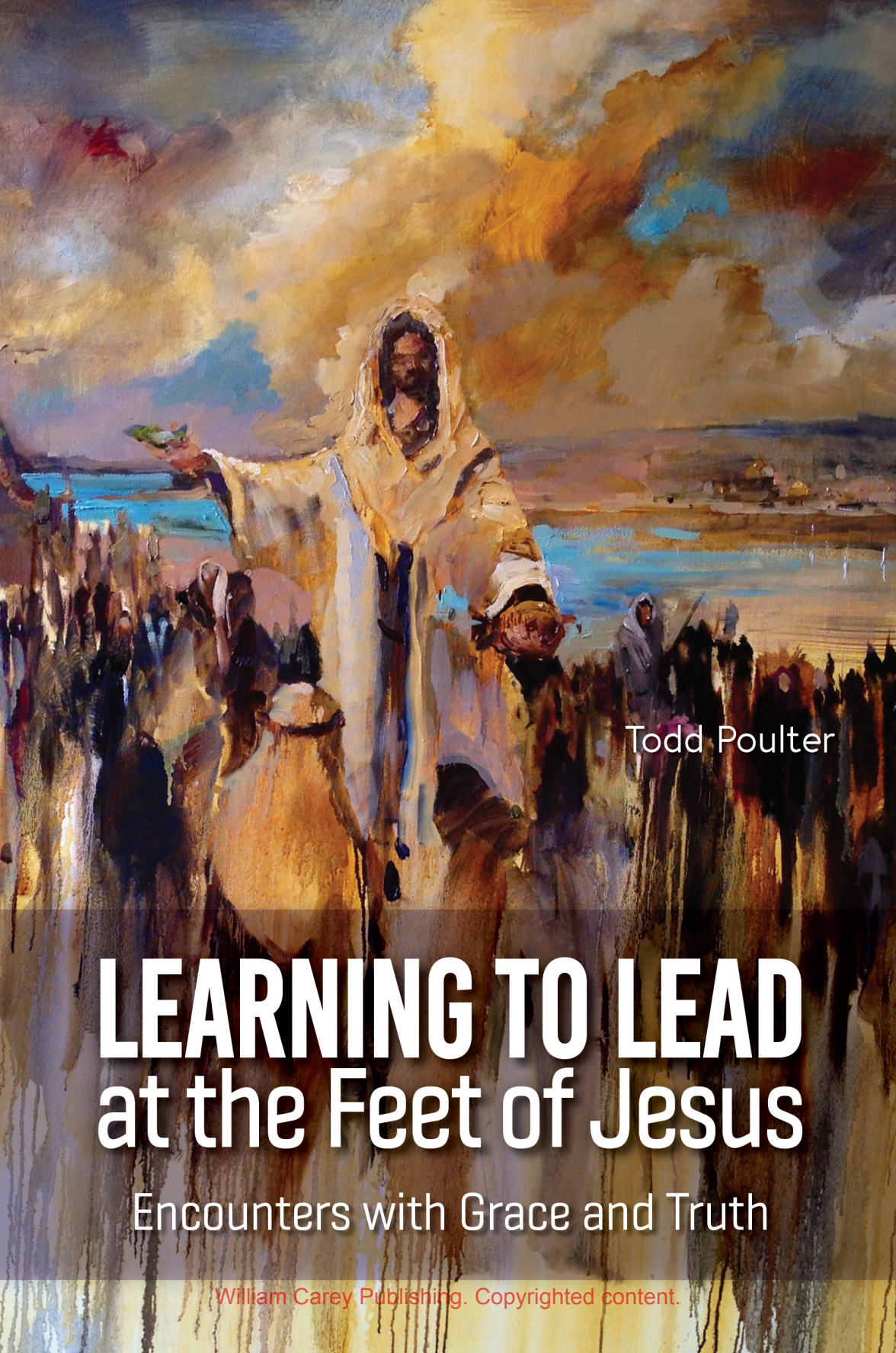


Todd Poulter

LEARNING TO LEAD at the Feet of Jesus

Encounters with Grace and Truth

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Learning to Lead at the Feet of Jesus: *Encounters with Grace and Truth*

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Chapter 1

A Submissive Son: Pleasing the Father

Vision for Jesus was seeing how the truth, as his Father showed it, touched life as Jesus lived it. —Leighton Ford[1]

Imagine a modern-day journalist going back in time and following Jesus around Galilee and Judea for three years. The first thing she would notice is the unmistakable power of his personal presence. He "owned the room"[2]—or the lake, the town, or the temple—wherever he went. His presence and his words compelled the attention of others. He was like a magnet that was both positively and negatively charged. He attracted friends as well as enemies, both of whom found him irresistible, but for quite different reasons. Some were drawn by the sheer weight of his personality, his compassion, his wisdom and integrity, his remarkable teaching, and his authority to heal and cast out demons. Others were infuriated by the audacity of his claims about himself and by his unrelenting challenges to the entrenched religious system controlled by the Pharisees, Sadducees, and teachers of the law.

