



LOVE PEOPLE

HUMILITY

They and Them

Let's talk about *them*.

And while we're at it, let's talk about *they*.

Who are *they* and *them*?

They are over there.

They set the direction.

They make the decisions.

They cast the vision.

They set the standards.

They are the *them* who are in charge.

We don't particularly like *them*.

We're not convinced *they* know what they're doing.

We shake our heads.

We quietly whisper.

We know what we would do if we were *them*.

We would do things differently.

We would do things thoughtfully, or aggressively, or carefully, or boldly.

Whatever it is *they* are not doing.

Until one day, it happens.

We can't pinpoint the exact moment it happened, but happen it did.

Like it or not, we became one of *them*.

Now we are the *they*.

We are over there.

We set the direction.

We make the decisions.

We cast the vision.

We set the standards.

We are the *them* and the *they* who are in charge.

Others shake their heads.

Others quietly question.

Others are quite certain if they could be one of *them* they would do things wisely; they would do things well.

What are *they* doing?

What are *they* thinking?

And so the cycle goes.

Reality

Let's acknowledge a reality.

Humanity is not a blob, not an unformed crowd of chaos. Like it or not, humanity is organized in a variety of structures.

Families are not blobs, for example. They are organized differently from family to family, but generally speaking, parents are responsible to lead. They give guidance and carry authority. Some parents will take this more seriously than others, but even the loosest of parents make basic decisions on how the family will function.

Businesses are not blobs. Some person or people are in charge. Maybe there is a board of directors. Maybe there is an executive team. Maybe there are presidents, vice presidents, directors, and managers. Every business will have its way of doing things, but even the flattest of organizations will have some system for making decisions and getting things done.

Schools and colleges are not blobs. They have a system. There are trustees, school boards, presidents, principals, deans, professors, teachers, students, and student governments. Certain people make decisions, and others are expected to abide by the decisions that are made. Decisions may or may not be liked, and may or may not be good; but that doesn't avoid the fact that there's a structure, a system, a way of doing things.

Churches are not blobs. There are a variety of ways to govern a church. Some will carry strong opinions on which form of church government is most reflective of Scripture's teaching. Whatever method is adopted, a church has its way of casting vision, setting direction, making decisions, and getting things done.

Even social settings are not blobs. Somebody owns the restaurant, for example, and determines the norms. One restaurant is refined and quiet, while another encourages peanut shells tossed to the floor and banter drowned out by loud music. This didn't just happen. Somebody created a culture, a set of norms, a way of existing in that space.

This is reality.

And let's be honest, we get it; and yet, we don't always like it.

We don't always like it as a follower.

And we don't always like it as a leader.

Which creates a challenge because truth be told, we do a bit of both.



Like it or not...

We lead.

And like it or not...

We follow.

We don't always lead.

We don't always follow.

We do both.

Leadership happens with and without formal titles. One need not be CEO to be a leader; and truth be told, not all CEO's lead. Mothers lead their children. Friends lead their communities. A vice president leads her team.

Interestingly, leadership often happens simultaneously with following. The teacher follows the principal, but leads her class. The manager follows his director while leading his team. The CEO follows the board while leading the organization.

Leading and following also shift from one setting to another. The very same people leading in one setting follow in another. He might lead his company, but that doesn't mean he leads in every situation; which, without self-awareness, can create a host of problems for those addicted to being in charge. On any given day, though, it happens. We move in and out of various structures and organizations. Each structure has its roles and relationships, its norms and its culture, its methods and its madness.

Which would all be fine if it weren't for the realities intrinsic in both leading and following.

Problems

As followers, we don't like being told what to do. And let's be forthright; we especially don't like it when the person doing the telling lacks self-awareness, or social skills, or vision, or understanding. It's hard enough to swallow our pride and do what we're told. The challenge is multiplied when we're told to do something we think is in error at worst or not ideal at best. All things considered, we'd prefer to be in charge.

But then we are put in charge, and we discover a new set of challenges. Not only are we frustrated by others pushing their own agendas, but we are at times equally challenged by the difficulty of setting direction. We thought we had clarity; we thought we knew what to do; we thought we'd have crystal clear direction if we were just given opportunity to set it. But what happens? The fog rolls in, and we're not entirely sure what to do. What happened to the decisiveness we envisioned we'd have?

Pull all this together, and we need a little guidance. If we're to love people, we must give careful thought to the realities of the relationships in which we exist. We don't relate to people in a void or vacuum. We relate to people in a variety of settings and structures, all of which have implications on our relationships.

Let's consider a tension.



Tension

We've seen the tension of Yes and No.

We then considered Forgive and Protect.

