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: *My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please*” (Isa. 46:9b–10). We need that same reminder. God is intentional and purposeful in conforming us to the image of Jesus.

God’s ultimate purpose gives meaning to our circumstances. Usually, the “all things” in these verses is applied when bad things happen. Comfort is drawn from these verses during crisis, bereavement, or tragedy. That certainly is appropriate. But the phrase “all things” means that all circumstances of life, bad and *good*, transpire and conspire to change us. God is at work through all our circumstances to shape us into the image of Jesus. Accepting and affirming that one great spiritual reality causes our circumstances, no matter how puzzling, to make sense in the context of Christian character development.

God’s purpose is good. God allows circumstances that have good *results* in our lives. Not every circumstance is good—the death of a child, a tragic illness, a national calamity, or other horrific events cannot be called good. God does not call them good.

Only fake piety or some form of spiritual denial leads to calling these events good. But God promises good can come from every circumstance as its meaning is related to his ultimate purpose. God can bring a good result, inner conformation to Jesus, from whatever he allows us to experience.

Now make it more personal. God has a purpose for you. His purpose is to make you more and more like Jesus. He is relentless in his quest. God will organize and orchestrate circumstances to accomplish his purpose—so there is purpose in your experiences as a leader. God’s purpose for you—shaping you in the image of Jesus—is good and will always be good for you. And that is very good news!

Leadership as a Laboratory

Have you ever wondered why God places people in certain leadership roles, positions, or responsibilities? The usual answer for most leaders is “because God wants to use me to (fill in the blank).” That was certainly my perspective earlier in ministry. I thought God wanted me to be a pastor so I could lead a church, teach people the Bible, reach people with the gospel, strengthen families, and impact our community. Later, I thought God wanted me to be a church planter so I could connect with lost people, demonstrate a new model of church, and create some new paradigms of ministry.

When God called me to be a denominational executive, I thought it was to bring fresh vision to a convention of churches, create new ways of thinking about cooperative ministry, and find new ways to encourage and nurture leaders.

All of those were good reasons why God placed me in certain roles over the years. But none of them were the ultimate reason. The ultimate reason God assigned me to any position was because he could best use that position, at that time, to accomplish his purpose of shaping me into the image of Jesus.

This understanding first dawned on me as I considered leaving the pastorate of the church I planted to become a denominational executive. As I meditated on that change process, there was one reality I did not fully understand and was reluctant to admit. The reality was, as a pastor, I was coasting.

By coasting, I mean the daily spiritual challenge of doing my job was not compelling. Our church was healthy, I basically knew what to do to keep it that way, and I was enjoying the ride! Changing ministry roles, changing to a kind of ministry in which I had little experience or expertise, and changing leadership identities was a staggering thought. As I prayed, asking the Father why he wanted such a change, this idea emerged. God wanted me in a laboratory where I was once again on the growing edge, desperate to know him and to become more like Jesus.

For me, my pastorate had become like swimming laps. I was stroking along, doing well, staying in shape, keeping things moving, and making steady progress. Answering God's call to this new position was like being tossed overboard into the ocean. No more gliding along! Once again, I would be swimming for my spiritual life.

By the time I was asked to consider becoming a seminary president, these convictions had formed more fully. When the search committee contacted me, my first prayer was "Father, is this the place you want me to be so you can make me more like Jesus?" Reflecting on almost ten years as an executive leader, I sensed some of the same feelings I had when I left the pastorate. I was more honest with myself, with my wife, and with God in answering his call this time.

I do not believe God has primarily called me to be a seminary president because of what I can do for the seminary. I believe God has placed me here because of how he will use these circumstances to shape me in ever-fresh, ever-deeper ways to be like Jesus. Part of that process, obviously, is serving and leading the seminary—doing my job! But I am much more eager to discover what the seminary community, challenges, and circumstances will do *in me* than what I will do for them.

Leadership roles, positions, callings, or assignments are God's laboratories for leaders. God places

us where we are (or may call us to a new place) so he can have the perfect laboratory for continuing to change us into the image of Jesus. God has control of our circumstances and will use them to shape us—if we learn to discern his work and allow him to do it.

