Is everyone a leader? I love the story about a young woman who really wanted to go to college. Her heart sank when she read one question on the application form, however. The question was, “Are you a leader?” Because she was both honest and conscientious, she simply wrote a one word answer: “No.” She returned the application and expected the worst. To her surprise, however, she received a letter from the college which said, “Dear Applicant: A study of the application forms reveals that this year our college will have 1,452 new leaders. We are accepting you, because we feel it is imperative that they have at least one follower!”

We’re in the middle of a study about Moses, one of the greatest leaders in all of the Bible. In fact, you could make Moses a case study on leadership. There’s a gold mine of information about leadership in Moses’ story – far more than we can cover in today’s message. But let’s highlight some leadership principles from Moses’ experience that are very important for everyone. Remember, if you’re a follower of Jesus today, God is molding and shaping you just as much as He did Moses. God isn’t going to use exactly the same methods with you and me, to be sure, but God wants the same results.

Now, someone will say, “But, Rick, I’m like that gal in your story. I’m not a leader, so how can today’s message apply to me?” Are you sure you’re not a leader? Being a leader doesn’t necessarily demand a title – president, chief executive officer, owner, director, pastor, head honcho, whatever! One of the best descriptions of a leader is simply anyone who has influence. If you influence other people in some way, shape, or form, then you are a leader. How about at home? If you’re a parent or a grandparent, you are a leader because you have influence. How about at work? You can be the low person on the totem pole, but if you influence others at your job in some way, then you have a leadership role. How about students? If you have friends, you have influence. If you have influence, you’re a leader, then, in some sense of that word.

How about at church? If you’re a member of the church staff, or a church officer, or a ministry team leader, or you head up some program, you’re a leader. I learned a long time ago, however, that titles don’t always tell you a lot about who’s really a leader. You can have great influence and no official title. You can have umpteen titles and degrees and have precious little influence. Particularly in a church, you can influence others by both your attitudes and your actions. In fact, if anyone follows your example in anything, you’re a leader. So, don’t write yourself off too quickly when it comes to being a leader. When it comes to Moses and leadership, two Bible passages come to mind for me. Here’s the first one. What insight does this story provide?

EFFECTIVE LEADERS HUMBLY LISTEN AND ARE OPEN TO CHANGE.

When God called Moses to go back to Egypt and lead the Jewish people out of their slavery, apparently he went alone. His wife and two sons didn’t go with him. Instead, they moved in with Grandpa Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law. In the first part of the chapter we read, we learn that Moses and his family were reunited. They had a great time
reconnecting with each other. I suspect Moses was pleased to have his father-in-law see him now in such a prestigious and important role. Remember, when Moses fled Egypt at the age of 40, he ended up marrying Jethro’s daughter and working for Jethro for the next 40 years. Jethro had only ever known Moses as a son-in-law and a shepherd who worked for him. But now everything was changed. Moses was God’s chosen leader of some 2-3 million people. Isn’t it possible that Moses was just human enough that he liked his father-in-law seeing him as an important man and leader? Jethro indeed took it all in, observed Moses’ leadership style, and then said rather bluntly, “What you are doing is not good.” (Ex 18:17 NLT) Ouch!

Right at that moment, Moses made a key leadership decision. He could have gotten all offended at Jethro and said, “What do you know about being a leader? What do you know about taking two million people across a desert to another country? How many miracles has God done through you, Pops?” But instead, Moses humbly listened to his father-in-law and he opened himself to change. If you’re going to be an effective leader in any area of life – your home, your place of work, your school, your church, your circle of friends – you’ll need to develop humility and the ability to listen. Proud people refuse to listen. They already know everything and have it all figured out. It’s a waste of time giving proud people advice. They know better and they always will.

Now, I’m not saying that as a leader you have to follow every piece of advice you’re given. That’s just silly. But, by all means, develop the capacity to listen – really listen to others – and evaluate what they say. Especially listen to those who love you, care about you, want the best for you, and who want you to succeed. God has put those people in your life for a reason – just like He put Jethro in Moses’ life. When President Franklin Roosevelt died in office, Harry Truman, then the Vice-President, suddenly become our country’s leader. The Speaker of the House of Representatives at that time was Sam Rayburn. He took Harry Truman aside and gave him this advice, “From here on out, you’re going to have lots of people around you. They’ll try to put up a wall around you and cut you off from any ideas but theirs. They’ll tell you what a great man you are, Harry. But you and I both know you ain’t!” I don’t know if Sam Rayburn loved Harry Truman but he certainly gave him some sound advice.