Most recently, it was Exhort and Respect.

This week it's...

Assert and Defer

Consider it carefully.

If we assert and never defer, we are controlling.

If we defer and never assert, we are negligent.

Let's unpack these statements.

When relating to others, we assert ourselves. We say what we think. We offer opinions. We express our wishes and our wants. This is both normal and good; but if we never defer, never listen, never work to be understanding, we project a controlling and demanding demeanor that hurts rather than helps. We know this, and we know it especially on the receiving end. We want to know what others think, know their opinions, and we're curious about their wishes and their wants. All of this is good; but when thoughts and ideas are expressed absent any hint of deference, we sense their need to control, and we ultimately pull back or rebel. In the worst of scenarios, we begin to oppose the other person...not because we truly disagree, but because we're frustrated with his or her disposition.

The opposite has its own set of challenges. In any relationship, we recognize the need for deference. We must listen. We must understand. We must carefully consider the opinions and wants of those with whom we relate. We're good with this and want to do it. We also know, though, that in any relationship there is responsibility; and if we are overly deferential, we may, in fact, be negligent. Nobody has our unique vantage point and perspective. Nobody has our exact experience or understanding. If we bury our thoughts and are solely deferential, we may be neglecting the very gift we bring to the relationship.

What's most fascinating and challenging about this tension is not just how it applies to relationships in general, but the questions that arise when applied to where we live. Life has its roles and relationships. Within this, when do we assert and when do we defer? Yes, we know that leaders must assert themselves, for example; but what about deference? Should leaders defer? And yes, we know that followers must defer; but what about assertion? Should followers assert themselves? Even more, why is it that leaders, at times, struggle not so much with deference, but with asserting themselves—the very thing they should do best? And on the flip side, why is it that followers at times struggle not so much with asserting themselves, but with deference? Depth of insight into all of this will go a long way toward facilitating authentic love for people—not in a void or vacuum, but in the roles and relationships where we do life. To get this needed depth of insight, we must dig deeply into Scripture's guidance for both leading and following and the critical role played by both *assertion* and *deference*.



Deference in Leadership

Jesus led.

Did Jesus defer?

If he did, that would say a great deal.

Jesus recruited an ambitious bunch. They wanted to matter, to count, to make their mark in this world. We know this based on their actions. James and John, for example, came to Jesus and asked...

Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory (Mark 10:37).

These brothers were charting their course. Convinced Jesus' star was rising, they determined to rise right with him. As he gained notoriety, they wanted notoriety as well.

They weren't alone. Scripture tells us "*When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John*" (Mark 10:41). Context shows their frustration was not concern that these brothers were selfishly ambitious. Rather, indignation was driven by their own self-promoting desires. Not long before James and John approached Jesus, Scripture records that while they were traveling the twelve "*argued about who was the greatest*" (Mark 9:34).

Such positioning and self-promotion seems vain and selfish. Before we rush to judgment, though, consider our own actions. Are we different, or are we just socially savvy enough to know how best to jockey for position without the appearance of vanity? In their day, maybe it was best to be bold and upfront. In our day, an air of humility and self-deprecation is more commonly preferred. Internally, though, identical internal motives often drive the differing external actions.

It's critical to note Jesus' response. Following the request of James and John, and after the argument that broke out when the others learned of their actions, Jesus pulled them together. Hear carefully a critical line...

Whoever wants to become great among you must... (Mark 10:43).

What's fascinating about this statement is Jesus' affirmation of their deep desire for purpose, their deep desire to matter, their deep desire to do something significant with their lives. He doesn't say, "*Whoever wants to be great among you is ridiculous and selfish.*" Rather, he touches the reality of this deep desire, and points it in a surprising direction. Hear carefully the full context.

Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45).

That's fascinating.

Jesus redefines both leadership and greatness.



Consider the juxtaposition. Jesus led by serving. The world leads by self-serving. Jesus led by meeting other people's needs. The world leads by getting their own needs met. Jesus led by sacrificing himself. The world leads by sacrificing others.

In a word, we could call this '*deference*.' Truly great leaders do not serve themselves; they defer to the needs of others. They listen for the needs of others. They listen to the ideas, thoughts, opinions, and concerns of others; and then do their best to chart a course that truly serves. If we want to lead, if we want to be great, if we want to make a difference, then we do not do so by serving ourselves, but by serving others. Leadership by Jesus' standards consistently looks for needs and for ways to best meet these needs.

With that, take note of Jesus' commentary on the "rulers of the Gentiles." He said they "lord it over them." This language is echoed in Peter's exhortation to leaders in the church.

Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3).

