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*International Forum*  
*Vol. 24, No. 2*  
*December 2021*  
*pp. 21-35*

**FEATURE**

**Reframing Leadership with a Focus on  
Inner Space Development**

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**Abstract.** *Humanity is facing a complex set of challenges in an increasingly uncertain, radical, and volatile world. To thrive, it needs leadership that manifests more positive outcomes from the leader's inner space. Through the lens of both transformational and servant leadership theories, this article argues that knowing what a leader does and what factors or behaviors demonstrate a particular leadership theory or style does not lead to enacting that style. There has to be a developmental formula that goes deeper than just looking at behaviors (Watkins, 2014). Leadership development cannot be separated from the development of the leader as a human being, no matter the nature of the organization that someone leads. Further, this paper argues that leader development must go deeper than behaviors associated with a particular theory (the common focus of scholarship) into the inner place from where all actions and behaviors flow—the heart. Science reveals much about the heart—the inner space of the leader. For instance, ancient wisdom, sacred writings, and growing scholarly discussions have always pointed to this truth. This article explores the concept of the heart and offers a biblical outlook on the growth of effective leadership through the cultivation of the leader's heart.*

**Keywords:** leadership, inner place, heart, servant leadership, transformational leadership, biblical leadership

**Introduction**

The traditional notions of leadership are no longer serving humanity well. Globally, there is a feeling that the challenges facing humanity are due to a lack of leadership (Adeyemi, 2017; Cann, 2014; Tourish, 2020). One can ask why

leadership is still an issue—with more than one hundred years of leadership theory, many approaches to leadership and thousands of writings on the subject, and industry spending billions of dollars annually on leadership development (Westfall, 2019). The critics of current leadership theory and practice argue that even though there are many leadership theories, styles, and approaches, most work still focuses on the same perspective of peripheral issues, which include traits, style, greatness, and content of leadership without considering the essential nature of leadership (By, 2021; Drath et al., 2008; Kempster & Jackson, 2021). The need for an urgent focus on the essential nature of leadership may take on three aspects; an appreciation that the old paradigm of leadership in which most of the leadership theory is rooted needs to be updated. Leadership is understood as a process of influence by someone on many people for specific goals. What this assumption does is to create an impression that leadership is the responsibility of one and the followers are just passive actors. The effect of this understanding can be seen in organizations where all leadership training is focused on persons with authority and very little on the role of followers in the leadership process. The second effect of this assumption is in the effects on society. For instance, since independence, African countries have had several elections with different people in leadership, but the problems of corruption, tribalism, and unequal resources still persist. It can be inferred that once leaders are elected, the followers become passive; leaving all to the discretion of the leader (Adeyemi, 2017). Therefore, to focus on the essential nature of leadership, the very definition of leadership needs to be updated. This issue is not limited to Africa. Humanity is facing bigger challenges which the United Nations (UN) has reframed into the UN Sustainable Development Goals that require all hands-on deck and is calling on corporations to take the lead in meeting them. The same paradigms that led to bigger and bigger corporations at the expense of all else cannot necessarily provide the solutions to the results currently required for sustainability.

The second aspect in the old paradigm that needs an urgent refocus is the disconnection between leadership theory and research and leadership development. Day et al (2014) argue that leadership theory and research is more than a century old; yet, research and theory in leadership development is much younger than this. This concern is captured clearly by Scharmer (2008), saying, “We are sightless to the source of effective leadership and social action. That is to say we are knowledgeable about what leaders do and how they do it” (p. 52). However, we do not know much about the inner place, the source from which they function. It is important to ascertain that knowing leadership theory does not equal leadership development. Leadership development “seeks to understand, predict and intervene effectively in addressing the questions of how individuals develop as leaders and how collections of individuals develop a capacity for leadership” (Day et al., 2021, p. 300). In the era of information overload and dynamic, volatile change, it is more profitable for organizations to connect the dots fully.

The third aspect of the old paradigm that needs a refocus is closely related to the second one where leadership development is heavily practitioner-oriented and based in competency models that emphasize behavioral attributes (Jacquart et al., 2021) without going far enough to seek to understand where behaviors originate from. Developing people involves change and therefore, aspects of developmental psychology must be brought into consideration. This article focuses on the second and third aspects with a biblical orientation.

