



Approachability

The Passport to Real Ministry and Leadership

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Craig was well-equipped for teaching God's Word. He was committed to Christ, thoroughly educated, solid in his doctrine, well read, loved to study Scripture, and could preach outstanding sermons Sunday after Sunday.

He also saw himself as a gifted pastor. He loved to discuss theology, debate doctrinal issues, and tell people how to apply the truth of God's Word to everyday life. When people came to him with questions or problems, he prided himself on helping them to quickly get to the heart of the matter by identifying underlying sins in their lives and developing practical plans to grow in godliness.

The trouble was that as time went by, fewer and fewer people were coming to him for pastoral advice. He would have been shocked to learn that while most of the people in his church respected him as a gifted preacher, many had lost confidence that they could approach him safely with questions, personal problems, and especially criticism, no matter how graciously it was offered. So while Craig's pulpit ministry seemed to be thriving, his pastoral ministry was withering day by day.

Jason, a pastor in another church, was flourishing in both his preaching and shepherding ministries. He loved to dig into God's Word and prepare practical lessons and sermons, but he was equally passionate about coming alongside his people, understanding their struggles, and helping them live out the gospel in the issues of daily life. Like the apostle Paul, he had an "Acts 20:20 ministry," teaching God's Word "publicly and from house to house." His people loved him, shared their struggles, ideas, and even their criticisms freely, and together they were growing in their love for God and their passion to build his church.

Craig and Jason shared many characteristics: excellent education, solid theology, and a passion to teach and preach. But there was one major difference between them: month in and month out, Jason's flock had found him to be consistently approachable, while Craig's congregation saw him as being so distant and above them that they gave up com-

ing to him with their life concerns. Craig was a fine preacher, but he had failed to earn the relational passport needed to shepherd the flock God had entrusted to his care.

Countless leaders in other settings, whether the home, ministry, or workplace, fall into this same habit, which destroys their ability to lead and minister to other people.

WITHOUT A PASSPORT, YOU CANNOT ENTER

A passport is an authorization to go somewhere. There is no more difficult place to enter than the inner life and deep struggles of another person. If you want people to welcome you into their world—their real, messy world, not the smiling façade we all put up—you must earn a relational passport.

In order to gain a passport into the lives and struggles of other people, you must relate to them in such a way that they would answer “yes” to three key questions, each of which contains a variety of sub-questions that roll around in the back of people’s minds:

1. Can I trust you? Will you maintain confidentiality? Will you lose respect for me or judge me if I allow you to see how badly I’ve blown it? Will you be gentle and patient even when I’m exasperating? Will you reject me if I don’t do everything right? Will you assume the best about me or will you jump to conclusions and blame me for all my problems? Can I trust you with the “fine china” of my life?

2. Do you really care about me? Are you just politely tolerating me or fulfilling an obligation? Or do you really want to help me? Why? How could anyone love a person with such problems? Will you take time to listen to me? Do you care enough to push past my outer defenses and take time to help me sort out the tangled mess in my heart? Will you love me like Jesus does, even when I’m not very loveable?

3. Can you actually help me? Are you competent to deal with my issues? How are you doing with your own challenges and struggles? Do you have a track record of successfully solving these kinds of problems? What kind of training or experience do you have? If this problem is beyond the two of us, do you have the humility and wisdom to help me find another person who has the experience I need?

Every time a leader engages people, he or she is either building or destroying passport. Use a counseling story as a sermon illustration without fully concealing the identity of the counselees, and you’ve lost the trust of an entire congregation. Refer with mocking humor to a letter from a member, and you’ve signaled your entire flock not to share their concerns with you. Brush past a person who is clearly trying to catch your attention, and she may not reach out a second time. Jump to conclusions about the reasons for someone’s struggles, and the conversation will quickly come to an end. Give hurried or superficial advice and your people will look elsewhere next time.

But if you take time to be filled with the love of Christ and learn to look at your people with his eyes and care for them with his heart, they will grant you access to the deepest regions of their lives, opening opportunities for rich pastoral ministry.

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF AN APPROACHABLE LEADER

One of the most effective ways to build passport with your people is to deliberately and persistently cultivate the image of being an “approachable leader.” An approachable leader makes people feel safe; they know they are welcome to come to you with questions, concerns, or even criticism. In order to gain this image and reputation, a leader needs to deliberately put off “passport killers” and cultivate attitudes and relational habits that encourage people to open up and draw near.