Consistent with Jesus' teaching, leaders in the church are told to be "eager to serve" and to not "lord over those entrusted to you." The person who lords over another is a person who controls them. They "assert," but they do not "defer." Christ-like leadership listens to those they lead. They hear their needs, their ideas, their interests; and they do their best to meet the needs, consider their ideas, and weigh carefully their interests.

Assertion in Leadership

With that said, this does not mean Jesus did not assert himself, cast vision, give direction, have expectations, or make decisions with purpose.

Put simply: Leaders must lead.

Assertion trumping deference is on clear display when Jesus left Capernaum. When in Capernaum, Jesus healed many and drew a great deal of interest. Crowds clamored for his attention, his touch, and his teaching. The very next day, the crowds continued to swell, looking for him to do more for them. He had met their needs the day before; surely he would do so on this day as well. But when morning came, Jesus was nowhere to be found.

We're told "*while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house, and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed*" (Mark 1:35). When Peter and crew finally located him, they were adamant, "*Everyone is looking for you!*" (Mark 1:37); but Jesus wasn't swayed.

Let us go somewhere else—to the nearby villages—so I can preach there also. That is why I have come (Mark 1:38).

Yes, the crowds wanted him. Yes, they had needs he could meet. Yes, they would be disappointed that he'd left.; but Jesus knew his purpose. He would go to other villages because "*That is why I have come.*" He asserted himself, his purpose, his vision, his reason for doing what he was doing. He served the crowds, but was not controlled by



the crowds. He met needs, but knew when it was time to walk away from needs. Servant leadership is not being at the whim of other's wishes. Jesus met needs, but he did so in a manner consistent with the purpose of his presence.

Such leadership offers important context for Scripture's teaching on what it means to follow.

Assertion in Followership

Let's start with the less evident.

Should followers assert themselves? Should they make their opinions known? Should they speak up and speak out?

Consider carefully the following Proverb.

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed (Proverbs 15:22).

This Proverb, penned by King Solomon, acknowledges his need and desire to hear a range of views from those he led. As an ancient king, his word was law. He would know well the deference of those around him; but he learned, no doubt from experience, the importance of listening to counsel. For him to receive this counsel, the people around him would need to assert themselves. They would need to speak up, and at times, with great risk.

There may be no better biblical example of this than that of Queen Esther.

Esther was queen to King Nebuchadnezzar, the absolute monarch of Babylon. Not only was his word law, but to step into his presence without being invited was to risk one's life, even for the queen. Due to the twisted persuasion of an adviser named Haman, Esther's very own people—the Israelites—were marked by King Nebuchadnezzar to be annihilated. He was literally going to have them wiped from the planet. The King didn't realize, though, that his very own wife was Jewish herself; and Esther's family pleaded for her to forgo all *deference* and *assert* herself on behalf of her people. Hear carefully the words of Mordecai, Esther's uncle, as he sought to persuade her to lay aside deference and assert herself.

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this? (Esther 4:14).

Mordecai knew the tension well. *"Esther, if you defer without asserting, you may in fact be negligent. You may feel like you're doing what a follower should do, but in fact be neglecting the very reason you are in the position you are in."*

Esther contemplated the request, knew the deep risks, and boldly responded...

I will go to the king, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish (Esther 4:16).

So this bold and courageous women did the counterintuitive. She thoughtfully, but forthrightly made her thoughts known...



If I have found favor with you, Your Majesty, and if it pleases you, grant me my life—this is my petition. And spare my people—this is my request. For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed and annihilated (Esther 7:3-4).

The king was incensed, not at her; but at Haman. He reversed the order; had Haman executed; and the trajectory for the Jewish people turned from tragedy to triumph, all because Esther laid deference aside and asserted herself. Had she not voiced her opinion, not only would her people have been killed, but the king himself would have taken an action he clearly did not want to take once he was aware of the full implications.

Those not in the authoritative role, like Esther, must recognize and embrace the highly influential position they do hold and learn to steward it well. If we assert without deferring, yes...we can be controlling; but if we carelessly defer without thoughtfully asserting, we may in fact be negligent, and there are times the implications are tragic.

With this in mind, let's now consider what may be most challenging for many. Let's consider deference in followership.

Let's do so by addressing one of Scripture's most controversial statements.

Deference in Followership

Let's not avoid it. Let's take it head on.

Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything (Ephesians 5:22-24).

That's intense.

Very intense.

But it's also easily misunderstood.

The role of the husband is paralleled to Christ's role with the church. We just finished reading that Christ's leadership is not like the world's leadership. The world "lords" over those they lead. Christ led differently. He led as a servant. So if a husband's leadership at home is to parallel Christ's leadership of the church, it is most certainly that of a servant leader. The very next line makes this clear.

