

“Prevention”

Avoiding Moral Failure: Finishing Well

With the advent of twenty-four hour news, we have become increasingly aware of the spiritual and moral failures of those in ministry. The pain of such tragedies has encompassed the globe with thousands in the Body of Christ grieving the loss of loved and trusted leadership. Many have asked the piercing question, “How can I hope to finish well if my pastor can’t be faithful?” How indeed! If the shepherd of the flock cannot find the humility, courage and strength to remain steadfast in his faith, how will the rest of us survive?

Keeping our Priorities: First Things First

“The question is not whether we fail again and again - that is a given; the question is whether over a period of time we are developing a practiced habit of divine fellowship.”¹

The first key in prevention is keeping our priorities straight. We have all heard the familiar saying, “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”² It is so easy to be driven by responsibilities, desires and expectations of others. One can get lost in the time demands and complexities of ministry. Prevention demands that we establish and hold to biblical priorities and goals. “A major part of successful living lies in the ability to put first things first. Indeed, the reason most major goals are not achieved is that we spend our time doing second things first.”³

Our first priority is to love the Lord with all of our heart, soul and mind.⁴ Too often, we focus on doing what is good instead of pursuing what is excellent (i.e. visitation, sermon preparation, discipleship, leadership training, problem solving etc.). All of these activities are important but they are all *second things*.

We understand the importance of keeping priorities and we are quick to counsel others on how to cultivate their relationship with Christ by keeping first things first. If we are not already doing so, the preventative measure would be to make the transition from the cognitive to the experiential by taking our own advice. Remember, “Intimacy with Christ is the essential element and necessary for useful ministry.”⁵ As ministers, we must lead by example.⁶

¹ Richard J. Foster

² Henry de Bracton (English Jurist, 1268)

³ Steven R. Covey, 7 Habits

⁴ Matthew 22:37-38

⁵ The Shepherd’s Covenant by H. B. London

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:1 (AMP)

To build intimacy with the Lord requires that we spend time in His presence. The spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, fasting, study, sharing our faith etc. help each of us to maintain that cutting edge first love.⁷ As we continue to abide in Christ, we will remain productive in ministry.⁸

Developing an intimate relationship with God and family includes rest. Perpetual labor is not a sign of devotion or spirituality. Jesus rested and encouraged his followers to do likewise. One day the disciples of Jesus came to him reporting that they had a particularly hard day of ministry, people coming and going, and they did not even have time to eat. (Sound familiar?) Jesus said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a secluded place and rest a while.”⁹ Taking time away from ministry with our family and friends for rest and renewal is a preventative first thing. I would suggest the following goals with *no ministry potential*.

- Take a day of rest to unplug each week.
- If married spend quality, time with your family daily and date your wife once a week.
- Once per quarter get away with your wife for at least two days.
- Attend at least one seminar every six months for mental stimulation and spiritual renewal.
- Build lasting memories with your family by prioritizing birthdays, anniversaries and other important family events.
- Take a vacation together at least once per year.

Dealing with Temptation: Deal or no Deal

“No matter how many pleasures Satan offers you, his ultimate intention is to ruin you. Your destruction is his highest priority.”¹⁰

Many leaders live their lives like a TV game show. How much risk can I take and still win the prize. All of us as Christians are tempted but it is no game! Thankfully, with every temptation we face God himself will give us the strength to resist and the power to endure.¹¹ The Word of God instructs us to “Keep alert and pray otherwise temptation will overpower us.”¹² We are also admonished to remain in submission to God, to resist the devil with the promise that he will leave us. We have His promise that as we draw near to God He draws near to us. As we humble ourselves in His presence, we will be exalted victorious.¹³

⁷ Revelation 2:2-4

⁸ John 15:1-7

⁹ Mark 6:31-32

¹⁰ Erwin W. Lutzer (1941-)

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 10:13 (AMP)

¹² Matthew 26:41

¹³ James 4:7-10

We must take responsibility for our actions. There can be no blame shifting. If we yield to temptation then we have sinned against God, our family and those who have put their trust in us. "There is no way to kill a man's righteousness but by his own consent."¹⁴

"We must be always on our watch against Satan, because, like a thief, he gives no intimation of his approach. Believers who have had experience of the ways of Satan, know that there are certain seasons when he will most probably make an attack, just as at certain seasons bleak winds may be expected; thus the Christian is put on a double guard by fear of danger, and the danger is averted by preparing to meet it. Prevention is better than cure: it is better to be so well armed that the devil will not attack you, than to endure the perils of the fight, even though you come off a conqueror. Pray this evening first that you may not be tempted, and next that if temptation be permitted, you may be delivered from the evil one."¹⁵

Ego Management: Truth or Consequences

"For pastors, popularity, prestige and power are as addictive as any drug-and so, we must avoid this drug and the high it brings."¹⁶

Part of the sin nature that we deal with is our own ego. When talking about this issue we like to use softer, more palatable terms such as, "he has a strong personality", "he's just an independent thinker", or the classic "that's just how he is." The scripture records that men are by nature, historically egocentric. When left to themselves, "everyone did what was right in his own eyes."¹⁷ The reality is, "There's only one thing that can keep growing without nourishment: the human ego."¹⁸

Let us look at the example of Pastor Bob (not his real name). On the surface (when he is seen in public venue), appears to be a nice person. He has that charming smile a warm personality and is a gifted communicator. Beneath the surface, he tends to be narcissistic and resistive to advice from others. He is usually domineering and has a need for control. In proverbs we read, "Fools think they know what is best, but a sensible person listens to advice."¹⁹ With Bob it is a my way or the highway mentality. This person is an accident waiting to happen.

