

LEAD LIKE JESUS LED

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TRUTH

&

LOVE

*Together*

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EILEEN HABELOW, PHD

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## **Lead Like Jesus Led**

*Truth and Love Together*

Eileen Habelow, PhD

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## **Dedication**

I don't know how I could dedicate this to anyone other than the One who gave it to me in the first place. My reliance on the Creator is the smartest move I have made in my life. He is Truth and Love embodied. All the time. No matter what. And I am grateful forevermore.

## ***A note about the stories you will read . . .***

*The stories in this book are rooted in real experience, my own and others'. To protect the privacy of the people who appear in them, I have not used real names, I have altered identifying details, and in some cases, I have combined elements from several situations into a single account. The patterns are accurate to what I have lived and witnessed. The specifics have been altered with care.*

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# Introduction: The Half-Truth We Lead From

I have loved people well and led them poorly.

I have preserved relationships and avoided necessary conversations. I have told myself I was being gracious when I was actually being afraid. Afraid of disappointing someone. Afraid of being misunderstood. Afraid of losing connection.

And I have seen the cost.

## Love as a Half-Truth

I managed a direct report who was responsible for producing a financial report for a weekly senior leadership meeting. Each week, she would compile the report, send it to me for a final review, and I was responsible for delivering it to the Senior Leaders Team. And each week, before I sent the report, I would find an error, the kind of error that could change the decisions made in that room.

And, each week, I fixed it myself before I sent it along.

I told myself I was being efficient. I told myself the conversation would be difficult, that she would push back, that it would take more time to address than to fix, that it was easier to just handle it myself. After-all, my silence was practical, not personal. At least that was what I told myself in a dozen various ways. But it was the same lie.

I followed that pattern for more than a year. Every week, the same error. Every week, the same quiet fix. Every week, another missed opportunity to tell her the truth she needed to hear. Until the day we had to let her go, for this performance issue, among others.

That is when I saw it clearly, what I had been doing wrong, for the first time. She did not lose her job because she could not do the work. She lost her job because I never gave her the chance to improve. I had been so focused on avoiding the discomfort of an honest conversation that I robbed her of the feedback that could have changed her trajectory. My silence, which I had dressed up as efficiency and patience, was neither. It was fear. And she paid the price for it.

When you avoid giving constructive feedback that someone would benefit from hearing, it does not protect people. It postpones their growth. And it quietly tells them that your comfort matters more than their future.

Here is the part I could not see at the time: I thought I was leading with love. In reality, I was leading with a half-truth.

My half-truth was this: if I care for people and protect the relationship, I have done my job. That is not a lie. It is partly true. Caring matters. Relationships matter. But caring without clarity is not love. It is avoidance dressed in the language of compassion. And I could not see what was missing because the half I carried felt so complete to me.

### **Truth as a Half-Truth**

I have watched leaders who never hesitate to speak. They pride themselves on clarity. They defend their directness as honesty. But their truth leaves bruises. Standards rise. Trust falls. People perform, but they stop bringing their real selves to the room. Fear rules.

I remember a particular visit from a *very* senior leader to our local leadership team. Our results were poor; we knew that. But what followed was not a conversation about improving them. It was a public dismantling. He went around the room, leader by leader, delivering specific, personal feedback in front of the entire team. He told one of our leaders that she was holding on to terrible performers on her team, then named each one. He criticized publicly. He moved on to the next person and did it again.

When it was over, we left the room in total silence.

Here is what stayed with me: he was not wrong about the results. Most of what he said was factually accurate. But he could not see the people he was saying it to. His lens was so sharply focused on the problem that the humans in the room had disappeared. We were not people with context, with effort, with futures worth investing in. We were performance gaps with names attached. And because he could only see the problem, every word he spoke, no matter how accurate, landed as an attack rather than a call to rise. No one left that room inspired to improve. We left, deciding he could not be trusted. The truth was all there. The love was entirely absent. And without it, the truth accomplished nothing because we couldn't hear it through the dismantling.

That leader had a half-truth, too: if I am honest and hold the standard, I have done my job. That is not a lie either. Honesty matters. Standards matter. But truth delivered without care is not integrity. It is ego wearing the mask of accountability. And that leader could not see it because the half they carried felt like the whole.

That is the nature of a half-truth. It is more dangerous than a lie because it *feels* true. And that is why it is so hard to see past it to the other half you are missing.

Think of it as a lens.

