

ALL GOOD LEADERS HAVE A LIMP

By Dr. Stephen R. Graves

Maybe you are familiar with the story in Genesis 32 in the Bible's Old Testament. Alone for the night, Jacob, who would become the patriarch for the nation of Israel, was confronted by "a mysterious man," and the two wrestled for hours. Toward the end of the night, the God-man touched Jacob's hip, and Jacob was defeated. Nevertheless, the God-man blessed Jacob, and from that day on Jacob walked with a limp. Until this point, Jacob had always found a way to come out on top. But now he had come up against an opponent he could not beat. Jacob was broken – yet he was better because of it.

What is a limp? Over three decades of coaching executives, I have spent time with a lot of people who, like Jacob, keep coming out on top. But constantly winning can result in placing our confidence and certainty on the wrong person: ourselves. I have noticed another trait among the most remarkable leaders I have met. They carry a limp, a scar from getting in the ring with God – and losing.

A limp is the spiritual, emotional, mental, and even physical (at times) recognition that we are not the supreme agent of life. The faster I can learn that I do not know all, cannot do all, and am not completely the person I need to be, the better. A friend of mine says the key issue for every person is, "Who has the right to rule?" Jacob was wrestling with God over who was in charge. He had spent years ruling his own life, and it seemed to be working. He did most people will not admit about themselves – he acted as if he did not need God.

Wrestling with God. Perhaps you, too, spent years winning at everything in life and then, all of a sudden, it was gone: Maybe, as happened to me a couple years ago, you suffered an illness that reminded you of your mortality. Or the corporate strategy you spent months designing failed. The corner office you spent coveting was given to someone else. You did not make the team after working harder than anyone else. Your marriage or your kids did not turn out the way you planned. In other words, something broke your forward momentum.

When the issue is who has the right to rule, it always involves a wrestling match going up against the Almighty. A limp comes when you battle God, and God decides to win. As He always does.

Why do we need a limp? Two things are the results of a limp: humanity and humility. These two things are tied together, and bad things happen when we lose a grip on either one. We all know people who have lost touch with their humanity, who act as if they are superhuman. Athletes, movie stars, preachers, business owners, and CEOs come to mind, but it could happen to any one of us.

The second by-product of a limp is humility. You can always spot it in people who have wrestled with God and lost. This is actually a good thing, because until we wrestle with God, we can avoid having to confront our humanity. There is no substitute for wrestling with God and going the experience of being broken.

"Brokenness" sounds bad, as if something is wrong with us. But what if brokenness is a good thing? The Bible, after all, often talks about brokenness and weakness being the places where God shines through.

As Psalm 51:17 says, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." The greatest leaders I know have a limp. They have realized their humanity and walk in humility. Through defeat, disappointment, or any number of things, they have discovered who has the right to rule.

Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Do you know someone who has a physical limp? How does that affect that individual?
2. What about the type of "limp" Mr. Graves describes? Do you have one of those – or know of someone who does? What has been the effect of that?
3. Have you ever experienced wrestling with God? Perhaps that is something you are doing right now. What has that been like?
4. How can a limp, resulting from wrestling with God, serve a positive benefit in our lives?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages: Psalm 6:1-3; Isaiah 40:29-31; 1 Corinthians 1:27-31, 9:24-27; 2 Corinthians 12:7-10