This paper explores this knowledge gap in current leadership theory and practice and offers a parallel perspective of how leadership may be made more effective for more positive outcomes for the majority by fostering the importance and development of the heart of the leader. For instance, if an organization would like to use transformational leadership, it is important to know the “how” of developing that capacity rather than relying on the many competencies-based solutions that are available in the market today. Exploring the inner place, from whence behavior originates, provides a framework that can lead to results that the world is seeking, enacted by the Sustainable Development Goals. The paper further argues that this inner space, called the inner ring or the heart of the leader, is significant to successful Christian leadership because this is where humility and spirituality come from (Burke, 2004; Miller, 2013). How are current leadership theory and development not heavily focused on this inner place? Why could many leaders and leadership experts not emphasize this important dimension massively? This article attempts to address these and other related questions. It is with the hope that leaders in various types of organizations can optimize their attention on this knowledge gap.

Society has framed leadership as one issue, yet leadership is a combination of two different constructs: the constructs of “who” and “what.” This has created an assumption that leadership can be developed and practiced without detailed consideration of the person to practice the leadership. This paper, however, proposes that only the “who” that is fully transformed can lead as a transformational leader in any organization. The “who” discussed in this paper is not just about the innate capability as discussed only in the trait approach (which does not necessarily include the spiritual aspect)—this “who” is much more holistic than discussed in the trait approach to leadership. The “who” that is a servant can practice servant leadership and the “who” that is authentic and can practice authentic leadership. This discussion requires going back to the “who” before people can talk about the “what”; that is, understanding the leader who is a Christian human being before talking about leadership—the human being and his/her practice of leading as a vocation, activity, or work. This paper calls for a deeper and critical look at the inner space of the leader.

The work done on leader development has focused on the attributes that a leader requires and does not always give equal emphasis to the inner place of the leader (Blanchard, 2019). In fact, “as many books, as there are out there focused on

helping leaders enhance their skills, there are far fewer written to help the leader with the all-important self-work—the part on the inside” (Miller, 2013, p. 1). Many leadership development programs and theories focus on building the skills of practicing a certain style of leadership; however, the inner place can no longer be ignored to manifest that leadership positively. It is no wonder that transformational leadership can be both negative and positive. This speaks to the critical importance of illuminating the inner place from where leadership comes from and making its cultivation a central part of any leadership development.

### **Leadership Theory and Practice**

There is a lot of positive contribution that current leadership theory and practice have made to the understanding of leadership. These theories are ever relevant but perhaps insufficient in environments that are unstable, radical, and increasingly volatile. By (2021) argues that even though there are as many leadership definitions as there are scholars and practitioners involved in the field, they tend to gravitate around the functions of the leader, followers, and shared goals. Northouse (2019) defines leadership as “a process whereby an individual influence a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (Northouse, 2019, p. 5). Taking this central definition of leadership, the flow in the popular models of leadership becomes apparent. How can the development of this process be removed from the development of the human being who is doing the influencing? How can these models make leader attributes, insufficient as they are, an antecedent? Perhaps the error is not in the models themselves but in the interpretation given by those who take the responsibility of leadership development who focus on developing skills of practicing the models and assume that the development of the person of the leader is implied. To highlight this omission, this article explores transformational leadership and servant leadership theories.

### **Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leadership is one of the most researched and written upon theories of leadership (Gardner et al., 2020). According to Northouse (2019), the theory of transformational leadership originated from the work of Burns (1978). The more expanded model was developed by Bass (1985) with four core factors of idealized influence, which include the following: a leader having a strong moral influence, inspirational motivation referring to a leader’s ability to set high expectations and then inspire followers to achieve these expectations, intellectual stimulation having to do with creativity and innovation in problem-solving, and individualized consideration referring to the ability to be considerate, listen, and provide a good work environment to the teams and individual employees.

This model describes what the transformational leader does and how it impacts the people. Still, it does not provide a framework on how the leader gets to embody the leader’s inner character that is primarily internal but demonstrates positive

external leadership outcomes. In the business world, where leadership development is focused on people who have been given positions of authority, and the training programs focus on teaching what a transformational leader does, how does one develop the capacity to practice these idealized models? Is it inborn, or is it learned? If learnable, can those areas that bring one to practice effectively be explored and linked to this development? These questions help take a critical look at the theoretical knowledge and work available in scholarship today.