1. **Maintain a “gentle authority slope.”** The Bible teaches that God has established authority arrangements in the family, church, workplace, and in civil government to maintain peace and order. As Jesus warned in Mark 10:42-45, however, sin often tempts leaders to “lord it over” others by over-emphasizing their own authority and others’ responsibility to be submissive. As Jesus teaches, the best way to guard against this tendency is to cultivate the attitude of a servant, seeing oneself as being below rather than above others (vv. 43-45). As servant-leaders cultivate the Christ-like attitude described in passages like Philippians 2:1-11, they can replace the “steep slope” of authoritarianism with a “gentle authority slope” that is easy for people to climb and invites them to bring questions, concerns, and correction to a leader rather than letting something fester.

2. **Fight pride and cultivate true humility.** Leaders often have more training and experience than other people. This strength can easily become a weakness if a leader allows pride to produce a superior attitude that thoughtlessly rejects ideas, advice, or correction. As Andrew Murray writes,

All want of love, all indifference to the needs, the feelings, the weakness of others; all sharp and hasty judgments and utterances, so often excused under the plea of being outright and honest; all manifestations of temper and touchiness and irritation; all feelings of bitterness and estrangement, have their root in nothing but pride, that ever seeks itself.¹

Many leaders conceal a proud attitude under a *demeanor of humility*, which is not the same as actual humility. One of the many evidences of actual humility is the inclination to “consider others better than yourself,” which results in valuing their thoughts and interests as highly as your own (Phil. 2:3-4). A closely related evidence of humility is to sincerely welcome critique and correction, no matter who brings the “observation” (Prov. 13:10, 17:10). Therefore, wise leaders regularly meditate and pray about the “pride and humility” passages in Scripture (see Prov. 11:2, 19:20; Isa. 66:3; 1 Pet. 5:5-6), asking God to help them put off self-confidence, pride, and every hint of arrogance, and to put on a humility that genuinely welcomes questions, suggestions, criticism, and anything else that might aid us in the process of presenting ourselves before God as empty vessels,

¹*Humility*, Andrew Murray (Wilder Publications, Radford, VA, 2008), p. 13

so that we might be utterly dependent on and fulfilled in him, which is the essence of true humility.²

3. Cultivate a Shepherd's Heart. The sheer busyness of church or ministry work can easily cause leaders to become distracted or aloof, which will send the signal that troubled people should keep their distance. Therefore, spiritual leaders must constantly pray for God to give them the heart of a shepherd, which is beautifully described in passages like Isaiah 40:11: "He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young" (see also Matt. 18:12-14). This kind of demeanor builds trust, promises safety, and invites people to draw near with their questions and concerns, rather than hiding them or broadcasting complaints to others. One way that I seek to apply this concept when engaging people under my care is to pray, "Lord, help me to serve so-and-so in such a way, that when she reads Isaiah 40:11 a month from now, she will say, 'That's how Ken treated me when I went to him with my concern.'"³

4. Guard against institutional dynamics that can undermine approachability. There are several dynamics in some church and denominational cultures that can aggravate a pastor's tendency to be unapproachable. A culture that has a *strong emphasis on theology and doctrine* can produce "relationally challenged" leaders who prefer preparing sermons over engaging people (which is a tendency in my own denomination). Approachability can also be undermined by a culture or polity that *minimizes congregational influence* ("We lead, you implement") or provides *no meaningful accountability beyond a closely knit leadership circle in the local church*. Such cultures can easily produce leaders who are not inclined to welcome ideas and suggestions from laity, admit areas of weakness or lack of competence, or be open to seeking counsel from outside the leadership circle. Similarly, a polity that fuels *political maneuvering between competing cliques* will usually produce leaders who are guarded in their relationships. None of these factors inevitably produces inaccessible or deficient leadership.⁴ Humble and spiritually mature leaders (like Jason in my opening illustration) can counteract each of these institutional dynamics, but only if they are aware of these pitfalls and constantly vigilant against the way they can undermine approachability.

5. See God's people as he does. One of the most effective antidotes to personal or institutional attitudes that undermine approachability is to cultivate the habit of viewing

²Two books I recommend on cultivating humility are: *Humility*, Andrew Murray (Wilder Publications, Radford, VA, 2008), and *Humility: True Greatness*, CJ Mahaney (Multnomah, Sisters, OR, 2005).

³For superb insights into the biblical concept of shepherd leadership, I highly recommend *While Shepherds Watch Their Flocks*, Tim Laniak (ShepherdLeader Publications, 2007).