Countless leaders today are on the lookout for ways to own the room in their respective contexts: to draw attention to themselves, market their messages, and exert influence over others. Books and seminars are dedicated to training us in techniques for how to amplify our voice above the many other voices out there. Numerous high-profile Christian leaders, or those aspiring to such a high profile, have perfected the technique of proclaiming Jesus and promoting themselves. They become the public "brand" of their church or agency.

Jesus' way of owning the room had nothing to do with such techniques, nor was he seeking attention or power. He had all the power he needed, and often got the kind of attention he didn't need. As a leader, his presence was simply unavoidable wherever he was, whatever he was doing: teaching crowds with startling authority (Luke 4:32), casting out demons a hundred at a time (Mark 5:1–20), healing every kind of sickness (Matt 15:31),

1 Leighton Ford, *Transforming Leadership* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 104.

2 "'Owning the room' means commanding the attention, respect, and action of others in a situation, [being] sufficiently entertaining, thoughtful, and intriguing to make everyone present want to pay close attention." Peter Khoury, "5 Simple Ways to Own the Room," *Magnetic Speaking*, undated, https://magneticspeaking.com/5-simple-ways-to-own-the-room/.

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raising dead daughters, sons, and friends (Luke 8:51–56; Luke 7:11–17), or endlessly debating with the Pharisees (Luke 20:20–26, for example).

As leaders, we may be tempted to put our attention and energy into learning techniques to help us own whatever rooms we find ourselves in. But I sense that it would give Jesus much greater joy if we focused on developing the kind of character and inner spirit that would be worthy of the interest and attention of others.



Jesus was clearly immune to the need to be in the spotlight and enjoy the adulation of others.

- *What made Jesus immune to craving the attention of others?*

As you consider your own motivations as a leader:

- *What attracts or repels you about the opportunity to own the room?*
- *What character qualities would you like to develop to make you worthy of the attention of others?*

Where Were His Papers?

Jesus had no birth certificate to prove his Jewish pedigree, let alone his Messianic identity. In its place, we have the witness of lowly shepherds from the hills and generous worshippers from the East in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Nor did Jesus have any ordination papers to qualify him for public ministry. Instead, a voice from heaven spoke: "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased" (Matt 3:17). He had many titles, but never held any ecclesiastical or organizational position. He was the king of a Kingdom that was as real as it was invisible.

When Herod locked up John the Baptist, John apparently had second thoughts about whether Jesus was really the Messiah after all. So he sent two of his disciples to ask: "Are you the One to come or should we expect someone else?" (Matt 11:1–6). In reply, Jesus sent John his résumé: "The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor." It's well worth noting that Jesus drew attention to the needy people who were the beneficiaries of his ministry rather than to himself and his importance.

He claimed the right to forgive sin, to grant eternal life, to judge humanity, to preside over the Sabbath, and to speak and act on the Father's behalf. It's hard to miss the certainty of his conviction as he summed up his parable contrasting the pious prayer performance of a Pharisee with the

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penitent plea of a desperate, breast-beating tax collector: "I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God" (Luke 18:14). His words carried unprecedented authority.

To back up his assertions, he raised dead people from beds, funeral processions, and tombs. He did wonders with fish, filling nets to the breaking point, multiplying a meager few to satisfy hungry multitudes, and even enlisting the help of one to pay the temple tax. And he stood up to storms as fearlessly as he did to the religious elite of the day.



In contrast to Jesus, many of us today as leaders do have papers: transcripts of our academic work, ordination documents, ministerial licenses, awards, and pictures of us with people more famous than ourselves. We have titles that go with our roles, whether simple ones such as President, Chief Executive Officer, Pastor, or Bishop, or more elaborate ones such as "the Very Reverend Doctor ___." Pastor's wives sometimes take the title of "First Lady," though I have yet to come across a "First Gentleman." Some of these titles are bestowed on us, others we have bestowed on ourselves.

Imagine you are required to provide your personal credentials as a leader.

- *What would you offer as tangible evidence of your right to be a leader?*
- *What would you offer as your intangible qualifications?*

Just Say the Word

One day as Jesus entered Capernaum, a Roman centurion sent messengers asking him to come and heal his servant (Luke 7:1–10). The centurion didn't go himself because he didn't consider himself worthy to do so. While Jesus was on the way, the centurion sent a second message: "I do not deserve to have you come under my roof ... But say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority."