I really admire Moses here. Despite probably wanting Jethro’s approval of everything he was doing, Moses sensed deep down inside that God was speaking to him through his father-in-law’s correction. Moses listened. He didn’t get all defensive or start to pout. Now, Moses didn’t start out being humble. No one does. The root of any and all sin is pride. Moses was a sinner just like you and me. He was one proud, “I can handle it all” young man until God allowed a 2 X 4 by the name of “Failure” to hit him upside the head! But by this stage in his life, the Bible described Moses this way, “Now Moses was very humble—more humble than any other person on earth.” (Num 12:3 NLT) He demonstrated that humility here, didn’t he? No man, no woman, no parent, no boss, no employee, no employer, no student is so all knowing that he or she can’t learn from someone who has his or her success at heart.
Humility can be measured in a variety of ways. One way is the willingness to listen to good advice. That willingness to listen implies, also, an openness to change – to consider the possibility that there just might be a better way to do what you’re doing. God was teaching Moses that He expected and wanted His people to change – to become more like God Himself in their character, in their attitudes, and in their behavior. If that was true of the average Jewish person trekking along through the desert on the way to the Promised Land, it was just as true of Moses, their leader.

God was about to change Moses’ picture of what it meant to be the leader of His people. When God first called Moses at the burning bush encounter, God pretty much did want Moses to do it all when it came to being the leader. Back then, God wanted His people to know very clearly that Moses was the appointed and anointed leader to lead them out of Egypt. But now that Moses was leading them toward the Promised Land, a change in his leadership style was necessary. Moses proved he could be flexible and change. Right there is a sure sign of an effective leader. It’s not about being wishy-washy; it’s about being flexible. It’s not about being all over the map, it’s about being adaptable. It’s the readiness to try a new approach if it makes you more effective. So, if you’re a parent, you don’t say, “Who’s she to criticize my parenting skills? She doesn’t know my kids!” You don’t say at work, “How dare he suggest that I could do a better job if I did it differently. I’ve been doing that job the same way for five years!” You don’t say at church, “What do they know about ministry? The way I do it is the only way it will ever work!” No. Effective leaders humbly listen and are open to change. I see another insight about leadership in this story about Moses and Jethro.

EFFECTIVE LEADERS DO WHAT’S ESSENTIAL AND DELEGATE WHAT’S ADDITIONAL.

Apparently, whenever the Jewish people stopped moving toward the land God had promised to them, and stayed put for a few days, Moses adopted the role of a judge. The people came before him with all sorts of disputes, grievances, and issues they wanted him to fix. They’d stand in line all day long just to get a few minutes of godly counsel or advice. Moses was everything! Not only was he the President and the Supreme Court, he was also the chief of police, county commissioner, and head of the water and sewer division. Not only that, but Moses was in charge of planning and zoning, transportation, agriculture, family counseling, and veterinary medicine! Somewhere along the way, Moses believed the lie that he was indispensable. As a direct result, he got hopelessly overextended. He’d become an ineffective leader. On a smaller scale, to be sure, that can happen to you and me too.

It’s easy to say, “What was Moses thinking?” But an outsider can sometimes see the obvious better than an insider. Jethro immediately perceived that Moses’ leadership style was ineffective and would only lead everyone – Moses and the people – toward utter frustration. What was Jethro’s advice? Basically, Jethro said to Moses, “You’ve got to figure out what’s essential for you to do here, Moses. What is it that you alone can and should do for all these people? Yes, you need to represent these people to God. Yes, you need to teach them God’s way of living. Therefore, you need to
choose, train, and develop some other high capacity people to deal with all this other stuff. Moses, you can’t do it all! If you keep this up, you’re going to crack up and these people are going to get even more frustrated with you than they are now. If you figure out what’s essential and do that, everybody wins!”

