

The Leader and Opposition

September 2010 – “They’re big! And they’re good!”

Those were the words that recycled nervously from teammate to teammate as we went through our pregame drills. No rocket scientist needed here. We were outmatched.

Somehow our coach had been able to set up a game of the Biola University JV team against the UCLA Bruin freshman team. (What was he thinking?!) From the nine national championship banners (which ultimately became eleven) that decorated the rafters of Pauley Pavilion, to the sheer size of the players, it was a night of intimidation.

As these storylines often go, we played over our heads for the first half and trotted off the court at halftime only a couple points behind and with a measure of dignity (at least for the time being!). And then the floodgates opened in the second half. Need I go on?

It is not a leadership of power and control, but a leadership of powerlessness and humility in which the suffering servant of God, Jesus Christ, is made manifest.

–Henri J. M. Nouwen

So here’s the point. Of the many things that occupy the ledger of a leader, somewhere at the top of the list is opposition. Count on it. Take it to the bank. Leaders are regularly in situations where they are outmatched.

That being the reality, I offer one of the most fundamental and formidable lessons of leadership: Leaders measure the opposition not against themselves, but against God. That is, leaders benchmark the foe not against the limitations of their resources, but against the strength of their God.

This principle of life and leadership is headlined in the Old Testament story when Moses sends out twelve men to do some recon of the terrain God had promised to the people of Israel. After forty days of scoping things out, ten of the twelve come back with a scouting report that they are remarkably outsized: “they’re giants... we’re grasshoppers”. For their money, it was time to cut and run.

But two of the twelve see things differently – much differently. Joshua and Caleb, after looking at the size of their opponents, quickly turn their focus to look at the size of their God. In so doing, their lives in perpetuity shout out the bold reality that leaders never calibrate their opposition against themselves, but only against their God.

So as you conduct an impromptu self-assessment, are you signed on to the minority report or the majority report? Here are a few questions to assist you in your review:

- Where are you most vulnerable to the trap of comparison?
- Do you find yourself nursing an attitude of “it’s me against the world?”
- Have you restricted your vision only to that which is SEEN (opposition), instead of that which is UNSEEN (our all-powerful God)?
- Do you find yourself redlining on the exhaustion scale of trying to bring some needed change within your sphere of leadership influence in your own strength?
- Do you find it difficult to admit that you are outmatched?

As a charter member of the I’M-A-SLOW-LEARNER Club, through the years, I continue to be reminded that one of the key issues here is SPEED. That is, how fast do I recognize that once again I am in a situation where in faith I need to stop looking at my capacities and instead to lock on to the unlimited resources of my never-outmatched God?

Long story short. Life is full of opponents. Many of them formidable. But none of them as formidable as our God.

Lord, I find it so easy to default to comparing the opposition in my life and leadership against my own limited resources. Forgive me, Lord. At the start of each new day, lift my eyes to You and Your inexhaustible resources. Grant me wisdom to hold tight to Your promised provision.