

5 Ways to Avoid Shipwreck in the Ministry: Protect Your Calling

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Something profoundly disturbing is happening in the church today. Pastors are leaving the job in alarming numbers. And many who stay are reporting frustration and disillusionment in the ministry. It is a complicated issue. But, there *is* hope for change.

Most of us in ministry began wide-eyed and enthusiastic, with vision and zeal for any challenge. We were called to reach out and serve, to further the Kingdom, and to incarnate Love. And we knew that there was no higher calling in life. What we did not expect was to outlive our energy for the exciting call we had received.

When I was serving in Russia during the 90's, I often felt lonely, inadequate, and misunderstood. I needed someone to help me process important questions, like: How do I handle this power I have? How do I deal with an emotionally unhealthy relationship with a team member? How do I learn from what others are trying to tell me, without becoming someone I don't want to be? Having a coach could have saved me a lot of grief and wasted time.

We at LeaderCare Online want to help you avoid grief and wasted time. We can help you become clear about who you are and what you are truly called to do. We want to help you reclaim the joy and passion with which you entered the ministry. We want to help you protect yourself from failure. We want to help you chart a course that will enable you to finish well.

To help you start thinking differently about your calling, consider these five ways to protect yourself from shipwreck in the ministry:

1. Cultivate a Heart of Humility (and an attitude of dependency on God)

You may be splendidly gifted, knowledgeable, and have years of life and ministry experience. However, if you have not allowed your heart to be humbled, your ministry impact will be limited. And, intentional or not, you will likely infect others with your pride. The ministry comes with tremendous power and responsibility. Without humility you won't use that power well.

Unfortunately, we've all seen people in power hurt themselves and others. It happens far too easily. We don't heed the red flags; we ignore the promptings of the Spirit cautioning

us that we're moving toward dangerous territory; we assert our independence, saying to ourselves, "I can handle this!" As David Hansen says, "ego sin kills the church" (*The Art of Pastoring*, 27-28).

Pride moves into our hearts with a very subtle stealth. And the consequences "punch us in the gut". Without humility, we continue in the wrong direction. Now we have to cover and hide even more. And the devastating cycle goes on and pulls us into its vortex.

Don't let the Enemy of your soul defeat you by using your pride and self-sufficiency against you. Cultivate an attitude of agreement with God Who reminds us that we are dependent on Him for any true, lasting impact on those we serve. We are at our best when we recognize and lean into a desperate and daily need of God's grace.

One of the biggest obstacles to humility is what I like to call our "preferred view" of self. We all have one. (For example, I like to see myself as a little more righteous and a little more sophisticated than I really am!) We spend large amounts of time and energy subtly persuading others to this view, as well. We nurse it and protect it. But, it usually ends up imprisoning us. Free yourself from this bondage by naming it and recognizing its perceived importance in keeping up the image you prefer. Then, decisively choose to ABANDON it.

Begin each day with a willingness to identify and release those things that you cling to in order to bolster your view of yourself. Jesus "emptied Himself" in order to serve us (Philippians 2:7.) Becoming a humble person is largely about "letting go" of those things we hold onto to give us a sense of importance.

Pray, asking God: "Create in me a new heart of humility today; help me to rid myself of my inflated sense of importance; may I learn to have a servant's heart like Yours." *Recognize* that God uses failures, embarrassments, and disappointments in life to chip away at our entrenched pride. *Seek* the feedback of others who can hold a mirror up to your heart.

2. Adjust Your Expectations (and reset others' expectations of you)

Someone has said that you only have enough hours in the day to do God's will. You don't have enough hours to meet *others'* expectations, if they don't align with God's. You actually don't have enough time in the day to meet your *own* expectations, if you are a perfectionist. We get into trouble when we try to do what we're NOT called to do. Knowing who you are, and how you were created and gifted, can help you to be realistic about what *you* are truly called to do.

Lowering or adjusting your expectations is not about being lazy or settling for mediocrity. It's about aligning who you are with your call. Older, seasoned pastors and leaders never tell us that they wished they'd worked harder or put more hours into the job. They do, however, lament that they didn't put more hours into two areas of their lives: more time in prayer listening for God's directives, and more time with their families.

Adjusting your expectations requires that you get to know yourself well and have an honest and realistic assessment of yourself. Recognize your strengths, be honest about your weaknesses, and surround yourself with people who can fill in these gaps. Train others and develop leaders to do some of the work you've taken on yourself. Many pastors are terrified of entrusting the work of the ministry to others. You may have to let others learn from failure or allow the church to feel the impact of things left undone.

One sign that you have trouble adjusting your expectations is a fear of disappointing others. As Larry Crabb puts it, "its frighteningly easy to think that I am being responsible when what I am really doing is meeting other people's expectations and letting them pressure me into cooperating with their agendas. Then I'm taking orders from them, not from God" (*SoulTalk*, 247).

Learn to live with the knowledge that if you do what you are called to, there will always be some who will be unhappy with you. So ask yourself everyday, "Where today might I have to disappoint someone in order to be faithful to my calling?" Pray that you recognize these situations as a matter of faithfulness to your call rather than as failing in it (Luke 16:10).