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).

Yes, the exhortation to wives uses language offensive to today's culture; but the exhortation to husbands is no less intense. Husbands are not exhorted to lord over their wives. Rather, they are exhorted to lay their lives down for their wives. Husbands love their wives by serving them, just as Christ served the church by dying for the church. Leadership in the home is anything but self-centered leadership. It's servant leadership willing to sacrifice one's own personal preferences, personal agenda, and personal comforts for the good of the family one leads.



It's in this context that wives are exhorted to follow a husband's leadership. Such thinking can leave wives feeling powerless and vulnerable, and such feelings are certainly understandable; but not only is deference balanced with asserting oneself—as powerfully modeled by Esther—it's also critical to understand the power of deference. Deferring to another will at times be exceedingly more influential than seeking control.

Consider common examples. Who is most influential in the office? Is it those who rattle on and on venting their opinions, or is it those with a quiet influence who choose to speak when it matters most? Or who do people go to for advice? Is it people in authoritative positions? At times, yes, those with authority may have the needed wisdom or insight. At other times, though, the one with the authority is not the most trusted source. Rather, the quietly consistent and faithful person will earn the trust and respect of many and be consistently looked to for counsel and input. The impact and influence of the deferential can be exceedingly profound. Scripture says as much. Consider the following...

The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler of fools (Ecclesiastes 9:17).

Yes, the “ruler” may scream and shout because those with authority can get away with such antics; but people see through this, and there's great power in the “quiet words of the wise.”

Such wisdom is also offered to a wife in the very difficult situation of being married to a man who does not share her convictions on faith. In such situations, the tension of *assert* and *defer* is often stretched to all limits as the husband and wife live by different convictions and values. Peter offers insight into these circumstances that could apply not just to marriage, but in principle to other relationships frustrated by differing opinions. As with other passages, the culturally offensive word “submit” is used; but don't miss the wisdom and depth of insight being offered.

Wives, in the same way submit yourselves to your own husbands so that, if any of them do not believe the word, they may be won over without words by the behavior of their wives, when they see the purity and reverence of your lives. Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as elaborate hairstyles and the wearing of gold jewelry or fine clothes. Rather, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight (1 Peter 3:1-4).

That's powerful.

Followers, Scripture tells us, will accomplish far more by the strength of a gentle demeanor than they will by controlling words. Such actions are counterintuitive, especially in situations where values and convictions clash. But when a person does the opposite in these situations, when they assert rather than defer, the approach commonly backfires, as this second, albeit colorful comment, from Scripture observes.

Better to live in a desert than with a quarrelsome and nagging wife (Proverbs 21:19).

Yikes!



This colorful description can cause us to either smile or step back, but we do get it. When we assert ourselves and take control by attempting to “fix” what we see needs fixing, we may in fact do more harm than good. The principle applies not just to marriage, but to all relationships. When we rattle on and on, rather than open a person up to our perspective, we may in fact shut them down simply out of frustration for the controlling nature of our response. Had Esther made it a habit of bursting in on the king and belaboring him with her opinions, he’d have developed a deaf ear to her assertions, no matter how good or noble they may have been. This will be true of friendships, relationships at work, relationships in the church, and relationships throughout a family. Much more will be gained by quiet deference complemented by well-placed and thought-filled words.

Let’s take all this and briefly consider how it applies to the church.

The Church

The church is on mission. In keeping with the mission of Christ, we “*preach good news to the poor...proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, [we] release the oppressed, [and we] proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18-19). It’s an astounding mission in which we are all invited to participate.

The mission is led by Christ. He is “*the head of the body, the church*” (Colossians 1:18). He is in charge. He leads and we follow. It is our job to “*do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do*” (Ephesians 2:10). It’s a stunning invitation. We get to participate in a movement that has been passed from generation to generation for thousands of years, which has brought liberation and healing to countless people.

In fulfillment of this mission, Scripture tells us that Christ...

...gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up (Ephesians 4:11-12).

That to say, Christ works through his people. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers work to “*prepare God’s people for works of service*” which is a fascinating application of Jesus’ very teaching on leadership.

The leaders—in this case referred to as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers—serve the church. They do so, not by doing all service, and certainly not by leading and controlling all aspects of a church, but by *preparing God’s people for works of service*. They equip and empower the body to be the body. That’s servant leadership. It’s getting into the lives of those engaged in the mission and purpose of the church, so they can turn and make a difference in the lives of those around them. It’s an anointed and synergistic relationship.

And it can be terribly frustrating when both participants—whether they be leading or following—neglect the tension of *Assert* and *Defer*.