We can be preventative, choosing to deal with the truth of our nature or we can be forced to be reactive when the consequences of denial or neglect emerge. Pastor Bob will need to be intentional in the following ways.

- Determine to be transparent by drawing others into his life by asking for advice, counsel and prayer.²⁰
- Submit your ideas to others seeking their counsel before decisions are announced and implemented.²¹

¹⁴ John Bunyan (1628-1688)

¹⁵ Morning And Evening Daily Readings By Charles H. Spurgeon

¹⁶ The Shepherd's Covenant by H. B. London

¹⁷ Judges 21:25

¹⁸ Marshall Lumsden

¹⁹ Proverbs 12:15 (CEV)

²⁰ Proverbs 28:26

- Be receptive to adjustments and correction.²²
- Develop meaningful accountability were truth not flattery is spoken.²³

Honest Accountability: Healthy Relationships

“For as long as it’s still God’s Today, keep each other on your toes so sin doesn’t slow down your reflexes.”²⁴

Honest accountability provides safety for the minister and to those who are receiving ministry. It is a place of humble confession, genuine acceptance, candid discussion and prayer. When appropriate, there is also needed adjustment and discipline. It is in this setting that healthy relationships are forged and spiritual health and productivity is promoted. This is where the wise reside.

Let me caution you here. It is not enough just to have the systems for accountability in place. There must be an eagerness to be humble²⁵, submissive and straightforward with those to whom you are accountable. Independence without genuine accountability has been the ruin of many good men and ministries.

As a preventative measure, make it your goal to meet with at least one to six other men on a regular basis. I know what you are thinking and I have heard all the excuses. We have been burned before! Whom can we trust? How can we make the time? God’s desire is that we all finish and avoid becoming the next casualty. The author of Ecclesiastes tells us, “It’s better to have a partner than to go it alone. . . By yourself, you are unprotected. With a friend you can face the worst.”²⁶

Another key component of prevention regarding accountability is biblical confrontation. If you know someone is in trouble you have a responsibility to confront.²⁷ If you say or do nothing you are complicit to the activity.

“One of the most fascinating biographies I ever read was that of Irene Webster Smith by Russell Hitt. The title of the book is *Sensei* which means “teacher” in Japanese. Irene Smith was a Quaker and a missionary to Japan for some fifty years. Sensei became her name to the Japanese. She first went to Japan about 1915 under the Japan Evangelistic Band from her native Ireland. Her first assignment was to serve in the Tokyo Rescue Home, which sought to save prostitutes from their entrapment in the government-licensed brothels. In this early experience, Sensei learned how these young girls, who were unwanted by their parents, were sold into a life of prostitution and trained from their earliest years to know no other experience. These days in the Tokyo Rescue Home were very discouraging to Sensei, because these girls, no matter how they seemed to

²¹ Proverbs 15:22,

²² Proverbs 10:17, 12:1, 13:18, 15:32

²³ Proverbs 27:5-6

²⁴ Hebrews 3:13 (TMSG)

²⁵ 1 Peter 5:5

²⁶ Ecclesiastes 4:7-12 (The Message)

²⁷ Matthew 18:15-17, Luke 17:3

repent of their past, would so often revert to their life of immorality as soon as they regained their health.

In the midst of this frustrating job a thought came to Sensei. *It would be better to put a fence at the top of the precipice than an ambulance at the foot.* And with that thought a vision was born—a vision of a home for unwanted girls—a home warmed by love and bright with God’s grace, a home where little girls, once destined for brothels and disease, could be brought up in happiness to lead full and useful Christian lives. And so for many years Sensei turned to the work of endeavoring to keep young girls from falling over this particular precipice.

Which is most important? Picking up the pieces in people’s lives after calamity has struck (running an ambulance service), or catching a few, as it were, midair in a net, or building fences to keep people from trouble in the first place?²⁸

The scriptures tell us not just listen to God’s word. We must do what it says. Otherwise, we are only fooling ourselves.²⁹ They go on to say that if we examine ourselves and honestly deal with our shortcomings we will not come under the stricter judgment of God.³⁰ I know of nothing better than legitimate accountability to accomplish the following.

- It provides encouragement and counsel in keeping our priorities balanced and our love life with God and family on track.
- We have camaraderie when dealing with temptation providing emotional, spiritual and prayer support.
- There is positive peer pressure promoting righteousness and restoration when dealing with areas of weakness and sin.
- It provides an honest evaluation of who we really are at the heart and promotes genuine humility.

Prevention is much less painful than the curing process. Avoiding moral failure or finishing well, the choice is ours!

²⁸ Illustrations Unlimited

²⁹ James 1:22

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 11:31