The rest of this book is about how God accomplishes this process.

Character Building 101

Some legitimate questions to ask at this point are, “Does character really continue to develop over a lifetime? After all, aren’t we shaped as young children into who we are? Aren’t the ‘formative years’ of our youth really when we finalize our inner core? Do we really change much after that?”

Certainly, personality and values are profoundly shaped by genetics, childhood experiences, family relationships, and other early life influences. But are these really the final, formative processes for a Christian? The answer is clearly no.

The Christian doctrine of sanctification—the biblical process of growing in grace, of becoming a fully devoted disciple of Jesus, of continually learning the ways of God—clearly calls for lifelong character development. While personality is largely determined by genetics and early environmental factors, character continues to be shaped and developed over a lifetime.

How then, does God shape character? God shapes character by bringing together three converging streams that flow toward his purpose—the Bible, circumstances, and disciplined discernment of his purposes.

God Uses the Bible

The most significant source for character development is the Bible. God's Word is the standard by which all of your impressions, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, choices, and values must be measured. Reading the Bible regularly (with a goal of daily), studying the Bible carefully, hearing the Bible preached and taught clearly, and memorizing key passages of Scripture are foundational to Christian character development. Making the Bible the center of your values and choices keeps this entire process from becoming an emotional, subjective experience.

This cannot be emphasized enough. In a post-modern world, pop psychology and pop religion focus on the endless search for inner peace, inner fulfillment, and inner actualization through all kinds of self-defined, self-motivated processes of self-realization. That's too much self! The urgency of this quest, and the fact that so many people are on it, speaks of our intuitive need to grow inwardly. But sadly, leaving God's Word out of the equation has perverted this God-created desire.

Unfortunately, postmodern spiritual seekers often develop a pseudo-intellectual, pseudo-spiritual mind-set void of any submission to absolute Truth or ultimate accountability. They want to develop their inner person but on their own terms. This is why it is essential to regularly engage God's Word. Read it, memorize it, meditate on it, study it, and most of all, let it control your decisions and attitudes. Without the Bible as a guide, you will be lost in a sea of subjective spiritual experiences.

The desire to become more like Jesus is evidence of a healthy Christian commitment. You are seeking God's ultimate purpose and expect to be changed. For this process to genuinely result in Christ being formed in you, however, the Bible must be a vital part of your life. You must submit this entire process of character development to the Word of God and what it teaches about life, about God, and about experiencing God.

God Uses Your Circumstances

The second significant instrument God uses is your life circumstances. While God uses all circumstances, particularly for leaders God uses the place you are serving. God uses the difficulties of your ministry setting—and all places have something that makes them difficult. He also uses the people he has allowed in your life, both friends and foes. God uses all the events, conditions, and rela-

tionships you encounter as a leader to shape you. This also includes the positive circumstances—the opportunities he provides for success and progress. God uses circumstances, events you have little or no control over, to do his work in you.

Joseph, the Old Testament leader (Gen. 37–50), had a life filled with unusual circumstances he did not cause and could not control. He came from a large family so dysfunctional his brothers sold him into slavery. Joseph lived in a foreign country, rising from slavery to a significant leadership role only to be imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. After several years in prison, he was returned to a prominent leadership role in Egypt. This position made him instrumental in feeding Egypt and able to provide for other nations during a severe famine.

Desperately hungry, Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy food. Because Joseph's appearance had changed over the years and his brothers assumed he was dead, they did not recognize him. He sold them grain, conspired to have them go home, and then return with their youngest brother, father, and families. Finally, Joseph revealed himself to them. Panic-stricken, they assumed they would be punished or killed for selling Joseph into slavery.