⁴As Ed Clowney wisely wrote, "Better by far are imperfect structures in the hands of devoted servants of Christ than the most biblical form of church government practiced in pride or in a loveless and vindictive spirit." (*The Church*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, 1995, p. 202)

the members of your church as God does: as people made “in the image of God” (Gen. 1:27), as “God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved,” (Col. 3:12), as “a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (1 Pet. 2:9), as people who have been “lavished with all wisdom and understanding” (Eph. 1:8), who are filled with the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 6:19) and are “competent to instruct one another” and “to judge ... the things of this life” (Rom. 15:14; 1 Cor. 6:3). When leaders remember that these types of descriptive phrases apply to all of the saints, not just to ordained leaders, they will be more inclined to humbly welcome questions, suggestions, and even correction from anyone in whom Jesus’ Spirit dwells.

6. Send convincing signals that you have time for people. As busy as he was, Jesus had the remarkable ability to send constant signals that he had time for people. The Samaritan woman, the rich young man, Nicodemus, Mary and Martha... all of them sensed that they could ask for his time and not be brushed aside because he was too busy for them. There are many ways to send these kinds of signals. Explicit reassurances of interest and availability need to be reinforced by an unrushed demeanor, relaxed body language, asking questions and patiently listening to answers, and sometimes by pulling out your cell phone and asking your secretary to reschedule an appointment “because something important has come up.”

7. Be transparent. People are usually reluctant to share their problems with leaders who seem to have their lives so figured out that they would not be able to relate to someone who is struggling with uncertainty, failure, or sin. But when a leader imitates people like the apostle Paul (see Rom. 7:7-25; 1 Tim. 1:15-17), and talks openly about his own weaknesses and struggles, and God’s redeeming grace, his flock can approach him as a brother who will understand and have compassion on those who are walking a similar road.

8. Pick up on hints. Troubled people often hesitate to lay all of their concerns out at once. Instead, they will drop hints of an issue and wait to see how you respond. If you brush past their words, they will pull back into themselves and look elsewhere for a caring ear. But if you show concern for even the hint of distress (“*How are you today?*” “*Oh, I’ve been better,*” “*What’s going on?*” “*Oh, it’s no big deal, just some problems with the kids*” “*Hey, I’m a parent too, and I know that can be a very big deal. Can I buy you a cup of coffee so you can tell me about it?*”), people may let you in on the pivotal issues of their lives (“*Well, last night my son made me so mad that I told him I could hardly wait for him to graduate and leave home. He didn’t come home from school today and we don’t know where he is*”). Picking up on a small hint can lead to life-changing ministry.

9. See the good in others (even if it seems outweighed by the bad). People with problems or complaints are naturally defensive and sometimes offensive. As long as they feel vulnerable to being criticized, their walls will be up. One of the best ways to relieve

tension or fear is to draw attention to the evidences of God's grace in someone else's life, even when serious sin is also evident. Here again the apostle Paul sets a superb example. Knowing that he must bring correction to the incredibly messed-up church in Corinth, he begins his first letter with these astonishing words:

I always thank God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way--in all your speaking and in all your knowledge--because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful (1 Cor. 1: 4-9; cf. Phil. 4:8-9).

When people know from experience that you prefer and delight to focus on God's grace in their lives, they will be more willing to pull back the curtain on areas that need more of that grace.

10. Listen deeply before jumping to problem-solving. People often know what they should do to solve a problem, but sometimes they still need to lay the situation out before someone who will listen compassionately and make them feel that they have been heard and understood. Therefore, people are much more likely to open up to a leader who has developed the discipline of listening patiently and deeply, and offering solutions only after others have shared all they want to reveal and are ready to explore solutions (see Prov. 18:13).

11. Be quick to confess sins, whether large or small. When people confront a leader with a mistake or sin that is embarrassing or seems insignificant, natural defensiveness will often tempt the leader to minimize the wrong or explain it away. An insecure leader may even shift the focus to an improper attitude or perception in the accuser ("What is going on in your heart that would cause you to find fault with me?"). This type of response will either provoke a debate or stifle discussion, both of which will confirm that it is a waste of time to approach that leader. Therefore, a wise leader will listen patiently to complaints, pray for God's help in discerning any truth in them, even if only a grain, and then model humility by sincerely confessing that wrong and thanking the brother or sister for drawing it to his attention (see Matt. 7:3-4; Prov. 15:32, 17:10; see the booklet *The Cross and Criticism*).