3. Pay Attention to Your Physical Needs (before they give negative attention to you!)

Taking care of yourself physically is part of your job description. And your personal health affects the health of the church. Too many of us have poor diets—too much caffeine, processed foods and sugar. Some of us have inadequate exercise habits, or none at all. Many don't take regularly scheduled vacations. We don't regard taking care of our body as a priority. And we aren't modeling good habits to our flock. Even Jesus needed rest from time to time.

Ministry requires sacrificial choices and is demanding emotionally, physically, and relationally. Pastors often live with too few resources and a lack of supportive relationships in addition to constant demands. In trying to do it all, you begin to feel that something is stealing your energy and joy. Burnout begins to creep up on you.

You don't realize burnout's destructiveness until you're already weighed down by its effects. But, it certainly saps the energy out of you for loving others well. And it can have a dramatically negative impact on your ability to turn to the One Who truly is able to help you.

One clue that you might be neglecting your physical and emotional health is a change in how you see and react to the people around you. Those you used to care for and feel compassion towards, now become inconveniences. You become cynical, and cynicism causes you to distance yourself and see the very people you lead as "morons." Then, of course, you feel guilty about thinking this way. You feel guilty, that is, unless you're

already numb emotionally. When this becomes your day, you're definitely in need of some help.

Think in terms of work/rest cycles rather than simply getting it all done. In Mark 6:31, Jesus called the disciples away to rest, right in the midst of a crowd of demanding needs. If you wait until all is accomplished in order to "reward" yourself with a break, you will not get much restorative rest. God actually spells out that we need to, "Be still!" in Psalm 46, and acknowledge that He is in control. Observing the Sabbath is a matter of trusting that God will get done what we will not and cannot.

4. Find Fellowship with Others (with whom you can be real)

Maybe you've been taught to remain aloof from your congregation. You've been conditioned to believe that you aren't afforded the luxury of sharing YOUR struggles with anyone. You've been told: "Don't burden your people with your own problems." Or, "You can't make friends with people in your congregation. Some will think you're playing favorites and will be hurt."

So, where do you go? The Bible does not say that you aren't allowed close relationships. And how will we ever model healthy friendships for those we shepherd, if we don't have any? How will they understand that much of transformation into Christlikeness happens in relationship with others?

You have to develop friendships. Be cautious, if you must. Move into friendships slowly, if you are fearful. By all means, choose your friends wisely, but, do choose friends. Find those who understand your call and have the discretion to allow you to be open about your struggles.

It's normal to begin to isolate yourself when you feel emotionally overwhelmed or exhausted. You just want to "back away" and give yourself some relief. But, while isolation may be "normal," it is not healthy; not for very long. Isolation is a primary tool of the Enemy of your soul.

Too many pastors and missionaries have come to avoid letting others "in," protecting themselves from the inevitable pain of relational disappointment. Many of us have been hurt by information having been used against us, rather than to help or nurture us.

We can also feel used by others and we're reluctant to expose ourselves to that risk again. So naturally, we seek to protect ourselves. Who wouldn't? Survival is built into us.

But, it's also the very thing God can use to make us more dependent on Him. And that very protectiveness over ourselves robs us of the richness of what God may be seeking to do for us through others. Remember that to love is to risk. Will we believe that God will come through for us, even if some of the risks we take prove to hurt us?

5. Get Help When You Need It (...not IF, but WHEN)

Pastors who have a solid sense of who they are and to Whom they are ultimately accountable, are not afraid to get help when it's needed. They know that getting help to clarify goals and to redefine the particulars of the unique call on their lives is not a luxury for the weak, but is crucial for the strong, effective shepherd. They also know that the cost is just too high not to.

Many of those in the pastoral role have idealistic expectations of (1) pleasing everyone, (2) doing it all themselves, and (3) resolving all conflicts in the church, to name a few. But, no one can do all that. A good coach can help you accurately assess your power and responsibility, and consequently, help you devise a plan for managing them well. Pastors rarely have the luxury of someone giving undivided attention to the further development of their spiritual and emotional lives. Good coaching can give you the focused attention that you need; help you gain perspective on disappointments, failures, and embarrassments; and assist you in recovering the joy and passion you started with.

Most pastors push themselves much harder than they would push anyone else, but, because the needs are constant, never feel they have done enough. Consequently, many pastors report that they have a lower view of themselves than when they began in ministry. Getting help in assessing yourself at this stage of your life can help you to see yourself more realistically and appreciate what you have been called to do.

Ask yourself this vital question: *Are your commitments really aligned with God's call on your life?* The demands of the job close in on you, and you know you're taking on more than you're handling well, but how do you know what to cut out, say no to, or leave alone?

From time to time we need someone to help us clarify that call again, in light of our present demands. Don't let another day go by, wasting energy on things you were never called to do. We care, we understand, and we want to help . . . so email us today at careforleaders@gmail.com today for a free consultation.