Joseph responded to his brothers' fear with one of the most remarkable affirmations in the Bible. Joseph said, "You planned evil against me; God planned it for good to bring about the present

result—the survival of many people” (Gen. 50:20). Another translation (NIV) reads, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good.” Could you say that to people who sold you into slavery, condemned you to a life apart from your family, and were the reason you went to prison? Doubtful, unless you shared Joseph’s deep conviction that God supervises your circumstances. This deep conviction—that God supervises your circumstances and will accomplish good through them—can be called “the Joseph principle.”

Not only does God use circumstances you cannot control; he also uses circumstances you create or control for the specific purpose of developing character. You can intentionally create procedures and practices for yourself to promote your own character development. You may wonder if that really works, if your character can continually be developed through shaping your external realities.

The answer is a resounding yes! One clear example clinches the case: parenting. God uses parents to shape their children’s character through controlling their circumstances. Parents create procedures and practices to help their children develop honesty, generosity, gratitude, work ethic, and other desirable character qualities.

For example, we frequently refuse to give our children money but enable them to earn it. We

are not being selfish. We are simply structuring circumstances to teach resourcefulness, give our children a sense of responsibility, and deepen their appreciation for the value of money. Parenting is continually structuring circumstances to shape character.

What works for children, at least in principle, also works for adults. Without parents monitoring your behavior, however, you must structure your own circumstances to shape your character. As leaders, we must have the discipline to do it for ourselves. We structure circumstances we can control and then allow them to shape our character. Setting up learning opportunities, creating structure or standards to control our behavior, and becoming accountable to others are not “mind games” to fool us into acting differently. These are valid strategies for shaping character over a lifetime. Throughout this book, examples of these kinds of self-initiated structures will be described as a primary means God can use to shape your character.

God uses his Word and circumstances, both those you control and those you do not, to mold your character. God’s Word and your circumstances converge to reveal new insights into your spiritual growth. To fully discover those insights requires development of an additional, important spiritual skill—disciplined discernment.

Disciplined Discernment

Joseph was able to affirm the good God did through his circumstances because he had proper perspective. This kind of mature perspective, living out the Joseph principle, comes from *asking God the right question* and *allowing time to discover God's answer*. Working through this process—asking the right question and allowing time to discover the answer is called disciplined discernment.

What is the right question? The right question to ask about your circumstances is “Father, why are you allowing this to happen to me?” The attitude and emphasis is key to asking the question appropriately. Your attitude must reflect submission to God’s purposes, respect for his wisdom, and an expectation of a positive outcome. You are not accusing God with the question, but simply asking him to reveal how the current circumstance relates to his purpose of shaping you into the image of Jesus.

The emphasis in the question is not on “why” but on “this.” Do not ask “*Why me?*” Instead, ask “Father, why *this?*” Sometimes, our concern with “why” something happens is based on a subtle arrogance. Deep down, we believe we do not deserve this kind of treatment! Be more concerned with “this.” Ask God to show you some specific connection of your current circumstances to the purpose of Jesus’ image being shaped in you.

The second part of disciplined discernment is allowing enough time to pass to discover the answer. Sometimes, the process is intense and the answer comes quickly. Other times, the process is more complex and the answers take years to discover. Sometimes, when circumstances remain the same over an extended period of time, the full answer might take decades to unfold in your understanding.

For example, my first pastorate was very challenging. The church was really good to me—supporting me as I developed preaching and pastoral skills, paying for me to attend seminary, and tolerating my learning leadership skills at their expense. While they treated me kindly, and I have come to appreciate them more and more over the years, it was still a difficult church because of the diversity of the membership.

The church had people from almost every walk of life. There were union workers and managers. We had a prosecutor and people he had put in jail. The people had very diverse educational levels, social backgrounds, and church traditions. Rich people sat next to the very poor. Well-educated served with the functionally illiterate. About every sin imaginable had been committed by someone in that church, and all too frequently involving others in the church!

I often wondered why God allowed my first church to be so challenging. Several years passed before I learned the answer. God used that church to teach me how to work with people from many backgrounds. When I left pastoral ministry and became a denominational executive working with several hundred churches, the skills I learned in that first church were skills I used daily. Who could have imagined? God was changing me and shaping me for future challenges. It took almost a decade to understand why God had allowed me to have such a difficult first pastorate.

