

Tools for Wise Leadership

A programme of TWR-Africa, produced by TWR-Zimbabwe, presented by Rev Dr Roy Musasiwa

Series 10: The Leadership Style of Jesus

Talk 6: Breaking Customs

Welcome to the programme **Tools for Wise Leadership**. We have so far discussed various important aspects of the leadership style of Jesus. In the last programme we were inspired by the example of Jesus as a courageous leader. Today we want to pursue a dimension of courage that we would call custom breaking. Jesus was a custom breaker when any custom was either serving no useful purpose or when it was contrary to his convictions.

Myles Munroe was right in making a distinction between conviction and preference. When a belief is merely a preference you would not be willing to pay a huge price to hold on to that belief. Before I came to the recording studio I looked in my wardrobe and chose clothes that I preferred to wear for today. But if my wife had shown great displeasure in these clothes and had insisted that I change them I would not have risked damaging my relationship with her for a mere preference.

However I would hold on to those beliefs that form my conviction no matter what. Now Jesus was a custom breaker precisely because those customs were contrary to certain convictions that he would not change no matter what. And Jesus was willing to carry severe consequences for breaking such customs. One tradition Jesus deliberately broke for the sake of his conviction was that of healing on the Sabbath. He got into conflict with Scribes and Pharisees again and again over this issue. In John 5 Jesus healed a man who had suffered from a crippling illness for 38 years. When the religious leaders heard about the healing they did not rejoice and praise the Lord as we might have expected them to do. Instead they became very angry. As Youssef says, "They would have preferred that this man continue to be sick and hopeless for the rest of his life than receive God's mercy on their holy day."

Now this was contrary to Jesus' conviction. Jesus had always taught that love for God and love for neighbour were the two most fundamental laws of God. For that reason he was willing to break the Sabbath regulations in the name of love. According to him, people must come before regulations. On one occasion he challenged his opponents: "If any of you has a sheep and it falls into a pit on the Sabbath, will you not take hold of it and lift it out? How much more valuable is a man than a sheep! Therefore it is lawful to do good on the Sabbath" (Matthew 12:11-12).

Now what price was Jesus willing to pay for upholding his convictions? A lot. Just go back to the story of John 5. There we read that the Jews persecuted him and in fact even tried to kill him

So much for Jesus paying the price for breaking customs for the sake of his conviction. But what about you as a leader? What customs and traditions are you courageous enough to defy for the sake of love for God, and love for others? Here's an example. In many African cultures they say that domestic chores are for women. Now there are times when this custom is contrary to the law of love. When we had our first child my wife had to quickly go back to work because we could not survive on one income. We both came back home tired. How loving would it have been for me to sit and expect my wife to handle all the chores, including looking after all the needs of the baby just in order to fulfil a man-made custom? No, it would not be a loving thing to do. So I went out of my way to learn these chores so as to relieve my wife from too much exhaustion, even at the risk of superstitious people wondering if my wife had given me a love potion, which in Zimbabwe is jocularly called "Stay-soft".

Tools for Wise Leadership, Series 10: The Leadership Style of Jesus

This is but one of many examples of cultural practices and customs that we need to defy for the sake of our convictions. Another example has to do with the many rituals that take place at burial or after burial in Africa. In my nation a ritual that happens approximately a year after burial aims at bringing back home the spirit of the departed relative from its wandering. That *kurova guva* or *imbuyiso* ceremony is believed to be so crucial that failure to perform it would lead to various misfortunes befalling the family. As a result there is so much pressure from the extended family for everyone to participate in this ritual which involves actually talking to the spirit of the departed. The Bible clearly says that this practice is an abomination. And Isaiah 8:19 pointedly asks: "Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?" Although many Christians know such Scriptures they dare not break these customs for fear of rejection or persecution. It takes real leadership to defy ungodly customs out of conviction as Jesus did.

Jesus also broke customs if they were unnecessary or had outlived their usefulness. Matthew 15:1-6 is a case in point:

Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!" Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? ... You nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition.

Now the washing of hands was not really a requirement for the sake of hygiene. Rather it was one of the many "traditions of the elders" that had been elevated above the actual law of God. The washing was for ceremonial cleanliness, not hygienic cleanliness. It was an external regulation that had nothing to do with the condition of the heart. To Jesus it was therefore not important, and therefore he deliberately let his disciples eat without observing the ceremonial cleanliness. He accused the Pharisees and Scribes of neglecting the real law of God for the sake of clinging to the traditions of man.

Today there are customs which are no longer serving any useful purpose and are just standing in the way of progress. The tribal wisdom of the Dakota Indians says that when you discover that you are riding a dead horse, the best strategy is to dismount. But in modern business, because of heavy investment factors and sentimental traditions other strategies are often tried with dead horses. These include:

- Buying a stronger whip
- Changing riders
- Appointing a committee to study the horse
- Arranging to visit other sites to see how they ride dead horses
- Lowering the standards so that dead horses can be included
- Hiring outside contractors to ride the dead horse
- Providing extra funds and/or training to increase the dead horses performance
- Promoting the dead horse to a supervisory position

Well leader, just think about it for a while. Are you riding a dead tradition that is now standing in the way of progress? Maybe a long time ago that was a useful tradition. But now it is just being perpetuated because "that is how we have always done it before". Such customs need to be changed or adapted to suit the new environment. That is what Jesus did. And that is what Jesus would do today.

Our focus has been on Jesus demonstrating non-conformity as a leadership quality. It takes character and courage to avoid flowing with the crowds but rather to act according to one's convictions. But not non-conformity for its own sake; Jesus **did** conform when his convictions were not thereby compromised. But he did not hesitate to stand against customs that compromised his main principles of loving God and loving people. This is a good tool of wise leadership. Apply it to God's glory, and until we meet again in the next programme.

Discussion Questions

My the programmes on the *Leadership Style of Jesus* inspire you. Three types of discussion questions can help you refine what you learn in *Tools for Wise Leadership*:

Study Question 1: for Personal reflection

What does this episode mean to you personally as a leader?

Study Question 2: for Group Discussion

What does this topic mean you as a group of leaders?

Study Question 3: for applying the topic

What can you apply from this topic in your role as a leader?

You could invite local leaders to your office over a lunch meetings to interact on the questions for the **Talk 6 - Breaking Customs**

Study Question 1: Personal reflection

What customs characterize your culture? Do any of them compromise your faith in Christ? How?

Study Question 2: Group Discussion

Identify some world customs or traditions that compromise Christian conviction. What is the best way to go about changing adherence to them?

Study Question 3: Applying the topic

As a Christian leader what can you do to phase out community traditions that do not honour Christ?

Please record what you learn from each other and share this with other leaders on

www.facebook.com/ToolsforWiseLeadership

You can SMS or Whatsapp us on +27 60 362 4163.

Use the email address leadership@twr.org to communicate directly with us.

On www.twr360.org/programs/116/tools-for-wise-leadership you can obtain the resources for **Tools for Wise Leadership**, as well as on the mobile app for **TWR360** for Android or iOS devices.
