



Leadership from the Inside Out
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Love Strengthens Every Relationship

The Leader's Heart

There are days, weeks, even months that my heartbeat is weak, almost too faint to be heard even by God's spiritual stethoscope. If the truth were known, if people could see inside of me, they would be shocked! In these seasons, I am not inspired by love and a lofty sense of God's calling; I am just grinding through each day trying to get my work done and praying for God to reignite the fire. And I hope that no one will notice I'm one heartbeat from spiritual cardiac arrest. O God, search my heart. Rekindle in me a love for you and for others that will lead me to an inspired, passionate, and fruitful ministry. Strengthen my heart, I pray.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ... ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

—Mark 12:30–31

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.

—Matthew 9:35–36

You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

—Jeremiah 29:13

Christmas 2004 was different from any other. Most years of my adult life I celebrated the birth of Jesus with my wife and three sons. Those were glorious times of family gatherings, exchanging gifts, candle-light services, and playing in freshly fallen Michigan snow.

But this year my attention was two thousand miles away. I got on a plane for a rush trip to Orange County. My dad was dying.

The doctors said operating on his heart could kill him. But not operating would be a death sentence. He decided to have surgery, and all of us kids gathered around his hospital bed with him and Mom. We prayed for his heart, for the doctors, for a great work of God in his life, for healing. By God’s grace, through faithful prayers, and by the hands of a skilled medical team, my dad made it through the surgery, and his heart became stronger than it had been for many years.

During the winter of 2004, I was confronted by a simple and profound reality. When the heart stops beating, life ends. I always knew this, but it struck me in a new way. As I stood looking at my father lying in a hospital bed, it felt personal.

What’s true of our hearts is also true of our spiritual lives and our calling as leaders. If our heart stops beating, we die. Sadly, leaders

can mask the reality that their hearts are sick. Sometimes we can even fool ourselves into believing that our hearts are beating strong. It's possible to preach, hold board meetings, lead an organization, and appear to be very much alive long after we have gone through spiritual cardiac arrest. We all have learned that we can go through the motions of leadership with an empty heart. Love is our heartbeat, and too often our heartbeat is weaker than we want to admit.

How is your heart? Is it strong and healthy? Is it weak and faltering? Has it stopped beating altogether?

Symptoms Check

My Heart Is Weak

- I minister more out of duty than out of love for God.
- I can go days or even weeks without sitting at the feet of Jesus, feeding on his Word, or speaking with him in prayer.
- When I prepare messages, my mind is always focused on what others will learn, and the truth of Scripture rarely pierces my heart or stirs my passion.
- When I lead in prayer or pray with others, the words sound right to the casual observer, but they feel hollow and empty to me.
- I see the people in my church or ministry as a distraction from getting my work done.
- I find myself structuring my life in a way that isolates me from people.
- I have become so busy doing church work that I leave no time to connect with spiritual seekers.
- I can't remember the last time I shed a tear for a lost person.

A Passionate Heart

The question was malicious, fired at Jesus like a bullet. It was a test, not a conversation starter. “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matt. 22:36). Jesus responded, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (v. 37). Jesus emphasized that every other commandment comes after this one. Until we are seeking to fulfill this calling, we can’t do anything effectively.

Help from My Friends What Do You Do to Stay Connected to God?

Some years ago, I began two very simple practices that have made a big difference in my spiritual life and in the whole feel and flow of my day. First, when I wake up, I roll out of bed onto my knees. I don’t let my feet hit the ground, because then I will begin running ahead with all of my tasks for the day. I am a morning person, and when I get going, I can forget to put first things first. So I go straight to my knees and talk with God. This conversation can last thirty seconds, a few minutes, or sometimes longer. I have noticed through the years that this practice has helped me examine my life and keep good tabs on what is really happening in my heart. This simple discipline has become a physical demonstration, at the start of my day, of how I want to live. I long for my heart to be bowed down and for God to be first.

Second, I head to a chair in the study and open my Bible. I spend just a few minutes reading a short passage and meditating on God’s Word. I know I will sit there later and spend more time studying the Bible, but this is just a chance to calibrate my heart and mind for the day.

— Sherry Harney, author and speaker

A heart passionately in love with God is the starting point of a healthy life and ministry. This is why Jesus warns the church of Ephesus (and all of God's people to this day), "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place" (Rev. 2:4–5).

When God is no longer our first love, our leadership lives are in danger. When other things, even good things, take supremacy in our hearts, we are in dangerous territory.

It is so easy for Christian leaders to allow other things to become our first love. Almost imperceptibly, the needle of our hearts can move from true north, and before we know it, we have fallen in love with a false idol. Often this surrogate first love seems noble, even Christ-honoring, but it is a heart-killing illusion.

Consider some of the enticements that cry for first place in our hearts:

- Building a successful and growing ministry.
- Being loved by the people we serve and keeping them happy.
- Making a name for ourselves.
- Making enough money to provide for ourselves and those we love.
- Feeling important and valuable in our own hearts.
- Loving and serving the people in our churches or ministries.

The things that can replace God as our first love aren't always bad. They become unhealthy only when they take first place in our hearts. Leaders who plan to serve God faithfully for a lifetime learn to identify when they are tempted to let something else become their first love. We are building healthy lives and ministries when we make sure that God rules supreme and that our hearts are beating passionately for him. When his glory is our joy, when our hearts beat with his, when he rules with no rivals, we grow healthy as leaders.