More personally, during my early years in ministry, I had several very intense critics. Like pugnacious bulldogs, they consistently pointed out my flaws—often verbally and sometimes in writing! More than one of them left me in tears, wondering if the ministry was really worth doing. The sharpness and frequency of those attacks was incredibly painful. One morning, while praying about (and against!) my critics, I finally asked the “why?” question with the right attitude and emphasis. As an answer, God turned on a movie projector in my mind and reminded me of repeated incidents where I had verbally attacked others.

That was not a fun morning at the movies! My memory flooded with specific times I had harshly criticized others. One incident was particularly hypocritical and painful. Reliving it, from the per-

spective of the person I had attacked, was devastating. I realized that my sharp tongue, quick wit, and hostile humor had harmed many people. I also realized why God had allowed others to attack me. God was determined to spotlight this flaw in my character and allow pain to motivate me to change. Because of this experience, I became much more patient with people.

This spiritual confrontation created a significant desire for me to change the way I use words in relationships. This is a watershed issue for me and one I have worked hard to change. Much to my surprise, several years later during an annual review, my evaluators said I am sometimes “too nice.” While I have grown significantly, I doubt that was true!

God is committed to shaping you into the image of Jesus. He uses his Word to set the standard and allows circumstances to turn up the heat. Discernment, asking the right question and allowing enough time to pass for perspective to reveal God’s purpose, is essential to understanding what God is doing in your leadership laboratory.

The Dark Side of Character Development

Ministry leaders are unique because character defines their qualification to lead. The biblical qualifications for leadership stress character more than skill, education, or experience. Conversely, for ministry leaders, character failure undermines and

cancels out prior results to a greater degree than for leaders in other fields. Character failure for ministers often invalidates everything done prior to the sin. Churches are devastated, people leave wounded and discouraged, and ministries take a long time to recover (if they ever do).

Character flaws or failures in other fields (like among business, military, and political leaders) are not usually as devastating. Public opinion often forgives those leaders, excusing their actions in amazing ways! President Clinton's sexual behavior and his remarkable popularity after leaving office is one example of this.

Accepting the high calling of ministry leadership is accepting this greater weight of responsibility. You can't shirk it. You won't be the exception to this rule. You won't be able to go quietly. If your character flaws (and all of us have them) turn into character failures, the breach of trust with your followers will have devastating consequences.

Let your mind's eye imagine the faces of the people you lead. They are counting on you, not just for what you do for them, but for the Christian character you develop and demonstrate to them. They may not articulate this often or clearly, but the primary issue for them is trust. Can you be trusted with the secret things of their lives? Can they be spiritually vulnerable with you? Can they trust you enough to let you speak truth to them?

Character collapse by Christian leaders breaks trust with Christian followers. That is its most devastating result. Followers close themselves to further spiritual direction and lose the opportunity to receive the ministry God could provide through subsequent leaders.

Every leader must make a determined commitment to avoid this tragic outcome! But more than that, as leaders we must cooperate with God as he shapes the character of Christ in us. That result must become our passion!

Why These Character Qualities?

The list of character qualities included in this book is subjective. So how were they chosen? First, they come from personal experience. As God has shaped me, I have written and reflected on the process and progress. Some of these qualities have been and are core issues for me. Several are continuing areas of profound struggle and growth.

Second, they come from observing other leaders. I have observed ministry leaders for three decades and trained ministry leaders for more than ten years. During that time, I have looked for common characteristics in both successful leaders and leaders who struggled or failed. Both groups reveal what is required for effective leadership over the long haul.

Third, these qualities emerge from teaching on character development and listening to the

responses. God has used church members, colleagues, students, and friends over the years to challenge my ideas and make me think more practically about the process of character development. Some of my worst ideas are on the cutting room floor thanks to the eye-rolling responses from past hearers. You can be grateful for the editing their frank responses provided.

