



Faith Pulpit

Ministry After “The Shelf”

A young pastor proposes new programs in his first church. Some follow his leadership, but others resist change. After two years, the congregation “blows up” and the pastor is forced to resign. His early dreams of ministry have been shattered. He feels he has been “laid on the shelf.” He finds a new job selling life insurance.

A senior pastor, respected by many for his sermons on marriage and the home, finds little time to nurture his own family. Suddenly, his congregation finds him gone, having taken the church organist with him. He leaves the church, his wife, and children behind to start life in another state. He disregarded what he taught to others, and he failed to apply it to himself.

Danger

A very real danger facing full-time Christian workers is the possibility of being “laid on the shelf.” Failure through discouragement or sin springs from the weakness of the human heart which is “deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked” (Jer. 17:9). The concept of being “laid on the shelf” seems to come from the testimony of the apostle Paul: “But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (1 Cor. 9:27).

The word “castaway” has the idea of being disapproved under testing. Paul did not fear loss of salvation, but loss of reward (1 Cor. 9:24-27) and damage to the Gospel of Christ (1 Cor. 9:12, 9:23). Paul knew that God’s resources were adequate to keep him true to his work, if only he were faithful in relying on the Lord alone for his strength (1 Cor. 10:3-5).

Prevention

Any Christian leader can fall into sin that will scar his testimony and limit his service. What are the things that keep a person from being a castaway, from being “laid on the shelf”? They are the simple things of faith that ensure our sensitivity to spiritual reality.

The grace of God is not only the basis of our salvation, but also of our service and of our rewards. Jesus said that the one who has been forgiven much loves much, but the one who is forgiven little loves little (Luke 7:47). Every believer has been forgiven much in God’s eyes; our problem is our undervaluation of our spiritual need. Daily prayer expresses daily dependence (Ps. 55:16-17, Dan. 6:10).

The word of God not only brought us to faith in Christ (II Tim. 3:15, I Pet. 1:23), but it is our offensive weapon (Eph. 6:17) which is able to build us up (Acts 20:32) and keep us from falling into sin (Psalm 119:11). Daily reading from the Scriptures allows God to renew our minds (Rom. 12:1-2) so that He can cleanse, instruct, and use us. When the Word is in our hearts and minds, we can use it daily in witnessing as God gives us opportunity.

Personal diligence is required so that we will add to our faith virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness, brotherly kindness, and love (II Pet. 1:5-7). Without growing, we become unfruitful and forget that we were purged from our old sins (1:8-9). God’s promise is that if we do these things, we will never fall (1:10). In water baptism, the believer makes a public pledge to “walk in newness of life” (Rom. 6:4), and by participating in the Lord’s Supper, the believer acknowledges the need for daily dependence on the Lord.

Immediate confession of known sin (I John 1:9) helps the believer break habits of sin. God is more faithful to forgive our sin when we confess it than we are faithful to confess our sin. Confessing sin right away allows us to remain sensitive and open to the control of the Holy Spirit (John 7:17). Delaying confession hardens the conscience and may lead to additional sinning to cover up the first sin. More severe levels of divine discipline may result, up to physical death (I John 5:16-17).

Teaching concerning divine discipline (Heb. 12:3-15) helps the believer understand the seriousness of sin and the value of God’s grace. Discipline is both positive and negative. Faithful church attendance (Heb. 10:24-25) and respect for the instruction of Christian leaders (Heb. 13:17) strengthen and protect the believer from sin.

Restoration

The restoration of the “castaway” is an important function of Christian leadership. “Ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted” (Gal. 6:1).

Although Eli failed greatly in rearing his own children, God entrusted him with the responsibility of training Samuel. Eli learned enough from his mistakes to contribute to the development of one of the greatest leaders in the Old Testament.

David sinned with Bathsheba and brought great calamity upon himself, his family, and his nation. When he claimed God's grace in confession (Psalm 51:32), God forgave him and restored him to kingship. David was given a new opportunity to "teach transgressors thy ways" so that many would be brought to the Lord.

Peter denied the Lord three times publicly even though he had been specifically warned by Jesus (Mark 14:30-31, 66-72). Although Peter wept bitterly, the Lord still had been praying for him (Luke 22:31-32), and He called for Peter by name and recommissioned him for service (Mark 16:7, John 21:15-19). Peter was transformed into the bold preacher of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40).

Some sins may disqualify a person from the office of pastor or deacon, but the person can still be restored to serve effectively in other areas. His character and Bible knowledge may become mellowed through the crushing realization of his own sinful nature and the tragic consequences of disobedience. God can use a crushed and broken spirit; a meek and contrite heart He will not despise (Ps. 51:17). God's grace always gives hope.

Christian leaders should guard their hearts and minds to avoid falling into sin, with the resulting loss of opportunities. If we cultivate a desire for spiritual fervor and growth within ourselves, we will impart that desire to others. The means of grace are simple and real, and we must rely on them in the spiritual battle. A Christian leader should not only minister to himself and to his "flock," but he should encourage and restore others who labor alongside.

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