

MINISTRY CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR SPIRITUAL HEALTH

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Ministry places enormous pressures on one's integrity and character, pressures which require extra vigilance and a deeper understanding of one's need for God.

It is always gratifying to see Christians become active in church ministry rather than remain mere consumers of spiritual services. There is nothing so fulfilling as to see lives touched and changed through your service, whether you are a volunteer, lay leader, church officer, or staff member.

But the Bible sounds a cautionary note. By its very nature, Christian leadership involves extolling the glory and beauty of God above all else. It means pointing others to God's worth and beauty even when your own heart is numb to any sense of divine love and glory. As someone who ministers to others, how will you survive when that happens? Following are two things to remember.

THE RIGHT THING TO DO

The first—and right—thing to do is to watch your heart with far more diligence than you would have otherwise, and to be very disciplined in observing regular times of daily prayer. In these times you may find your heart warming to God's reality. Prayer can fan the flame of that reality, allowing you to speak to others out of your daily sustenance from God.

Even so, your heart may continue to feel spiritually dry or dead for an extended period. Such a condition requires that you keep your regular times of prayer even more diligently. Humbly acknowledge your dryness to God and set your heart to trust him and

seek him despite it and during it. This deliberate act is itself a great step of spiritual growth and maturity. When you speak to God about your dryness, rather than avoiding prayer times, it reminds you of your weakness and dependence upon his grace for absolutely everything. It drives home the importance and preciousness of your standing in Christ.

THE WRONG THING TO DO

The second—and wrong—thing is to rely not on prayer and your relationship with God but on the excitement of ministry activity and effectiveness. In this way you can begin to lean more on your spiritual gifts than on spiritual grace. In fact, you may mistake the operation of spiritual gifts for the operation of spiritual grace in your life. *Gifts* are abilities God gives us to meet the needs of others in Christ's name—speaking, encouraging, serving, evangelizing, teaching, leading, administering, counseling, discipling, organizing. *Graces*, often called spiritual fruit, are beauties of character—love, joy, peace, humility, gentleness, self-control. Spiritual gifts are what we *do*; spiritual fruit is what we *are*. Unless you understand the greater importance of grace and gospel-character for ministry effectiveness, the discernment and use of spiritual gifts may actually become a liability in your ministry. The terrible danger is that we can look to our ministry activity as evidence that God is with us or as a way to earn God's favor and prove ourselves.

If our hearts remember the gospel and are rejoicing in our justification and adoption, then our ministry is done as a sacrifice of thanksgiving—and the result will be that our ministry is done in love, humility, patience, and tenderness. But if our hearts are seeking self-justification and desiring to control God and others by proving our worth through our ministry

performance, we will identify too closely with our ministry and make it an extension of ourselves. The telltale signs of impatience, irritability, pride, hurt feelings, jealousy, and boasting will appear. We will be driven, scared, and either too timid or too brash. And perhaps, away from the public glare, we will indulge in secret sins. These signs reveal that ministry as a performance is exhausting us and serves as a cover for pride in either one of its two forms, self-aggrandizement or self-hatred.

Here's how this danger can begin. Your prayer life may be nonexistent, or you may have an unforgiving spirit toward someone, or sexual desires may be out of control. But you get involved in some ministry activity, which draws out your spiritual gifts. You begin to serve and help others, and soon you are affirmed by others and told what great things you are doing. You see the effects of your ministry and conclude that God is with you. But actually God was helping someone through your gifts *even though* your heart was far from him. Eventually, if you don't do something about your lack of spiritual fruit and instead build your identity on your spiritual gifts and ministry activity, there will be some kind of collapse. You will blow up at someone or lapse into some sin that destroys your

credibility. And everyone, including you, will be surprised. But you should not be. Spiritual gifts without spiritual fruit is like a tire slowly losing air.

So let's examine ourselves. Is our prayer life dead even though we're effective in ministry? Do we struggle with feeling slighted? Are our feelings always being hurt? Do we experience anxiety and joylessness in our work? Do we find ourselves being highly critical of other churches or ministers or coworkers? Do we engage in self-pity? If these things are true, then our ministry may be skillful and successful, but it is hollow, and we are probably either headed for a breakdown or doomed to produce superficial results. Abraham Kuyper wrote that Phariseeism is like a shadow—it can be deepest and sharpest closest to the light.

Christian ministry changes people. It can make us far better or far worse Christians than we would have been otherwise, but it will not leave us unchanged.

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