

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is a term that evokes far-ranging images depending on one's background and orientation. Our minds gravitate to recollections of great leaders of the past as diverse as Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Alexander the Great, Hannibal, Hatshepsut (female pharaoh of Egypt), Joan of Arc, Eleanor Roosevelt, Shaka Zulu, and Martin Luther King Jr. For many, such leaders are the standard by which all others are judged. However, noteworthy leadership is not just found among the royal, renowned, and revered. All over the world people from various walks of life are leading in ways that are worthy of emulation.

This book examines the characteristics of a person who lived a life that was exemplary yet enigmatic, productive yet puzzling, charismatic yet a curiosity. He was an only child, born to God-fearing parents. He had only a basic education. He never left his hometown. He had a unique diet and wore unfashionable clothing. He was loathed by some and loved by others. He died before age thirty-five by decapitation. Still he managed to leave an indelible imprint on history. The question begging to be asked is what can we learn about leadership from a man who ends up losing his head?

John the Baptist was the son of aged parents who had longed to have children but to no avail. According to the Gospel of

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Luke, God honored the parents and assured them they would have a child even though their biological functions had long since abated. The angel Gabriel appeared to the father-to-be, Zacharias, and informed him that his wife, Elisabeth, would indeed bear a son who would serve as forerunner and precursor to the much anticipated Messiah. Fast-forward thirty years and we find the child, John, grown up and his parents most likely deceased. Like his priestly father, he too is in the service of the Lord, but his temple is without walls. His robes are not made of fine fabric but of weathered camel's hair. His daily sustenance is not derived from wave offerings, but from wild locusts and honey. He has but one sermon: "Repent!"

. . . The fire of God

Fills him. I never saw his like; there lives

No greater leader.

—Alfred Lord Tennyson, Idylls of the King: Lancelot and Elaine

Invariably when I speak for a wide array of audiences, I am asked how it is that I derived leadership insight from the life of John the Baptist. This is a fair question given the brevity of historical information on this man of intrigue. Aside from the gospel accounts in the Bible and a brief mention by the early Jewish historian Josephus Flavius, we have little information on the life of John the Baptist. My answer is simply this: I believe that whatever we do, we bring our experiences, training, and education to the table and view everything through those lenses, including a reading of the Scriptures. As a midlevel manager for twenty-six years, I acquired extensive experience in the areas of strategic planning, employee development, and leadership. Several years ago, while reading the account of John the Baptist, I saw a pattern emerging that was spellbinding. I began to see a simple man whose life exhibited some fundamental and easily applied principles. I felt so compelled that

I termed these leadership attributes “imperatives”—commands, incontestable requirements. When embraced, these imperatives will transform a person into an effective leader. Application of these imperatives may not elevate a person to the stature of a Winston Churchill or Abraham Joshua Heschel, but they will provide a framework for daily living that is impactful and fulfilling.

The majority of published books about John the Baptist are scholarly and attempt to harmonize the gospel accounts and wrestle with John’s relation to Jesus and his theological significance as the Elijah of his day. I do not even pretend to be equipped to contribute to this existing body of scholarly discourse. My premise is that John’s life—the little we know of it—serves as a model of effective leadership for leaders at all levels. Consequently, I am constrained to use a profusion of examples, both biblical and secular, to illustrate the universality of John’s imperatives.

This book is not a theological defense of any particular denominational form of governance. Instead, it provides a common language and framework for discussing leadership that builds upon the reader’s intuitive understanding. As you intently read the successive pages, you will see how this singularly focused man turned the entire region right side up. I hope that as you read and reflect on these seven imperatives, you will discover the possibilities for effective leadership within yourself as exhibited by this wild man of priestly descent.