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Establish Priorities

Tom Ascol

Dear Timothy,

Donna and I are very excited for you and Mary as you settle into your new pastorate. It is an awesome responsibility and privilege to care for the souls of God's people. After twenty-five years in this ministry, I still tremble at the greatness of the task. I hope you won't think it presumptuous if I offer you a little "seasoned counsel" from one pastor to another.

One of the greatest ongoing challenges I face in my life as a pastor is maintaining a proper balance in my priorities. Every pastor has several roles that he must fulfill in order to remain faithful to his calling. You must be a student of God's Word. You must be a man of prayer. You must give leadership to the church. You must work hard to preach and teach the Word so that the people under your care are continually being formed by it into the image of Christ. You must do the work of an evangelist and you must give yourself to personal work with individual members. All of this and more goes

with the territory of serving Christ as an undershepherd of souls.

But every pastor is more than a pastor. He is first and foremost a disciple. Typically he also will be a husband and a father. In addition to this he may take on other ministry-related duties as well. How are all of these important roles to be fulfilled without sacrificing the best on the altar of the good? It is a daunting challenge under the very best of circumstances.

A question which I often ask people I counsel is this: "What, in order of priority, has God called you to be?" It is a clarifying question because it forces an evaluation of life on the basis of what is most important. From time to time I put that question to myself and find that it helps me fight the battle for balance in my life. I would encourage you to make it a practice early in your ministry to stop and ask that question on a regular basis.

A Christian

What has God called me to be? First, He calls me to be a sincere, devoted follower of Jesus Christ. This is so basic that it is easy to take for granted and to forget about it. One great danger of the ministry is professionalism. As you will soon discover, a pastor can become very adept at doing his job. Like any other vocation, certain skills can be developed and polished in the gospel ministry. A pastor can become so proficient in his public ministry that others will regard him as very successful.

But where "professionalism" as a mentality takes over a pastor's outlook, his heart will inevitably begin to be neglected. And the heart is the primary tool of every pastor. If you are not loving God with all of your heart because you have

neglected the basic responsibilities of discipleship, it does not matter how professionally “successful” you become. In reality, your apparent success will only be a sham.

Spurgeon tells of a pastor who “preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said that he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again.”¹ Such compartmentalization of life may be acceptable in other professions but it is hardly agreeable with vital Christianity and much less with faithful pastoral ministry.

Many good men have been tripped up at this basic level. In fact, the gallery of fallen pastors is a sober reminder of absolute necessity to make your daily discipleship your top priority. Some of the most emotionally trying moments of my ministry have come upon receiving news that another brother has disqualified himself from the pastorate by self-inflicted moral failure. You are still young in the ministry, but make no mistake, such news will too soon make its way to your doors. Men that you know, or know of, whose gifts and graces you judge to be far superior to your own, will be discovered in scandalous sin.

How does this happen? You can be sure that it doesn’t happen all at once. Disqualifying sin always has a history. And at the root of that history is the neglect of spiritual disciplines. As Bunyan’s Christian puts it, one of the earliest steps down the path of apostasy comes when backsliders “cast off by degrees private duties, as Closet-Prayer, Curbing their Lusts, Watching, Sorrow for Sin, and the like.”²

¹ Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 17.

² John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim’s Progress* (reprint, Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 177.

So, my dear young brother, guard your heart. Go to God's Word first and foremost as a believer. Remember that before you are a shepherd you are a sheep. As a pastor you need the very same things that you commend to others. Follow the wisdom of Robert Murray M'Cheyne who noted, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."³

Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "take heed to yourselves." When he repeats the admonition to Timothy he adds that doing this is an essential ingredient to saving both himself and his hearers (Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 4:16). A pastor must make it a matter of disciplined priority to read, meditate on and memorize Scripture—for his own soul's sake. We must also pray for the work of the Spirit in our lives. Anything less is spiritual malpractice.

A Husband

After being a Christian, God has called me (and you) to be is a husband. Like you, I am blessed with a faithful, godly wife. Donna and I take our covenant vows very seriously, which means that I am to have and to hold her above all others. Next to Jesus Christ, she is my top priority.

It is an awesome responsibility to be a husband. Jesus Christ in His relationship to the church is to be our model. Being the head of a household is a great challenge. A godly wife both needs and desires godly leadership from her husband. The call to be a godly husband includes providing such leadership. Christ calls a man to fight against the opposite and equally deadly errors of self-protecting passivity and

³ Andrew Bonar, *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne* (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1978), 258.

self-serving authoritarianism in the way that he relates to his wife. A passive husband will breed frustration in a wife who desires to be led and may tempt her to become domineering. An authoritarian husband intimidates his wife and may well stifle the development of her spiritual gifts.

In Ephesians 5 Paul makes it clear that Jesus Christ is our model as a husband. His love, sacrifice and care for His bride is to be the pattern for how you relate to Mary. She needs to be secure in your love. She needs to know that she is more important to you than your reputation or the exercise of your public gifts.

A pastor's wife may have the most difficult role in the whole church. Charles Spurgeon noted this with his characteristic wit and tenderness two years before his death. Speaking at a wedding, he said:

If I was a young woman, and was thinking of being married, I would not marry a minister, because the position of minister's wife is a very difficult one for anyone to fill. Churches do not give a married minister two salaries, one for the husband and the other for the wife; but, in many cases, they look for the services of the wife, whether they pay for them or not. The minister's wife is expected also to know everything about the church, and in another sense she is to know nothing of it; and she is equally blamed by some people whether she knows everything or nothing. Her duties consist in being always at home to attend to her husband and her family, and being always out, visiting other people, and doing all sorts of things for the whole church! Well, of course, that is impossible; she cannot be at everybody's beck and call, and she cannot expect to please everybody. Her husband cannot do that, and I think he is a great fool if he tries to do it; and I am certain that, as the husband cannot please everybody, neither can the wife. There will be sure to be somebody or other who will

be displeased, especially if that somebody had herself half hoped to be the minister's wife. Difficulties arise continually in the best regulated churches; and, as I said before, the position of the minister's wife is always a very trying one. Still, I think that if I was a Christian young woman, I would marry a Christian minister if I could, because there is an opportunity of doing so much good in helping him in his service for Christ. It is a great help to the cause of God to keep the minister himself in good order for his work. It is his wife's duty to see that he is not uncomfortable at home; for, if everything there is happy, and free from care, he can give all his thoughts to his preparation for the pulpit; and the godly woman who thus helps her husband to preach better, is herself a preacher though she never speaks in public, and she becomes to the highest decree [sic] useful to the church of Christ committed to her husband's charge.⁴

A pastor's wife sees all of her husband's blemishes and shortcomings and yet must receive instruction in God's Word from him week by week. She lives in a fishbowl. Unrealistic expectations from the congregation can often add great stress to her life. Thoughtless comments, which may or may not be designed to hurt, can wound her deeply. If, in addition to these and other pressures, she feels that her own husband is neglecting her, the pressure can become too great to bear. As a husband, it is my responsibility and privilege to reassure my wife that she is more important to me than any other human relationship that I have. I am called to nurture and cherish her, to help her fulfill her own calling as a woman of God.

⁴ *Spurgeon's Sermons Preached on Unusual Occasions* (Houston, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1978), 248.