An important observation to make is that the original work of Burns (as cited in Northouse, 2019) had motives and the collective purpose as core to the work of transformational leadership. By (2021) points out that this component of motives and purpose, as envisioned by Burns, was left out of research and development of transformational leadership until only recently. This paper argues that motives and intentions must be brought into the consciousness (by connecting it more strongly and more intentionally to the inner space) to permit effective rooting and establish a foundation for the effective practice of transformational leadership or servant leadership. What deals with motives is the inner life or interior condition or, simply put—the heart. To further explore this knowledge gap, which may be standing in the way of effective practice and thereby more positive outcomes, a look at the servant leadership theory is helpful.

### **Servant Leadership**

Getting students to succeed in school goes beyond teaching the three Rs of learning; rather, it is about determining clever choices and uses of the resources available (Flora, 2019). Creativity is generating something non-existent like an innovative technique or a problem solution which can be an ingenious piece or practice (Kerr, 2016), a key component in innovation. Lucas et al. (2014) proposes that creativity is inherent among youth; however, due to teachers' practices that do not tap into these EHoM, the skill "lies dormant in most students" (Liu & Schonwetter, 2004, p. 806). Students display a lack of interest in learning and are hesitant to participate in class. Therefore, the teachers must awaken and nurture the creative minds of the students through facilitating various "thinking tools" (Liu & Schonwetter, 2004, p. 804). Through this nurturing, students can become productive in their everyday lives and practice success.

As presented by Liden et al. (2014), the servant leadership model explains that for servant leadership to be effective, the antecedent factors of context and culture, leader attributes, and follower receptivity must be right. Furthermore, Spears (2010) gives a list of servant leader attributes of listening, healing, persuasion, awareness, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building community—attributes that seem much more related to the inner place than any other aspect of a leader. The question remains—how does a person get into possessing these characteristics to effectively practice servant leadership for positive outcomes from followers and community? After all, they

are not just skills that can be developed but attributes. This paper reasons that even though these theories propose robust and brilliant models, the reason leadership is not producing results that society wants is because the models do not connect the dots completely; they leave a gap in preparing the people to be ready to practice effectively. Many models fail to address the inner place—the heart.

### **A Closer Look at the Inner Space Development in Leadership**

Given the significance of the heart in implementing theories such as servant leadership and transformational leadership, it is important to take a closer look at the heart. Such a closer look comes with the challenge of a critical analysis that propels leadership thinkers to examine deeper the role of the inner place in leadership development and practice. This section guides the reader in this critical look.

#### **The Challenge**

The tendency to specialize and categorize fields of expertise has led to a separation of the work of developing human beings, which could be referred to as a spiritual process and that of developing their capacity to lead in an organization to be set in what seems to be two unrelated fields. Compartmentalization of the fields may have led to specialized fields, but it has also led to compartmentalized thinking that can negatively affect leadership. There is a false belief that people can categorize their lives and only bring some parts to work; yet, unleashing human potential requires a full embodying of spirit, soul, and body (Parikh, 2016). God created human beings from a holistic perspective. Compartmentalization has led to the assumption that leadership can be developed in persons in positions of authority without developing any other competencies unrelated to business. It has also created a false view that people can come to work and leave the Creator, the Source, and His instruction or perspective at home. Scharmer (2008, 2018) refers to this fallacy as knowing so much about leadership and the how of leadership without ever exploring the interior place where leadership comes from. Effective leadership does not develop in a vacuum. It must be directly connected and driven by a clean heart.

Healing this divide may require going back to the fundamentals of what it means to be a human being and exploring how to develop human motivation. This journey in the matter of transformational leadership may lead back to the foundations of the world. Wigglesworth (2012) states that the overarching desire “for every human being is to be drawn to [their] own highest potential” (p. 4). Human beings acknowledge greater, fuller manifestations of humanity when they see it. The writer highlighted that “when asked people they admire, many are drawn to figures like Nelson Mandela, Mother Teresa, Dr. Martin Luther King” (p. 5). These figures might as well be a father, grandfather, mentor, or acquaintance who has had an impact through their illustration of love and service—from the

inner place. Connecting people to their greatest potential for the greatest good of the majority requires the alignment of the heart—motives to the being in human, a process that is achieved through the work in the heart. Leadership that is propelled by the right inner place will thus yield positive outcomes because, in a way, it positively affects a great majority of followers in an organization.