If you’re going to be an effective leader in any area of life – in your home, at work, at school, at church, or in everyday life – you need to figure out the areas of your life you can’t delegate to someone else. You focus on those tasks to the best of your ability taking whatever time you need to do them well. Where you and I usually get into trouble is discerning the difference between the essential and the additional in our lives. We get sucked into doing more. Or we assume we’re required to do more. Or we don’t want to hand it off to someone else who might drop the ball and make us look bad.

A psychiatrist and professor at Harvard Medical School who studies burnout recently surveyed a random sample of 72 senior leaders and found that nearly all of them reported some signs of burnout and that all of them noted at least one cause of burnout at work. The article quoted one chief executive for a multibillion-dollar company who put it this way: “I just felt that no matter what I was doing, I was always getting pulled somewhere else. It seemed like I was always cheating someone—my company, my family, myself. I couldn’t truly focus on anything.” That’s what happens to you, me, or anyone if we lose the ability to discern between the essential and the additional.

You can pay a high price by trying to do it all. Moses was a prime example. His inability to do the essential and delegate the additional was exhausting him, frustrating the people, delaying what needed to be decided, and allowing a lot of undeveloped talent to just sit around never being put to use. Just because Moses was God’s man didn’t exempt him from natural laws. Wise, old Jethro could see that if his son-in-law didn’t change his leadership style, his daughter was going to be a widow. You can love Jesus, be filled with the Holy Spirit, and be on your way to Heaven, but you’re still subject to the laws God has built into His universe. You can’t do everything! Your body, mind, and spirit needs so much work and so much rest. You can only handle so much stress and strain. Being able to organize your life effectively isn’t some kind of spiritual gift that only a few people possess. Being able to organize your life effectively – to do the essential and delegate the additional – is a mark of spiritual maturity.

This principle applies to every area of life. Parents, you can overextend yourselves at home. I had small kids and teenagers in the home once. I know all the societal pressures out there. Do our kids really need to be on every team or in every activity available? Our culture says, “Yes!” Does it really enrich them or just exhaust them and you? As a pastor, I’ve seen too many Christian parents put all those activities above attending church regularly or even just having the time and space to read a Bible story at home and talk about it. Figure out what’s essential in being a parent, hold on to it with all your might, and let the additional stuff come and go. We can overextend ourselves at work. Some people – particularly men – can easily fail to figure out what’s essential and end up losing their marriages and families because wives and kids felt
ignored. Imagine allowing your family to be destroyed because you failed to discern between the essential and the additional! Sadly, it happens every day.

I recall a story the late Dr. Robert Schuller told on himself. He was on some kind of whirlwind book promotion tour, visiting eight cities in four days. It was an exhausting schedule by itself without his normal responsibilities of leading the ministry of a large church. When he was going over his schedule with his secretary, she reminded him that he was scheduled to have lunch with the winner of a charity raffle. Schuller was suddenly very sobered when he found out the identity of the winner of the raffle. He happened to know that the $500 the person bid to have lunch with him represented that person’s entire life savings. How did he know that? The person who’d won the raffle to have lunch with him was his own teenage daughter!

Can you overextend yourself at church? Yes, it can happen, although in my experience it’s rare. Usually, most people are quick to identify church stuff as “additional” and cut it out of their schedule whether it is truly just additional or not! But sometimes well-meaning people don’t know how to share ministry with other people, and they end up doing too much. They get exhausted, irritated, and over-extended. God’s Word has the solution. It says every last one of God’s people have spiritual gifts – God-given abilities to do whatever a church needs to do to fulfill its God-given destiny and purpose. As a pastor, I’ve learned that sometimes it takes work to convince someone that he or she really does have an ability given to him or her by the Holy Spirit. But once they find that “sweet spot” - identifying and using a spiritual gift God has given them - their spiritual life just takes off from there! Effective leaders do what’s essential and delegate what’s additional. But Moses gives us at least one more insight into being an effective leader.

EFFECTIVE LEADERS LEARN TO DEPEND UPON GOD AND PRAY.