Every leader looks through a lens, a default way of seeing people, problems, and the relationship between the two. The lens shapes what you see clearly and what stays blurred.

Some leaders look through the lens of love. They see the person with extraordinary clarity. They see the face, the feelings, the humanity. But through the lens of love alone, the problem stays blurred. The conversation gets softened. The feedback gets delayed or is not delivered at all. The truth that might serve the person's growth never quite comes into focus.

Other leaders look through the lens of truth. They see the problem with extraordinary clarity. They see the gap, the miss, the standard violation. But through the lens of truth alone, the person disappears. What remains is a performance issue to be solved, not a human being to be developed. The words land with precision and no mercy.

One leader sees the person and avoids the problem. The other sees the problem and ignores the person. Both are looking through a real lens. Both are seeing something true. And both are blind to what the other lens would reveal.

Your lens determines not just what you see, but what you build.

Most of us have inherited or chosen one as our natural instinct or our default. Truth or love.

We call it personality. We call it wiring. We call it leadership style. But it is more than that. It is a *half-truth* we have mistaken for the whole. And the reason we cannot see what is missing is not only a lack of self-awareness. It is something deeper.

• • •

Every leader has a half-truth that leads to a blind side.

I am using the word blind side as a noun, not a verb (i.e., to blindside someone). The original definition of a "blind side" entered the English language as a noun meaning "*weak or unguarded aspect of a person or thing*" (Online Etymology Dictionary).

In this book, the blind side refers to '*the consistently missing side of a leader; the half they do not see.*'

Your blind side is the half of truth-and-love that drops out of your leadership, especially under pressure. It is the half you cannot see that is missing because the half you carry feels so reasonable, so complete, so supported by every system you work inside.

Beneath the leader who avoids hard conversations is often a person who needs approval. Beneath the leader who delivers truth like a verdict is often someone who needs to be right. Both defaults are protecting the same thing: an identity that is not yet settled. Unfortunately, both half-truths stay hidden because the marketplace often rewards them and calls them strengths.

The truth-teller gets promoted for “driving results.” The peacekeeper gets praised for “great team dynamics.” The system does not just tolerate your half-truth. It trains you in it, rewards you for it, and tells you it is the whole truth.

It can be difficult to fully understand the impact your half-truth has on others because your intention is not to harm. The leader who avoids does not intend to stall someone's growth. The leader who hammers does not intend to diminish someone's dignity. Both are genuinely surprised—even hurt, or in denial—when they hear how their leadership lands on the people closest to them. And that gap between intention and impact is exactly where the half-truth lives. It survives because you judge yourself by your intention, while the people you lead experience your impact. You walk away from the meeting thinking, “I was being gracious” or “I was being honest.” They walk away thinking “she doesn't trust me enough to tell me the truth” or “he doesn't see me as a person.” The intention feels clean from the inside. But the impact tells a different story. And as long as you measure your leadership by what you meant rather than by what they felt, your half-truth will never be visible to you because from where you are standing, it still looks like a strength.

Most of us did not arrive at our half-truth on our own. We were trained into it. We were promoted for it. We absorbed assumptions so early in our lives and careers that we stopped questioning them. We taught them to others. We built teams on them. We called them “the way to work.”

That is the blind side. Not ignorance. Not incompetence. Blindness to the potential of the full truth because we have never seen it, or we never knew we needed it. We have only looked through one lens at a time, and we have assumed that is all there is.

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This book did not begin as a book. It began as a study. After decades of leading in the world of work, building teams, managing P&Ls and people, and navigating performance systems, I decided to undertake a specific study: reading only the words of Jesus and the stories where His words lived; slowly, one passage at a time. I wanted to answer the question: What did Jesus actually do and say?

I was not looking for a leadership model. I was looking for Jesus. But as I sat with the red letters day after day, watching how He spoke to Peter, how He handled the Pharisees, how He entered a room and how He left it, how He corrected, restored, challenged, and loved, a leadership framework emerged that no seminar had ever taught me. And it exposed something I had never seen: the half-truth I had been leading from my entire career. What you are holding is what I found in those red letters, and how it changed the way I see leadership.

Jesus never led from a half-truth. Not once.



He always looked through both lenses at the same time. He saw the person and the problem simultaneously, and He never sacrificed one for the other.

