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PREFACE: FOR THE LOVE OF LEADERS

So many aspire to leadership—until they get there. From my experience and that of so many co-workers, this is especially true of spiritual leaders. Corporate leadership carries with it ideas of power, positions of respect, the authority to influence the agenda, and expectations of material reward that compensate the long hours and emotional load. Not so much in spiritual leadership. Balancing personal well-being and family responsibilities with the ever-growing expectations of people and kingdom accomplishment is a difficult job in itself. The expectations put on spiritual leaders are never ending: a Christ-like demeanor, a humble confidence, an entertaining and informing communicator, the quintessential counselor and—whatever else anyone needs.

The need to lead is all around us. It manifests itself when a group can't so little as decide on a place to eat or a person to say grace. The need to lead also manifests itself when

children die before they should and stunned mourners look you in the eyes. While leadership action, or reaction, is always different with each situation, the same leadership responsibility is there when you open your eyes in the morning until you finally get to close them at night.

So why do it? Surely, there are easier ways to make a living. But the reality for those gifted with leadership, is that we can't not. In situations void of direction or movement, leaders can't often hold back the familiar compunction to act or speak whatever it takes to bring direction and cause action. People with leadership DNA built into their fibers can't help but lead. It wells up within them, reminding them that God's gifts are baked into the core of who they are. It is the same with all the other spiritual gifts Paul listed. Givers can't not give. Helpers can't not help. Teachers just find themselves teaching, planned or not.

Why? Because through all the wading around in the never-ending expectations of people, there are rare moments when leaders come alive and know exactly why they've been created and called for such a time as this. We live for those epic feelings that we are actually accomplishing something of value that will outlast us. An "Aha!" moment for your

organization—an impassioned, clear, and convincing call to action that leads others to act—or a breakthrough change that you’ve been spending your life bringing about. They are more than just feelings of satisfaction or joy. They are defining experiences that make you know you are fully alive and fully in use as you were created to be.

The burdens of leadership never end, but neither do the opportunities for change. Leadership is hard, but the transformations that can

be brought by Spirit-filled transformed leaders is the stuff that literally changes lives and even history. And it’s for this hope of change that I first say I love leadership, and I love leaders. At times, as you read, you may not believe me. Because while I love leaders, I am, however, also terrified about the current climate of spiritual poverty and the cost

of failed spiritual leadership. Know that every hard word or thought I present has been—and will always be—first applied

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to me. Not because I am a masochist or a critic for critic's sake. (We have more than enough people critical of spiritual leaders today.) On the other hand, I can't help but be fixated on what the kingdom of God could look like on earth, as it is in heaven. That is the spirit and hope for which I feel so compelled to write these words.

INTRODUCTION

I was a freshman at Bible college when I first remember reading Matthew 23. I wasn't reading it for any of my classes at the time. I was reading in the dormitory stairwell. That's where I went to get away from people and spend time with Jesus. I remember it being the middle of winter. Frost had encased the emergency exit door and the window frame. The electric heater in the stairwell couldn't keep the Canadian prairie winter outside, so I had to bundle up to stay warm. But it was reading Matthew 23 that day that sent a chill through my soul.

God's direction in my life was extremely clear. The gifts and passions He gave me, the affirmation by people I trusted, and the natural inclinations of my heart all pointed to career leadership within the Church. In fact, God had completely reversed the direction of my life. My plan was to follow my dad and gradually grow into the family broadcasting business. I remember sitting in a small Methodist church one Sunday

when we were visiting family. There were probably thirty-five people in the service that Sunday. Our family made up nine of them. As I listened to the pastor preach, I distinctly remember thanking God that I would never have to do what this poor man had to do. Getting paid next to nothing, studying the Bible, and speaking in public every week sounded worse than a prison sentence to me. I remember thanking God that I would never have to do any of those things. But I've discovered that it really is dangerous to say "never" to God.

Ironically, years later I was at BIBLE college. I was preparing to be a PASTOR. Getting a bachelor of THEOLOGY was the first step along the road to be ORDAINED. I was in the process of becoming professionally religious. And one unsuspecting day, I sat down and read Matthew 23:1-33:

Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them. Everything they do is done

for people to see: They make their scripture prayer boxes wide and the tassels on their garments long; 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 ‘Teacher’ by others. But you are not to be called ‘Teacher,’ for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father,’ for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘Instructors,’ for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill, and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel. Woe to

you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say, 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.' So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started! You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?"

