

WHAT IS A BLACK BELT LEADER?

Not all of the members of the Gospel Martial Arts Union are black belts but I'm pretty sure that those that aren't still have a goal to become a black belt one day. So let's talk about that coveted rank.

I'll begin by asking a question. What is a black belt? I've often heard it described as "a white belt who never quit." Some say a black belt is a "master of the basics."

Would it be right to say that a black belt is a leader? He or she should be an example to follow—not only in class but outside of class as well?

That's what has traditionally been acknowledged in the martial arts. A black belt is not only someone who has demonstrated outstanding physical skills but also has shown discipline, self confidence, self control, humility, and all those other traits you see on those posters.

Traditionally black belts have ALSO been teachers, communicators, mentors, wise counselors. Remember those movies where the old master with the long white beard spouts lessons for living?

Now—for a number of reasons—I don't think that is true anymore. Part of it is the fact that we now have seven-year-old black belts running around at tournaments. AND I've been to tournaments where the black belt instructors are yelling at the judges and embarrassing themselves and even their students. The whole emphasis on sports martial arts has put a kink in the idea of the humble and wise sensei.

Speaking of sensei, do you know what the word LITERALLY means? In Japanese the kanji indicates someone who has "traveled farther down the path before you." Someone you can rely on to show you the proper way (because they themselves have traveled it). Incidentally, a sensei doesn't just refer to a karate teacher but to any kind of teacher, from a school teacher to an expert noodle chef.

TODAY, young martial arts students have instructors who are much farther down the path. It might interest you to know that wasn't always true in the martial arts—at least not in this country. My instructor, Allen Steen is 11 years older than me. That means

when I started training at the age of 13, he was just 24. HIS instructor was Jhoon Rhee, who was just 36 at the time.

I have to admit that when I was 24, or even 36, I still had a LOT to learn.

So all of you students training today don't know how fortunate you are to have these grey-haired, or even bald, sensei to show you the path. BUT back to our question— if you are a black belt, or want to become one, what kind of man or woman should you be? What kind of leader should you be? And maybe, more important to us in the GMAU, what kind of Christian leader should you be?

Now the Bible tells us that we should ALL be examples of Christ's love. We should all be salt and light in the world. But the Scriptures also are clear that there are those who will be leaders of others. From political leaders, to military leaders, to church leaders. And God expects more from those.

From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked. LUKE 12:48

So if you are a leader, men expect more from you—and God expects more from you. Much has been written about the “servant-leader” in the Christian community. Many writers and preachers refer to this passage in Mark.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be servant of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” MARK 10:42-45

Interestingly it wasn't a Christian author who first used the term “servant-leadership,” it was a secular educator named Robert Greenleaf who first mentioned it in a 1970 essay called “The Servant as Leader.”

In his and other secular studies, the characteristics of leadership often mentioned are things such as:

The ability to listen

Empathy

The ability to persuade
Self Awareness
Foresight
The commitment to the growth of others

You know, Teamwork is ALSO often cited in discussions about leadership. I remember some team building exercises on an employee retreat we did once. Rope climbing, falling back from a platform into the hands of others (we didn't do any fire walking by the way). I admit as a black belt I thought it a little less physically challenging than some of the others

But having seen how some of those other people reacted to not only physical challenges but how they rejoiced after accomplishing them made me even more aware of how what we do as marital artists can build leadership qualities.

If you have the self confidence to face a larger opponent on the mat, and if you can break a couple of inches of white pine, and if you can flip a knife-wielding attacker (albeit probably in class) THEN you have the confidence to stand up in front of a group, the confidence to tell other people what to do, the confidence that your decisions are the right ones, or at least the best you can make with the information you have.

So self-confidence, I would argue, is a vital part of leadership. But having TOO much confidence can also be seen as being prideful, isn't that so?

Jesus certainly had confidence, right? How about the apostle Paul, or King David, or Moses? All the great leaders of the Bible had self confidence. And, with the notable exception of Jesus, they all had some degree of pridefulness too.

- David thought he could hide his sin.
- Paul spoke of that "thorn in his flesh" that served to keep him humble.
- Moses wasn't allowed to enter the promised land because of his pride.

And we could go on and on.

Speaking of Jesus, the prime example of Him as a servant-leader is when he washes the disciples feet in John 13.

When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to

them, “Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you.

Peter, another man with lots of self confidence and more than a little pride said to Jesus that He shouldn’t wash his feet. and what did Jesus say in return? Basically, if you want to be a part of me, you’ll let me. Then Peter said, well go ahead and wash my head also. In this case, Jesus demonstrated what a leader needed to do. He was giving his disciples, and, of course, us, an example to follow.

Lets look at some other qualities of Jesus that we might follow if we are to be good leaders.

- Jesus listened to others.
- He felt compassion for others.
- He stood up for what He believed in.
- He understood hierarchy — always giving respect to God the Father over Him.
- He knew his material and he taught it in a way that his disciples would understand and be encouraged to follow.

In a Christian setting — leadership should be about equipping God’s people for works of service so that the body of Christ might be built up (Eph. 4:12). In specifically Christian martial arts schools that is certainly the goal.

Some of us are instructors in more secular settings but we STILL need to reflect Christ in all that we do and say. Often times our demeanor, our character, our compassion for our students speaks louder than any so-called “preaching” might.

For us — as black belts who are also Christians — that means showing students the path (remember *sensei*) towards a successful and fulfilling life.

Although Scripture is — of course — the best way to learn about Christian leadership, there are also many other examples of leadership that we can follow. Since the word *martial* means military we could look to some great military leaders for a few examples. Here are some great quotations.

If a man does his best, what else is there? —General George Patton

There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, and learning from your failures. —Colin Powell

The truest wisdom is a resolute determination. —Napoleon Bonaparte

Any man worth his salt will stick up for what he believes right, but it takes a slightly better man to acknowledge instantly and without reservation that he is in error. —Andrew Jackson

Leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character. But if you must be without one, be without the strategy. —Norman Schwarzkopf

So a good leader must have CHARACTER, according to both Jesus and Storming Norman. OK, now let me exercise another one of the aspects of leadership and help you bring everything together into focus.

If you want to be a good leader, a good sensei, you must have character, you must have humility, you must have compassion, you must not only treat others with respect but actually seek to serve them.

This is the goal of the Gospel Martial Arts Union. To build leaders who can truly lead others down the path of life.

To accomplish that, our mission is fourfold: (and I'm going to quote from our website)

- 1) to be a faithful witness for Christ and His Word in the martial arts community,
- 2) to provide a venue in which Christian martial arts can develop technical expertise free from false and immoral teachings and practices,
- 3) to foster scholarship that develops and articulates a Biblical world view and a Biblical philosophy of the martial arts, and
- 4) to help Christian martial artists develop and maintain Christian character while practicing martial arts and in every other aspect of their lives.

Right now the GMAU has thousands of members in practically every state and in numerous countries. But we need more involvement (I dare say from you) to help accomplish our goals. So help us spread the word. Maybe you have a hard time sharing

Jesus directly with people. Sharing your affiliation with the GMAU might be a way to be a little more subtle. Let your fellow martial artists, Christian and non-Christian, that there is an organization that seeks to help them become better leaders by following the example of the greatest leader of all.

Dr. Keith D. Yates

Chairman of the Board of Governors, GMAU