There are so many great examples to share, but too many to treat them all in detail here. One particularly touching story is found in John chapter 8, starting in verse 1. The Scribes and the Pharisees bring a woman who was caught in adultery to face Jesus. They point backward to Moses and the Law, which said the woman should be stoned for her offense. Instead of falling for their trap, Jesus drew a line in the dirt and said to them, *“He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first”* (John 8:7). If you know the story, you know that when Jesus looked up again, only the woman remained. He asked the woman if any of her accusers remained to condemn her, but none were there. He had called out her accusers with the truth. And then he shared both love and truth with the woman. He said, *“Neither do I condemn you (love); go and sin no more (truth)”* (John 8:11, my parenthetical words added). He looked at a woman caught in adultery and protected her dignity without denying her sin.

*(It is worth noting that this account does not appear in the earliest manuscripts of John's Gospel, though many scholars believe it preserves a true story of Jesus from the early church's memory. I find it entirely consistent with everything else we see in Him.)*

Jesus never sacrificed truth for love and never sacrificed love for truth. He always delivered both together.

Here are other examples.

He said to Peter, *“Get behind me, Satan”* (Matthew 16:23, Mark 8:33, Luke 4:8). And He still entrusted Peter with the future of the Church. He sat with a Samaritan woman, named her situation with precision and without contempt, and watched her leave transformed rather than ashamed (John 4:1-42). He looked at the rich young ruler with love and even let him walk away grieving rather than soften the truth to keep him close (Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, Luke 18:18-23).

His love never weakened His clarity. His clarity never diminished His compassion. He held both. Not by oscillating between them, not by balancing them like a scale, but by holding them as one single, undivided reality.

That is the full truth. Truth and love, together. Not as a technique to master. But a way of leading that flows from a Source most of us have never been taught to cultivate.

And the more I studied His words, the more I noticed what Jesus' Source was. Or, I should say, WHO His Source was.

Before He preached or performed a single miracle (that we know of), He was baptized. And when He rose out of the water, His identity was made clear when God the Father declared, *“This is my beloved Son”* (Matthew 3:16, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22).

Before He selected His disciples, He prayed (Luke 6:12, Mark 3:13-19).

When crowds pressed in, He withdrew to lonely places (Luke 5:16, Mark 1:35, Matthew 14:23, Luke 6:12, Luke 9:18).

When opposition rose, He did not scramble to defend Himself.

When temptation came, He fought it with the Father’s words already deposited in Him (Matthew 4:1-11, Mark 1:12-13, Luke 4:1-13).

He lived in union with the Father, and that union produced the full truth: leadership that was both strong and gentle, courageous and compassionate, truthful and merciful. All at the same time. Without compromise. Without half-measures. Without choosing one lens at the expense of the other.

John 1:17 says, *“For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.”*

That is what surprised me and also inspired me. As I read the red letters, it became clear that Jesus was not only a good leader, but that His leadership came from a Source I had yet to fully cultivate. In fact, no system I had ever worked inside even acknowledged this existed. I had spent years refining the half. Jesus showed me I had never seen the whole.

I was blinded to the potential of the full truth.

• • •

This book is an attempt to open our eyes to the full truth and to the Source that makes it possible.

It does not include corporate leadership models. It is designed to be a Kingdom-led leadership manual for Christian believers who have leadership responsibilities in the world of work: they work within systems, under pressure, make decisions that affect livelihoods, and want to follow Christ through it all.

When I say marketplace, I mean every context where you carry leadership responsibility and feel the weight of it. That includes the corporate office, the startup, the classroom, the nonprofit, and the church.

This book is written primarily for the Christian believer who works and leads in the marketplace. It is written for department heads, business owners, team leaders, executives, pastors, and teachers.

It is written for YOU.

You operate within systems that are satisfied with and that reward half-truths. You navigate politics, manage risk, supervise people, and feel pressure. You also follow a King who never separated truth from love or courage from compassion.

In the chapters ahead, we will do three things.

First, we will name the half-truth. Chapters 1 and 2 are the diagnostic heart of this book. Chapter 1 examines leadership through the lens of love. This is the leader who sees the person with such clarity that the problem stays blurred, who avoids the hard conversation and calls it grace. Chapter 2 examines leadership through the lens of truth. This is the leader who sees the problem with such precision that the person disappears, who delivers accountability like a verdict, and calls it honesty. Read both chapters carefully because your half-truth lives in one of them. And the half-truth you carry is the key to everything that follows. Chapter 3 then reveals why no technique, no communication framework, no amount of self-awareness can fix a half-truth. That's because a half-truth is not a skill gap. It is a problem of perspective.