## **The Heart**

The discovery of quantum physics completely revolutionized the understanding of the physical world, the principles and laws that govern it, and how to leverage this quantum physics to provide solutions that serve humanity better. Pavlovich (2020) points out an important perspective from the field of quantum physics; that it may help human beings eliminate dichotomies due to the discovery that quantum relies on intuitive experiences that include personal experiences and practices that lead to a shift in consciousness. The author concludes that quantum leaders and managers are more likely to be “agents who focus on enhancing human flourishing and societal well-being” (p. 299). This adds credence to the need to shift to the development of the inner place of a leader. Such is not the outcome of just some mental exercise; it is the outcome of a heart dedicated to doing good from the inner place. It does not depend on an external reward.

Further, Sandra and Nandram (2020) reason that the understanding of quantum, given the fact that the heart is the most powerful organ in the human body, means that the heart can pull all different systems together and that the state of the heart plays a critical role in the efficacy of a leader in an organization. Yet, this is not a new concept or perspective; one only needs to consult the owner’s manual of any equipment to know how to optimize its functionality. The Ultimate Owner of the heart is God Himself because He is the One who created humanity.

In recent times, there has been a lot of speaking in the corporate world for people to bring heart, head, and hands to work; yet, there has not been a focus on the exploration and cultivation of this heart. Science is starting to reveal way more about the heart than it has done in the recent past. According to Watkins (2014), the notion that the heart is just an organ pumping blood through the system, popular though it may be, is just a concept of this century where the study of human wellness became separated and specialized into medicine and psychology. The author points out that prior to that, the heart “was revered for its wisdom- a potent reservoir of intelligence that surpasses the logical reasoning of the mind” (p. 40). The next section explores how the concept of the heart is at the center of the development of any impactful leadership by examining the biblical leadership perspective.

### **Bridging the Gap Through a Biblical Leadership Perspective**

A clear revelation of the heart in relation to leadership is revealed in a passage in the Bible: Mark 10:35-41. In this passage, John and James ask Jesus to let them sit on His right and left in His Kingdom. What the sons of Zebedee were asking was a position of honor and power in the leadership structure of the Kingdom of Jesus which they had perceived wrongly as being like the Roman Empire of that time. This request caused distress to the other disciples. One can posit that they too had the same ambitions to be as exalted as high as possible in this Kingdom that Christ was leading. Yet, the desire to have power and honor is not limited to these only. It plays out daily in society. It is visible in political leadership through the campaign and massive resources invested to attain power and in corporate organizations. Even the Christian church has not been spared this desire for power and control. This self-serving quest for power and control is what is referred to as the “Sons of Zebedee Syndrome.” It is for self-exaltation or self-gratification. It can cause strife and discontent. This comes as a result of trouble in the inner place. What does it take to overcome the selfish desires of the heart?

### **Biblical Leadership Defined**

Biblical leadership is also referred to as Christian leadership, godly leadership, or spiritual leadership (Howell, 2003). This article uses biblical leadership because the argument and position are advanced with the support of precepts and principles revealed in the Holy Scriptures.

What is biblical leadership? Blackaby and Blackaby (2011) define a biblical leader as someone who is called by God to lead; leads with and through Christ-like character; and demonstrates the functional competencies that permit effective leadership to take place. The authors define biblical leadership as reflected in the title of their book, *Moving People on to God’s Agenda*. Moving people means impacting them or getting them to achieve their or their organization’s vision. The authors argue that God has a formula for preparing leaders and it is essentially about character development accomplished by the Holy Spirit working in the inner life (translate: inner place) of the person. No wonder White (2010) declares, “character building is the most important work ever entrusted to human beings; and never before was its diligent study so important as now” (p. 225). This is true for leaders in both the church and the corporate world. Biblical leadership can be exercised as much in a secular corporation as in a Church organization.