12. Be slow to confront sin in others. When people are confused, suffering, dissatisfied, or feeling they have been wronged, they have often contributed to their problem in some way; it is equally likely that they may speak sinfully as they unload their complaints to others. Unless there is a clear danger of irreparable harm, it is usually helpful to give people uninterrupted time to get their thoughts and feelings out in the open,

even if they are tainted with sin, so that you can accurately discern the issues that are burdening them. Once you have demonstrated your concern and compassion through patient listening, people will generally be more open to hearing words of counsel or correction (see John 4:1-30).

13. Make yourself truly accountable to others. If people believe that they will have to convince you all on their own that you are wrong about something, they may not even try to speak to you, especially if you have strong verbal skills. But if they know that you are accountable to other leaders in the church, who can be called in to help address unresolved issues, most people will be more inclined make the attempt to engage you on points of concern or disagreement. Therefore, a wise leader will make an earnest effort to demonstrate that he or she is genuinely accountable to other leaders who have the strength and willingness to deal candidly and thoroughly with questionable issues in his life (see the booklet, *Accountability: The Mark of a Wise and Protected Leader*).

GET AN “APPROACHABILITY CHECKUP”

Even when leaders sincerely want to be approachable, they are often blind to the ways that they push people away. (This is certainly true of me!) If you have the courage to learn how approachable you are, there are several tests you can take.

1. First, read through this article a second time and ask God to help you evaluate yourself on each of the listed characteristics.

2. Second, give your spouse and children a copy of this article and ask them to give you feedback on each of the qualities listed above. Encourage them to give you specific examples of your strengths or weaknesses in each area.

3. Third, meet with your leadership team and assess your institutional culture, asking whether any of the polity or cultural dynamics described above may be undermining your approachability. Then evaluate yourselves as individuals and as a team, giving thanks for good examples of approachability and confessing areas of weakness.

4. Fourth, have the courage to go beyond your inner circle and ask for input from people who have the courage to tell you things, like the Sunday school teacher who always questions your ideas, or the member who has been cool since that meeting in your office a few months ago. (Every time I’ve done this exercise myself, I have been convicted to learn that others don’t see me as being nearly as approachable as I imagine they do.)⁵

⁵You can begin this process with an email like this: “Dear ___, I would like your assistance in gaining an accurate assessment of how “approachable” I am to other people. Therefore, I would appreciate it if you would do me the great favor of reading the attached article and giving me your candid feedback on how approachable I am in your eyes. You may do this in any way that is comfortable for you, whether offering some general observations, or evaluating me in light of any or all of the characteristics described in the attached article. It would be especially helpful if you could provide specific examples that illustrate my strengths or weaknesses in any of these areas. I sincerely want to become more approachable to others, so the more candid and specific your feedback, the better. Thank you!”

5. Fifth, if you (either individually or as a leadership team) want truly candid and inhibited feedback, provide a way for people to communicate their thoughts to you without fear of later being reproached or marginalized for saying something that you may not like to hear. One way to do this is to commission one or two uniformly trusted members in your church or ministry to meet with a variety of people and listen to their candid feedback on your approachability, with the assurance that their comments will be presented to you as a composite rather than being identified with specific individuals. Although this approach falls short of the ideal of forthright individual communication, it follows a well established biblical principle of having mediators diffuse intimidating encounters (Ex.20:18-19; 1 Sam. 19:1-6; 1 Tim. 2:5) and will usually provide much more robust, specific, and reliable information by not putting individuals in a threatening position.

6. Finally, ask God to help you take others' insights and advice to heart. Confess specific failures to individuals you've offended. If God opens your eyes to a pattern of weaknesses that have impacted many people, ask him to give you the humility and courage to confess to that entire group. If this requires confessing to an entire congregation, you may be able to do so as part of a sermon on "The Grace of Christ-Like Approachability" (which is a quality that every Christian should cultivate, especially if they are in a position of authority, whether in the family, church, or workplace).

Becoming an approachable leader and earning passport into others' lives is no easy task. The very qualities that cause others to recognize a person as a leader can also result in an image or demeanor that keeps others closed off and distant. No one was more likely to have such an aura than Jesus. Yet his humility, love, and desire to connect intimately with others were so strong that people were constantly drawn into the safety of his presence and desirous of having him enter deeply into their lives. If you are a leader, I encourage you to make it your life-long pursuit to draw on God's grace and develop this same approachability in your life.

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