So, while these nine character qualities are a subjective list, they are not a random untested collection. They represent the core of what it means to be a leader. They are the heart, the core, the solid center that sustains a leader over a lifetime.

Transparency

This book contains a lot of my journey. God has been working to remake me into the image of Jesus Christ for more than thirty years. There was and is a lot of work to do! Many of the principles and experiences in this book have been learned the hard way. By sharing them, my goal is transparency, not elevating my experience as a foolproof model. Many of the personal illustrations in this book are of my failures. Much of my growth as a Christian leader has happened when God turned these negative experiences into good opportunities for growth.

Transparency is often scarce among Christian leaders. Leaders often careen between two

extremes—self-celebration or catharsis—when they share personal illustrations. Appropriate transparency reveals enough to be helpful, but avoids self-promotion. Transparency protects persons who might be harmed by exposing confidential information, yet uses real illustrations to help you see real-life applications. Transparency allows you to look through the window of someone’s life and learn from what you see. Like many leaders, my life is often lived in public. Admitting that, and inviting you in for a closer look is what I have tried to do. Balancing all this is tough. I hope I have come reasonably close!

Most books are success stories. This book is a work-in-progress story. God *is* shaping you and me into the image of Jesus—no matter our age or life status. None of us can claim that this process is finished. Perhaps some part of my story will encourage you in fresh ways to become more like Jesus. And, maybe we will meet someday and discuss what else I have learned about how God shapes character in the leadership lab. This book will end with a comma, not a period. Fresh experience with God should produce fresh insight as he continues to shape Jesus in me in the years ahead.

The simple goal of becoming more like Jesus should be the ultimate goal of every leader. Leaders are usually remembered for who they were, not what they did. Instead of building monuments to

our ingenuity, we should be focused on building lives worth remembering.

How will you be remembered? What will you be remembered for? Most significant leaders accomplish much. But what they are remembered for is their character. Think about what you have heard (or said) at memorial services for leaders. The tributes are about character. I have never once heard anyone praised for enlarging the budget, hiring more staff, building a building, or writing a book!

So, join me in the journey of becoming a leader who makes a long-term impact and leaves a positive leadership legacy. Join me in the challenge of becoming more like Jesus Christ—the model leader. Join me in *becoming* a leader, not just doing leadership stuff. Join me in the quest for character, the character of Jesus Christ formed in you. This is the essence of what it means to be a man or woman of God. This is the core of a real leader.

“Jeff Iorg has made an enormous contribution to the critical area of ministry and leadership. It isn’t what a minister does so much as what he is that makes him effective. This is a must-read for every minister who strives for excellence in ministry. I recommend it without reservation.”

James T. Draper Jr.
President Emeritus
LifeWay Christian Resources

“As I was reading Dr. Iorg’s book, I kept thinking, *This man has walked in my shoes!* His counsel is biblical. His applications are practical. Every seminarian, pastor, and church or Christian organization staff member should make it a must-read. It has been said that reputation is precious, but character is priceless. This good book, written with the honesty and transparency of the author, underscores that reality.”

Jim Henry
Pastor Emeritus
First Baptist Church Orlando

“In his book, *The Character of Leadership*, Jeff Iorg defines lasting leadership as character, not capacity or competency. The making of a great leader is built on what God intends you to *be* rather than doing the leading God intends for you to *do*. His purpose is first and foremost to shape you into the image of

Jesus, the greatest leader of all time. You can *be* the leader God called you to *be!*”

Rick Warren

Pastor, Saddleback Church

Author, Purpose-Driven Life

“Jeff Iorg is eminently qualified to write this volume on leadership because he possesses and has consistently demonstrated the qualities of leadership described in this book. These qualities have graced his life as a pastor, church planter, state convention executive, and now as president of Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary. This book should be required reading for every minister of the gospel. The chapter on integrity and the no-nonsense chapter on purity are very much needed in our times and worth the price of the book and the investment of your time to read it. Even the seasoned leader will be enriched by the wisdom of the author.”

J. Robert White

Executive Director

Georgia Baptist Convention