Howell (2003) defines biblical leadership as “taking initiative to influence people to grow in holiness and to passionately promote the extension of God’s kingdom in the world” (p. 3). Further, the author points out that the profile of a biblical leader is not so much about an extensive list of attributes, style, or role, but rather a trajectory that penetrates the fundamental identity of all servant leaders at heart level; that is, character, motive, and agenda. Character refers to the describable attributes that generally form the leader’s personality. Motive is the set



of deeply held intentions of the heart. Agenda is the set of goals that one pursues that are strongly ingrained in that person's heart.

According to Collier and Williams (2004), Jesus is considered the greatest leader as He was also the greatest follower. Therefore, the primary quality of a godly leader is that they follow Someone who is stronger, wiser, more discerning, and more in control of circumstances than they are. They must follow the Creator of the heart. They must follow the One who knows how to take care of the inner place.

The journey of any leader begins in the heart; the heart then beams out either light or darkness into the critical triple trajectories of character, motive, and agenda. The direction the heart takes is determined by whom the leader is following. From the heart, the leader can lead the organization to positive or negative outcomes. Below, the paper explores the areas of critical consideration for a submitted heart on the character of the leader as they pursue the motive and agenda from God's perspective in view of Christ as the model for a biblical leader. The heart transformation work must move from loving self to loving God and His creation enough to choose to serve God and people. That is how true servant leadership comes to be manifested. That is how godly leaders get to empower their employees.

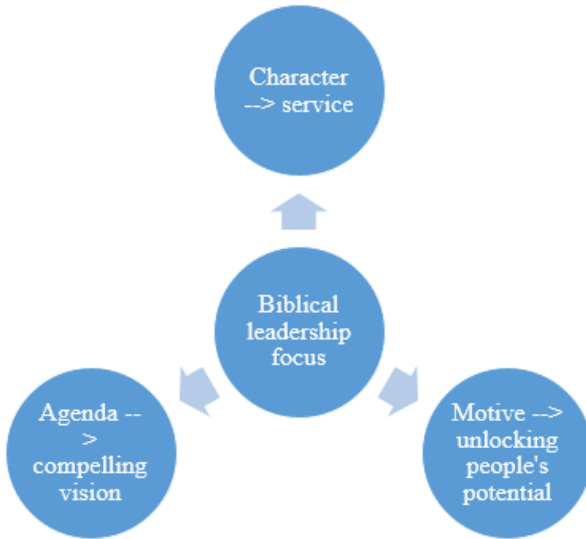
### **Christ Model of Leadership**

The compelling success of Jesus' movement was not because He cast a great vision or developed great plans. Rather, He sought the will of the Father. His vision came from the Father. No matter how important leadership style is, it is not the critical key to the success of biblical leadership; it is the relationship with God, seeking His will and guidance and discerning the actions needed to accomplish that will by the attitude and mind of service. Of note here is that a biblical leader does not choose to be a Bible leader; rather, spiritual leadership flows out of a person's vibrant, intimate relationship with God. It is an outflow of total submission to God (Blackaby & Blackaby, 2011). Christ's leadership model is based on love that is rooted in complete trust and total dependence on God. How does one bring this new heart and connection to God to bear in the day-to-day work?

### **Becoming a Biblical Leader**

Leading like Jesus may sound like amateur advice to a leader in a corporation in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. However, before dismissing this advice, it is worth noting that Jesus Christ's global corporation started more than 2000 years ago and has more followers than any other leader in history (Blanchard et al., 2016). High-performing leaders set a compelling vision, focus everyone's energy towards achieving it, and manifest a servant leader attitude (Blanchard, 2019). Jesus Christ's model is to the highest extent of servanthood (Howell, 2003). Biblical leadership focuses on character (service),

motive (unlocking people’s potential), and agenda (compelling vision). Figure 1 visualizes these components.



*Figure 1.* Biblical leadership focus.

According to Blanchard et al. (2016), to be a leader after the pattern of Jesus Christ begins in the heart, which involves the consideration of motives. It is a transformational journey that involves aligning the heart, head, hands, and habits. Leading like Jesus changes the results that society is producing today. It is clearly revealed that the most important part of the leader is their heart that is connected to God and His gift of the Holy Spirit. The heart is thus reinforced by the being habits and doing habits which are endearing transformational paths to illuminating the inner place from where leadership comes from. When this transforming work was done in the sons of Zebedee, they went on to become effective leaders, impacting their generation positively. Their work lives on to date.

