

Introduction:

1. Some of the great leaders in history are those who would never have been thought to be leaders.
 - a. Nelson Mandela spent 27 years in prison before becoming president of South Africa.
 - b. Abraham Lincoln, born in a log cabin and raised in abject poverty, became our 16th president.
 - c. Moses, at age 80, became the leader of God's people, setting them free from Egypt.
2. These are special men who are known around the world. But there are other leaders who also come from very unlikely places. These leaders may not be in the history books, but they are leaders, nonetheless. They are leaders used by God for His purposes. We are talking about leadership in the Lord's church—what we call "Leadership in the Most Unlikely Places."

The Lesson:**I. Leadership is for Saints.**

- A. Let us begin by addressing a fallacy: "Leadership in the Lord's church means being an elder."
 1. That sentence works if inverted: "Being an elder in the Lord's church means leadership."
 2. But, there can and should be many leaders—both men and women—in the church who are not elders. In discussing this point in a Bible class, someone responded, "Show me the verse that says a woman can be an elder!" (I had said "leader," not "elder.") For a number of reasons, a woman cannot be an overseer of the church (1 Timothy 3:1-7). But, this betrays a misunderstanding that "Leadership in the church means being an elder."
- B. Leadership is for saints.
 1. We cannot emphasize too strongly the need for leaders in a dozen areas of service.
 2. Do we need leaders in evangelism? Someone says, "That's why we hired a preacher; he does that stuff." While he ought to be a leader, is he the only leader? When a sister in the church begins to teach the gospel to the lady who lives next door to her, and then takes a young sister with her to the Bible study—is she not a leader? She is not only stepping up and doing the work, she is also mentoring (training) another to do the same work!
 3. Do we need leaders in caring for the sick and shut-ins? When a sister uses initiative in taking food to a shut-in, calling six other ladies and planning the meals, is she not a leader? I intentionally use women in these illustrations only because we tend to think leadership is exclusively for men in the church. Indeed, the woman cannot have authority over the man and cannot teach over the man. In fact, she has no authority over the church, 1 Timothy 2:11-12. But that does not mean that she cannot lead in these areas of service.
 4. Do we need leaders in teaching children? I am persuaded that we have women in the church today who are just like Lois and Eunice, 2 Timothy 1:5. Women who teach in the home and in the church are spiritual leaders, though they are not elders or deacons. How many men were first taught the gospel as a child—and they were taught by women?
 5. We need a paradigm shift—a change in our thinking. We need to see leadership in a very different light than what we have traditionally done. Leadership isn't strictly just for elders

and deacons. When a woman sets an example for God's children and for her own children, she is a leader in the kingdom. That's what Lois and Eunice did.

6. Can you be an influence for good among your circle of friends in the church? If so, then by the definition we are using ("Leadership is influence") you are a leader.
- C. Be convinced that leadership is for saints—and is not limited to a few select people.

II. Leadership requires Sight.

- A. Someone has to see the need that a friend has for the gospel. Someone has to see the need to care for a shut-in. Leadership requires sight. It often involves *seeing* what others don't see.
- B. Consider Nehemiah—a leader in the huge task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.
1. Yet, when we first meet him, he is the cupbearer to the King of Persia (Nehemiah 1:11).
 2. This man learned of the condition of the walls of the city and was deeply grieved over that condition, Nehemiah 1:1-4. He wanted to do something about this disgraceful situation.
 3. But this man is no construction worker; he is neither foreman nor a stonemason. What could he do about the walls? He was a man who carried serving trays. Maybe he could bus tables at a restaurant, but there was no leadership in this man—or so we might think!
- C. But Nehemiah was a leader. Leadership requires sight. He could see what others could not see. Before Nehemiah ever left Persia he knew what his task was. Even though he had never been to Jerusalem and had never seen the deplorable conditions there, he knew what his task was. Before he ever got permission from the king to go to Jerusalem, he knew what his task was. This man had a vision—not a miraculous vision from God—but a vision of what should be done and what could be done. Nehemiah saw what others did not see.
1. He saw **farther** than others. He saw Jerusalem's place in the plan of God. He knew the importance of this city to the *future* of God's cause. He had the foresight to look ahead. That's what leaders do. Can you see your congregation's place in the plan of God? Do you see your part in the plan of God? *You do have a part, Ephesians 4:16*.
 2. He saw **more** than others. He saw the possibility of rebuilding the wall and knew it could be done. Maybe some said, "What a shame the wall isn't rebuilt!" They may have said that, but did not act. God isn't looking for people who say "What a shame," he is looking for those who see the possibilities of what can be done and then act—and not just in building projects! God needs people who see the possibilities in evangelism.
 3. He saw **before** others. When Nehemiah went to Jerusalem, he convinced others to work with him in rebuilding the wall. They also saw—but only after Nehemiah showed them that they could do it! Maybe you can take the lead in showing someone the possibilities in teaching the lost.
- D. But why Nehemiah? Why not someone who was already in Jerusalem? There were thousands of Jews who already lived in Jerusalem. Why had they not rebuilt the walls? Maybe instead of making brick and mortar they were making excuses.
1. "I am working on my own house. Maybe when I finish it." Nehemiah had his priorities right.
 2. "I am just one person. The job is too big for me." Nehemiah was also just one person.
 3. "Nobody else is doing it. Why should I?" But Nehemiah acted when nobody else did.