It rocked the core of my being. Here I was, preparing for the same career as those to whom Jesus directed this scathing rebuke. It was unfathomable that Jesus aimed this message at the professionally religious of His day! How

dare He, just a carpenter, speak to the religious leaders and elite this way? Yet, Scripture records that during His three years of public ministry, Jesus was most antagonistic and most adversarial with the professionally religious. Jesus was constantly compassionate with broken people and constantly confrontational with the religious. And here I was, committing the rest of my life to become the latter?

I have spent the past twenty-five years either working as or working with the professionally religious all over the world. I was trained to be professionally religious. I have a bachelor's degree in theology and a master's degree in leadership. I am convinced that if Jesus were walking and talking in the flesh today, He'd be saying the same stuff that Matthew recorded in chapter 23. Throughout history, the Church repeatedly takes the concepts of the humble spiritual gift of servant leadership, and over time, morphs them into puffed up and self-serving positions for the professionally religious.

In Scripture, we could point to judges, kings, priests, Levites, Pharisees, and even the twelve disciples. In the two thousand years since Jesus, we could point to early leaders of what became the Catholic Church, Protestant reformers, new factions, splits, denominations, and para-church ministries—

example after example where God makes something sweet, fresh, and new out of old structures and religious institutions. Yet, over time, the new starts to be familiar, the familiar becomes the norm, and we lose the sweetness and the spiritual intimacy from which God did the new things. Human nature starts to creep in, and humble servant leaders begin the slide into self-serving positional propensities. Even more tragic, wherever her leaders go, so goes the Church. The spiritual poverty of the Western church points to spiritual heart failure in its leadership.

This is not another book about leadership. We have more than enough great books about leadership. This is a book that is first for the professionally religious, and second for those who follow us. This book started off as a series of entries in my personal journal and has been unintentionally written over a period of a few years. Over those years, the Holy Spirit challenged my core motives with Scripture, in prayer, and through many conversations and other writings. This is not about the skill or practice of leadership. This is all about being as vulnerable and open as I can be about my journey in professional religion and the motives of leadership toward the goal of being refined and filtered. I wrote this book because I am concerned for my own spiritual poverty as

much as I am for that of spiritual leaders in general.

Such as journal entries do, some of these chapters will read in the recent past or present tense. Some will refer to other writers and leaders as they have impacted me, and I will be sure to credit the source where possible. Some of the chapters will read as conventional devotional thoughts, sermons, or blog posts, and some will read more like coffee table conversations. While this book is relatively short, it's not to be read quickly or in one sitting. I hope it takes you as long to read it as it did for me to write it. This book is also designed as a journal. Before each section, each chapter is listed and room is given for you to write a response. Jot down your thoughts as to how or if the chapter applies to you, and any changes you'd like to make in your life. You can also use this space to write your prayers to God or any Scripture that comes to mind. What you will write in this book is much more significant to me than anything I've written here.

What's my purpose with this book? Just as the book of Matthew was like a defibrillator on my professionally religious heart, my purpose and passion here is to reduce any appeal for career religion and to foster an ever-increasing hunger for servant-hearted intimacy with Jesus that can't help

but transform the world around us. The counteragent of professional religion is spiritual vibrancy.

Before we get started, I want to admit that I will be primarily exploring the motives of the professionally religious. And by professionally religious, I am referring to those who have made a paid career out of spiritual leadership: leaders who are seen by followers as the “professionals.” I want to look honestly at why the professionally religious do the things that we do. Motives are complex, and rarely do we do anything with just one in mind. We can have self-centered and selfless motives in any one decision at the same time. We all try to hide the self-centered motives and accentuate the selfless ones. I say this to fully acknowledge that the issues and deep places of the heart we will be exploring are not black and white. For all of us, there will be varying degrees to which we are challenged by these thoughts. There will also be some who have already been well refined in many of these areas.

Admittedly, I began my career professionally religious; I have been a recovering Pharisee ever since. God has had to jack hammer the foundation of my leadership values and pour the cement again. The following series of short thoughts reflect my conversations with God and with God’s people as He

continuously transforms my heart from being professionally religious to just—more like Jesus.