## Conclusions

Advancement in science in the field of medicine and physics has created an avenue to quantify the concept of the heart (motives and intentions) that was not previously emphasized in leadership as much as it should be. The dichotomies of leadership theory and research on one hand and that of leader(ship) development on the other hand can be made whole through the appreciation of the fact that at the core of leadership are human beings that go through a process of development and the fullest potential is unlocked when the heart is filled with love beaming into pursuits that recognize and surrender to the will and leading of God. The need expressed in the corporate world speaks of bringing the heart, head, and hands to work. Bringing these three together can be enabled by the leadership development industry, revisiting a whole perspective of what it takes to be fully human, and indeed seeking the counsel of the Creator as revealed in the story of redemption in the Bible. It turns out the admonition to guard the heart with all diligence for issues of life flow from it is quite literally solid, complete, and life-giving. This paper posits that as much as leadership development focuses on the skills and the mental capacity of the leader, it should focus on making the leaders Christian humans. Fostering this dimension can certainly strengthen one's leadership, especially in view of the urgent call for all hands-on deck for the attainment of the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

There needs to be an investigation into what methods and tools can be used to cultivate the leader's heart in the organization. The following questions should generate future research on the topic and arguments presented in this paper: can there be a development of measurable, specific competencies that enable leadership results as enshrined in the UN Sustainable Development Goals as part of deepening leadership theory and practice? How can leadership development be integrated into current leadership theory to update it for the current world? How can the corporate world benefit more from a holistic perspective of leadership that puts more focus on the inner place? What weight should the heart carry in assessing the suitability of a new leader in a Church organization and indeed corporate organizations that view the UN Sustainable Development Goals as urgent and critical to the good of humanity and the planet? This paper encourages more discussion in this direction.

At the heart of the matter is not that there is much wrong with the leadership theory, such as transformational leadership and servant leadership, but that there is a disconnection in how we get people developed to enact these theories effectively. As there has been a lot of conversation of what is ailing leadership, alternative voices have come up. It is no wonder that the history of leadership development theory and research is as recent as the year 2000 (Day et al., 2000). Earnest's work has been done to start to understand the what and how of leader(ship) development. Leader development needs to focus on the development of leader identity and issues of cognitive and metacognitive skills (Lord & Hall, 2005; Marshall-Mies et al., 2000). In other words, leader development for effective leadership must

develop the capacity of the leader to view themselves as leaders and accept the responsibility of leadership, and develop thinking skills and capacity to understand their own thought process and patterns. In the same perspective, Watkins (2014) outlines a vertical development process that goes a little further than what developmental psychologists have done (Cook-Greuter, 2004; Rooke & Torbert, 2005) and shows that at the root of developmental maturity is physiology centered on the heart as the primary pillar.

On the other hand, leadership development must focus on developing collective beliefs and practices of a group that leads them towards direction, alignment and commitment (DAC). Direction is defined as a widespread agreement in a collective of overall goals, aims, and mission. Alignment is defined as the organization and coordination of knowledge and work in a collective. Commitment is defined as the willingness of members of a collective to subsume their own interests and benefits within the collective interests and benefits (Drath et al., 2008, p. 636). Having seen the challenges of current leadership theory and development and seeing what critical voices are providing as solutions, it is important to now map this new perspective into Christ's model of leadership. To do that is to seek to explore to some degree the biblical plan of redemption.

### **Steps Towards Christ Model of Leadership'**

Step 1: Acknowledging God as the Creator of all, and the position of the human being as created in the image and likeness of God, and given the responsibility over all other creation (Genesis 1, 2. NKJV)

Step 2: Recognizing that humans fell in sin and therefore, their ambitions separating from God cannot attain the very best for all (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV), but through the gift of redemption and renewal of the Spirit, humans are reconnected to God in Christ, and it is a gift of God's Love (John 1:12; John 3:14).

Step 3: Accepting that leadership is an acceptance of responsibility to lift others to their highest and that it is not self-serving (Mark 10:42-45; Matthew 22:37-38).

Step 4: Practicing truthful anchoring through disciplined thought and action (Romans 12:3-8; Philippians 4:8).

Step 5: Measuring the outcomes based on higher values than what the world offers (Gal5:22-25).

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