A second story about Moses illustrates this principle. God had done some spectacular stuff through Moses. He’d been God’s instrument to rain down judgment upon the Egyptians in the ten plagues. God had used Moses to part the Red Sea so that some 2-3 million Jewish people could cross safely to the other side. God had provided food and water for the people miraculously through Moses. It might have been very easy for Moses to conclude that he didn’t need to depend upon God consciously and pray. But in this story, the Jewish people faced a new and very dangerous threat. A group of people known as the Amalekites attacked them. How easy it would have been for Moses just to assume God was with him, not admit his utter dependence on God, and not pursue God’s help through prayer!

For two months back in 1988, Orel Hershiser was perhaps the best pitcher in baseball ever. From late August through the World Series, he had an earned run average of 0.60 and led the Los Angeles Dodgers to an improbable world championship. But this wasn’t the first time Hershiser had thrown so well. While pitching in the minor leagues a few years earlier, he had also fashioned a 0.60 earned run average going into June. Now, Hershiser had become a follower of Jesus and was learning the value of spiritual practices like prayer. But he recalls, "I got caught up in the scouting reports, what I read
in the papers, and the phone calls from the Dodgers. I stopped praying. And I stopped listening to God. I started going out with the guys and not really having a focus on what I was supposed to be doing." After his next three pitching assignments, his earned run average had ballooned to 8.60. Hershiser said, "It was like God had come down from heaven and hit me over the head and said, 'You dummy. Remember Who got you here. Remember where your abilities come from.'"

Moses had natural gifts as a leader. But he was nothing without God. And unless he consciously depended on God, his leadership would have utterly failed. Joshua led the Jewish people into battle while Moses adopted a very unique role. What was Moses’ doing up there on the mountain by raising his hands while the Jewish army fought the Amalekites down in the valley? It never actually said in our passage that Moses was praying to God, but that’s the explanation that makes the most sense to me. The Bible associates prayer with raising one’s hands. “I will praise you as long as I live, lifting up my hands to you in prayer,” (Ps 63:4 NLT) David sang in the psalms. “In every place of worship, I want men to pray with holy hands lifted up to God,” (1 Tim 2:8 NLT) Paul told his young friend, Timothy. Up on the mountain, Moses was reaching out in prayer to God. He was interceding on behalf of Israel’s army. Only prayer explains the powerful, but invisible connection between what happened in the valley and what happened on the mountain. Moses could have put his confidence in his own leadership abilities. He could have put his confidence in Israel’s military strength. Instead, Moses put his confidence in the only One who deserved it: God alone. Why did Israel win the battle that day? It wasn’t superior military tactics. It wasn’t because the Jewish army was more courageous than the Amalekite army. No, it was God working in and through the prayers of a leader named Moses.

Moses learned the limits of his own abilities. Any and every effective leader learns the same lesson. Do you pray about being a godly parent and grandparent? Do you pray that you have a godly influence at your place of work or the school you attend? Do you ask God to help you be an effective leader in any ministry you do here at church or out in the community? Effective leaders know that prayer can never be an afterthought. Prayer can never be overlooked or neglected. Effective leaders know prayer has a way of unleashing God’s power into life’s battles like nothing else. Prayer opens the door for God to do what is otherwise impossible. Effective leaders learn to depend upon God and pray – not once in a while, not just when they’re faced with some monumental crisis - but instead regularly, consistently, and faithfully. You could put it this way. Effective leadership is all about knowing how small we are and how big God is.

Did you know the National Park Service is celebrating its 100th year of existence this year? Go visit one of our great national parks! Another President Roosevelt – Theodore Roosevelt – had a great love of the outdoors. He was responsible for the creation of several national parks and monuments. It’s said that when President Roosevelt entertained diplomatic guests at the White House he was fond of taking them out to the back lawn at the end of the day. As the president stood gazing up at the night sky, all eyes would eventually be cast heavenward. In his day, the vast array of stars wasn’t dimmed by the lights of Washington D.C. The magnificent display of God’s
brilliant creation would overcome the party. After a long moment, Mr. Roosevelt would say, "Gentlemen, I believe we are small enough now. Let's go to bed." At the end of the day, effective leadership is all about knowing how small we are and how big God is. It means living every day consciously dependent on Him and yet busy at the tasks He’s given us to do while never forgetting the great privilege and opportunity we have through prayer to ask for His help in any and every situation.