Church leaders must assert. They must lead. They must set direction and give guidance. When they fail to do so, they shirk their responsibility and the church flounders. With that said, though, they must do so with deference to the church’s true



needs by listening to those engaged, by taking the best thoughts and ideas—not just their own—and incorporating them into the vision and direction of the church.

Likewise, participants in the church—true owners of the mission—must also assert and defer. If they assert without deference, they do damage to the church and the church's mission. Such participants aren't participating; they're controlling and doing so by setting their own agenda. Such actions cause strife and division in the church. Hebrews states this clearly.

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you (Hebrews 13:17).

With that said, participants in the church must also assert. The thoughtful and respectful voicing of their ideas displays true ownership of the mission of the church. This is having an idea and suggesting it. It's seeing a need and meeting it. It's reaching out to a person in need. It's being a conduit for connection. It's taking initiative and not waiting to be told what to do. It's stepping into the mess of another's person's life and serving them, even when it stretches us much further than we would ever want to be stretched. This is the kind of service Christ referred to as making a person *great*. It's stepping out of our comfort zone, laying down our lives, and making a difference in the life of another person.

Love God

So maybe we get this. Maybe we get the need to assert and defer in both leading and following, but there's more to it than getting it. There's doing it. Why is it that whether we lead or follow, both assertion and deference stretch us, sometimes far more than we feel able to endure? And most interesting, why do we struggle with what should be most natural?

Leaders, for example, will struggle with deference. We get that. They take on a position and fully expect to set direction and will, at times, need reminding to defer; but often deference is not the challenge for leaders. Rather, leaders often fail for lack of assertion. They thought they'd do fine; they thought they'd be bold; but then they are put in a position of leadership and fail to set the bold direction they thought they would set. Yes, they defer, but sometimes dangerously so. What happens at our core when we shirk our responsibilities and fail to truly lead?

Failing to assert is certainly not the only struggle of a leader. We do, at times, fail to defer. This failure lands us in the controlling crowd. What is it about leadership and responsibility that causes us to lead with a white-knuckled grip and fail to truly respect and hear from those we lead? The results can be tragic. Children don't thrive when they feel the clutch of control squeeze the life out of their existence. Organizations fail when person after person bails in search of a more life-giving and respectful relationship. Churches don't reach their full redemptive potential when a leader, rather than giving direction, controls every detail of the mission. What's happening in our hearts when we squelch the creativity of those with whom we're intended to partner?



Such failings are seen on the follower's side as well. Why do we fear asserting ourselves? Why do we fail to speak up? Why don't we think for ourselves and consider what would truly be best? Esther's example is clear enough. She feared for her very life. We, too, at times will fear for our jobs or well-being. Such concerns may be legitimate, but at times they're not; and there's something more profound happening in our hearts. What do we fear? Why do we silence ourselves? Do we fear being wrong? We will, of course, be wrong at times. Do we fear being right? As odd as it sounds, this will at times be the case. Being right means our thoughts will be adopted, and the attention associated with such actions may put us in the spotlight. Maybe we don't want the spotlight. Maybe we like the shadows. Why? What's that about?

And, of course, there's the challenge of deference in following. Why is this so hard? Why do we squirm our way around the leadership of others? Why do we seek to control when it's not our responsibility to do so? What's going on in our hearts when no matter what the boss says, we think she's wrong and will only do something if the idea originates with us? What's with our need to be the one who always has the best idea, always gets the credit, always gets the applause and respect? We may not think this is true of us, but let's be forthright. It's easy to point the finger at the failures of those who lead, but might there be times that our lack of deference is doing greater damage than we realize? Might we be causing division? Might we be frustrating forward momentum? What's happening in our souls when we refuse to defer and must be in control?

These questions bring us back to our center, our core, the ultimate source of our security.

If we are to lead, and if we are to follow, we must be a people who authentically love God. Left to ourselves, we will self-protect; and the self-protected life does damage because it is consumed with itself. If we are to be *great* as Christ defined greatness, then we must be liberated, we must be free, we must have God at our center so we are no longer consumed with ourselves and can consistently and thoughtfully love others with both our *assertions* and *deference*.

To get after this we must dig deeply, not only into Scripture, but also into ourselves. Where are we asserting where deference is best? And where are we deferring where our assertion is best? The exercise that follows is designed to help us dig into these questions and better understand ourselves. Are we controlling others by asserting when it would be best to defer? Or are we neglecting the gift we bring by deferring when we would be best to assert? If so, why? How we respond will say a great deal about our hearts and holds potential to revolutionize and heal the relationships we engage.