Second, we will walk through the Gospels together, watching Jesus lead from the full truth in real situations as He builds relationships, sees gifts in people, has difficult conversations, creates cultures of accountability, delegates authority, navigates crisis, and uses positional power.

In every scene, we will ask three questions: Where was the truth? Where was the love? And what was Jesus' union with the Father producing that made it possible for Him to see through both lenses, at the same time?

Third, we will turn the mirror toward ourselves. Not to condemn, but to invite. What would it look like to lead from communion rather than from performance? From identity rather than from insecurity? From the full truth rather than from half? We will get practical, including spiritual rhythms, honest self-examination, the community you can't lead without, and the daily practice of hearing "you are beloved" before you hear anything else.

. . .

I should tell you who is writing this.

I have worked and led long enough in corporate systems to know many of the strengths and half-truths. I have managed budgets, built teams, sat in conference rooms, made decisions that affected people's careers, and carried the weight of organizational pressure.

But I have not always led the way I describe in these pages.

I have absorbed unexamined assumptions from my marketplace experience and held them as truth. I've even taught them as "the way to work." But I have learned, sometimes the hard way, that my half-truth was costing people more than I knew.

. . .

Late in my career, a direct report asked to speak with me privately. She was nervous, I could see it, and I remember thinking she must have a problem she needed help solving.

She did. The problem was me.

She told me that my energy in brainstorming sessions, the enthusiasm I brought into the room, the rapid-fire ideas I generated in the first ten minutes, the sheer volume of my voice, and my vision were shutting the team down. Not because they disagreed with my ideas. Because they assumed I had already decided. My enthusiasm, which I had always considered one of my greatest contributions as a leader, was functioning as a closed door. The team had learned that when I came in with that much energy, the brainstorming was over before it started. They were just waiting for me to finish.

I had no idea. Absolutely none. I had walked into many of those meetings believing I was modeling the kind of engaged passionate leadership I wanted to see in others. And every time, I was taking up so much space that there was no room left for anyone else to contribute. The overuse of my strength, the thing I would have named first on any self-assessment, had become my blind side.

That conversation changed how I lead. But more than that, it showed me something I have never forgotten: the half-truth you carry does not feel like a half-truth. It sometimes feels like your best quality. It feels like the thing that makes you effective, the thing the team is lucky to have, the thing you would never think to question. And that is exactly why you cannot see your blind side without someone brave enough to name it.

I am not writing as someone who has arrived at the full truth. Not by a long shot. Throughout this book, I am going to share more real examples of failures, missed opportunities, and moments I wish I could redo. In some cases, I may need to ask for forgiveness. But I would rather be honest about the journey than pretend I can see what I am still learning to see.

When you admit where you have grown, you create space for others to do the same.

I am writing as someone who has seen both the power and the limits of leading from a half-truth, and who, from studying the red letters and from years of getting it wrong, is convinced that leading like Jesus led offers the full truth. Not a softer model. Not an idealistic model. A model that is demanding, compassionate, honest, and effective.

And a model that only works if you are connected to the same Source Jesus was connected to.

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Before we begin, I want to ask you something honestly.

What is your half-truth?

Which lens do you look through? Are you the leader who sees the person with such clarity that many times you cannot bring yourself to name the problem, telling yourself it is grace, when it might be fear or self-preservation? Or are you the leader who sees the problem with such precision that the person has disappeared, telling yourself it is honesty, when it might be a need for control or self-preservation?

Which lens do you lean on? And what potential might the full truth of both lenses hold?

One warning. This language is for the mirror. It is not for the room. If you find yourself naming someone else's half-truth in a conversation, you are most likely defending your own.

Jesus looked through both lenses at the same time. He saw the person and the problem, the dignity and the gap, the sin and the future simultaneously, without choosing. He led from the full truth because He was rooted in the Father. He didn't need self-preservation and He didn't need to be in control of everything. His identity was settled before He ever opened His mouth. His security came from somewhere the marketplace cannot reach.

That same Source is available to you and me.

This book will not give you a formula. But it will walk you into the Gospels, into the leadership of Jesus, into the Source that made the full truth possible. It will show you what you may be blind to and invite you into the full truth.

The goal is not to shame you, but to show what becomes possible when both lenses come together. When truth and love are held as one, it is more powerful, more redemptive, and more effective than anything you have experienced leading from.

Great leadership moves people toward God's purposes for them.

Truth provides clarity. Love safeguards dignity. Union with the Father gives you the power to hold them together.