This is a remarkable observation from a Gentile: "I too" (as the NetBible renders it) "am a man under authority." According to biblical scholar Marvin Vincent, "The words might be paraphrased thus: 'I am a man whose daily course of life and duty is appointed and arranged by superior authority.'"[3] It took a god-fearing Roman military official to recognize what the Jewish religious leaders refused to acknowledge—the authority Jesus exercised was a direct result of his continual submission to his Father's authority.

3 Marvin Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament* (New York: Scribner's, 1900), https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/vnt.html.

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As Jesus repeatedly declared throughout his three-year ministry, he had neither come on his own authority (John 8:29)[4] nor did he speak on his own authority (John 12:49). He knew that he had come from God and was returning to God. His identity and destiny were clear: he was the Son who had been sent by the Father to do the will of the Father. He had no agenda of his own. His authority came directly from his Father and from a life lived in reverent submission to his Father (Heb 5:7). His affirmation came from the Father alone.

The essential element that both liberated and constrained how Jesus used his power and authority was his unwavering submission to the Father and his purposes. Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, was "tethered by trust"[5] to the Father, teaching, forgiving, healing, and casting out demons under the direction of the Father and in the power of the Holy Spirit. His presence was equally God's presence and the presence of the Kingdom. In the context of Jesus' submission, the Father committed all things into his hands (Matt 11:27), affirming the reciprocity of their relationship.

Everything Jesus did—or didn't do—flowed from this crucial commitment, the indestructible bond of love, trust, and intimacy between Jesus and the Father. Jesus knew to whom he belonged and whose mission he was on. The mission of God was his mission. As the writer of Hebrews explained, Jesus didn't take upon himself the ministry of high priest, but the Father bestowed it on him as his Son (Heb 5:5). Jesus led at the feet of his Father, watching and listening to him daily in order to find the courage and direction he (Jesus) needed. *For Jesus, the ultimate indicator of the success of his ministry was the extent to which his actions pleased the Father and revealed the Father's character.*

Power, for Jesus, was an attribute that he not only shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit, but one for which he was also dependent on them. Both the Father and the Holy Spirit were present at his conception[6] and baptism. It was the Holy Spirit who sent Jesus out into the wilderness to be tempted (Mark 1:12). Forty exhausting days later, Jesus returned to Galilee in the "power of the Spirit" (Luke 4:14), not in his own strength. Jesus' ability to heal was subject to the presence of "the power of the Lord" (Luke 5:17).

All three temptations in the wilderness were designed to get Jesus to abandon his dependence on the Father, use power for his own personal

4 Compare John 20:21.

5 Boyd Bailey, *Learning to Lead Like Jesus*, 97.

6 As the angel Gabriel explained to Mary in Luke 1:35: "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." We do well not the miss the fact that the prospect of God exercising his power over Mary's body like this didn't terrify her, reflecting her confidence in his character and good intentions toward her.

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benefit, and prostrate himself at the feet of the Devil.[7] Jesus would have nothing to do with. In the end, these temptations actually served to strengthen his authority: he overcame temptations in the wilderness where the Israelites before him had failed so many centuries earlier (see Deut 8:3; 6:13, 16).

Jesus never quoted or referred to any other authority than his Father's. He needed no purification after touching unclean people. He didn't simply extend grace and teach truth. He personified those qualities. And he had the authority to give "the gift of God," eternal life (John 4, especially vv. 10–14).

The depth of Jesus' ministry arose out of the intimacy, union, and joy of his relationship with the Father.

- *What freedoms did Jesus enjoy because of his willing submission to his Father, and his desire to please him in all he said and did?*
- *What do you find most inspiring and challenging for your own leadership as you see Jesus' commitment to please his Father in everything?*
- *In what ways are you cultivating such depth in your own life as a leader?*

The Authority of Jesus' Life

Many of us would love to command attention the way Jesus did. His very presence compelled respect, if not trust. There was no disparity between his private life with the Father and his public life with people, nor between his teaching and his actions. Jesus perfectly exemplified the essence of the Greek word for authority, *exousia*:[8] "out of being."[9] This kind of authority, as described by pastor and theologian Urban T. Holmes III, "flows from the inside out and is grounded not in our status or role, but in our center of being, who we are. It is ... rooted in the authenticity of the person; he or she is who he or she appears to be."[10] Such authority had no inherent 'rights' attached to it to legitimize Jesus' actions. Yet objective observers recognized the unmistakable reality of his teaching and the equally unmistakable depth of his compassion. They saw his authority in his eyes, heard it in his voice, and felt it in his touch.

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7 Luke 4:7, where "the προσκυνέω [*proskuneō*] can allude not only to the act of worship but the position of the worshiper." NetBible, https://netbible.org/bible/Luke+4.

8 Greek ἐξουσία.

9 Urban T. Holmes III, *Spirituality for Ministry* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), 44.

10 Holmes, *Spirituality for Ministry*, 44.

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