4. "We've just sort of gotten used to the mess here." They tolerated the intolerable!
 5. "The job is too big for us." Are these people grasshoppers? It wasn't too big for the willing.
 6. "We tried it earlier and it didn't go well." When Nehemiah came to town they just did it!
 7. "Maybe God will send someone else to lead in rebuilding the walls." Indeed, that is what God did. But what a shame that he couldn't use the men already in Jerusalem to lead!
- E. Rebuilding the city walls was a massive undertaking, but it was accomplished in only 52 days (Nehemiah 6:15). An amazing task! But Nehemiah, rather than being a dreamer, was a realist.
1. He knew what could be done and did it! He began with the end in mind—a finished wall. He then did what needed to be done along the way to get the job done.
 2. In order for Nehemiah to be successful, he needed the ongoing support of others in his work, [Nehemiah 2:17-20](#). Nehemiah encountered two kinds of people in this text. There were those who opposed his work; and there were those who supported the work. Maybe not everyone can be a Nehemiah, but everyone can be a supporter of the Nehemiahs among us. Step up and support your elders, deacons and evangelists in their work. These workers (and all workers) ought to be appreciated for what they do! In so many churches, they are taken for granted. They often receive lots of criticism, but not lots of credit.
 3. Nehemiah—what an incredible story of leadership in the most unlikely places! While there were thousands of Jews in Jerusalem, a man comes all the way from Persia—a man who worked in a king's palace—and led this great construction undertaking!
 4. Have you ever heard someone say, "You can't get there from here"? Some people don't believe enough in the work of God to get anywhere. But, Nehemiah, from Persia, believed he could get all the way to a finished wall in the city of Jerusalem.

III. Leadership is about Servantship.

- A. That's what Nehemiah was. He was a servant to God and to His people. If there is nothing else gleaned from these lessons on leadership, learn that a leader is a servant.
1. Jesus is both the greatest leader and greatest servant of all time, [Matthew 20:25-28](#).
 2. We speak of military leaders—whether in the foxhole or strategy room—as men who "serve their country." Why? Because being a leader means being a servant!
 3. We call Paul a great leader. Why? Because he saw himself as a servant, [Romans 1:1](#).
- B. The story of a servant: sister Lourie Suits. A story of leadership in the most unlikely places.
1. She was loved by everyone at the Emerson Avenue church in Indianapolis. Our family met her in the fall of 1969 when she was about 75 years old. She was blind from age 13 when an unfortunate incident took her sight away. As she aged, Lourie was confined to a wheelchair by an illness that consumed her body. She had been recently diagnosed with cancer. Yet, when we had a gospel meeting she attended every service that week.
 2. We might think someone in such a condition could not be a leader. How wrong we would be! Sister Suits was looked up to—respected—by every member of the congregation. Both young and old would go to her for advice. Preachers and elders sought her counsel.

She was respected because of her love, kindness, wisdom and example of graceful aging. She held no formal position of leadership in the church but was a leader, nonetheless. In spite of her poor health and need for special care, she had the respect of everyone in the Emerson Avenue church. She was a woman of influence. That made her a leader.

3. Our churches are filled with women who serve God with the same dedication as sister Suits. You can name several in your congregation who are godly, kind and generous. You know women like that who are women of influence. They may have little or no money; they may not have good health or the sparkle of youth and vitality. But they are looked up to and respected as servants. They influence others for righteousness' sake. They are leaders.
 4. While everyone agrees that shepherds in God's church are supposed to lead, not everyone who has a position as a shepherd actually leads. And, conversely, not everyone who leads others has a "position" as a shepherd! The case of Lourie Suits exemplifies how a person with no positional leadership role influenced and touched the lives of many people.
 5. Sister Suits was a gentle soul who *reached out to others* and touched many lives; as a result, *others reached for her* in seeking counsel and advice. In spite of her many handicaps, she helped numerous people find their way home to God. She was not a shepherd in the congregation in the sense that elders are to be. But elders could learn from her.
- C. When you are a servant and reach out to others, others will trust in you and seek your guidance and counsel. You can help them find their way home to God. It is about servanthip!

Conclusion:

1. Indeed, leadership is sometimes found in the most unlikely places. And it is sometimes the people we would least expect who turn out to be leaders. But we serve a God who is able to do things with people—things we would not expect or anticipate.
2. Will you let God use you? Don't set out to be leader (not that it is necessarily wrong to have such aspirations). Set your heart on being a servant. Live a godly, humble life so you can influence others for good. Imitate the Master.