

PITFALLS OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

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Part I

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Are you called to ministry? Before you answer, let me say that I believe every Christian is called to some kind of ministry. I think this ministry call is plainly stated in Scripture. Often when we think of "ministry," the first thing we think of is the Ephesians 4:11 five-fold ministry list -- the apostle, prophet, pastor, teacher, and evangelist. But Scripture makes it clear that there are other ministry calls such as administrators, those who give, those who govern, workers of helps, dispensers of mercy and so forth. (See Rom 12:8.) And I also believe that every ministry must include regular prayer, continual Bible study, sharing Jesus with others, teaching Bible classes, and on-going involvement in Christian works.

So far this call to ministry sounds good, doesn't it? We are moving in our gifts, being a Father pleaser, and having good, on-going fellowship with other believers. In fact, it sounds great! But anyone who has served the Lord for a long period of time has already learned that there are pitfalls in our ministry walk.

It is easy to find those who have been set back or injured by some event or snare of life. I regularly encounter Christians who were once fully committed to ministry but who are no longer involved in any way. They are no longer following Jesus in the work of the ministry. They have been sidetracked. Usually these people can tell you why they are no longer in ministry. They can point back to some event or circumstance that knocked them out of the race. Most are still in the church. They are simply not moving in their call.

The object of this teaching is to identify many of the pitfalls that the circumstances of life, our own sin, and/or Satan uses to knock out God's ministers, as well as to provide the Biblical basis for overcoming such pitfalls.

Entrance Into the Ministry

Entering into ministry can roughly be divided into three phases. They are 1) the call, 2) the preparation, and 3) the ministry. For most of us these phases overlap as we grow in Christ.

1. The Call

Sometimes the call to ministry is very specific and can be marked to a time or an event in one's past. I have known many whom God called to ministry during an altar call in a church service. I have known others to whom the Holy Spirit simply spoke. Still others began doing what they were called to do without even realizing "the call" at the beginning of their work. Their service just came naturally to them. Often these people have never thought of themselves as called ministers.

2. The Preparation

The amount of preparation varies with the call. For example, those who preach and teach must prepare more thoroughly in the Word than those who do not. However, all preparation for every Christian ministry involves gaining a

thorough knowledge and understanding of the Bible. Sometimes this includes Bible school, sometimes not.

A diploma or graduate degree doesn't necessarily certify one for ministry. The Holy Spirit often certifies one for ministry before any such diploma is received. Only the Lord knows when each person is ready. Ministry and training can take place at the same time. There is no one correct way training takes place. But rest assured the Holy Spirit will train each person for ministry if he or she is willing.

3. The Ministry

As Christians begin to mature in their call, the Lord gently gives them opportunities to move using the gifts encompassed within the call. At this stage there is usually great joy in the hearts of the young ministers. Why? Because for the first time they experience the joy of "co-laboring" with Jesus. They feel the exhilaration of speaking or acting under the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Often this exhilaration includes fresh new visions of the Lord's harvest by our new minister.

The Testing of Ministers

But God tests all who respond to His ministry call. His reason for testing is not that He might then reject us, but rather that, like Apelles, we may be tested and approved in Christ. (Rom 16:10) The Apostle Paul mentioned this testing process in his letter to the Thessalonian church. He wrote, ". . . we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel." (I Thes 2:4 NIV)

For most, little time passes before the testing begins. Perhaps at a Sunday evening service a young boy receives a call to preach. On Monday he works up enough courage to share God's call on his life with his friends. They respond to his "ministry" with laughter and ridicule. The testing has begun! The time comes for him to receive formal Bible training . . . and there is no money . . . the testing continues. Two years into his pulpit ministry a severe sickness lays him out . . . the testing goes on. We have all heard the stories. And all who have responded to their ministry call can tell their own similar story.

If we are to stay in the race, then we must learn to pass the tests that come along. In order to do that, we must know 1) their purpose, 2) God's objective, and 3) the Biblical principles involved in overcoming them. Let us first look at Jesus to see how His testing relates to these three points.

The Testing of Jesus

It is important for us to recognize that even Jesus, the sinless Son of God, underwent severe testing. Even He had to prove Himself able (the **purpose**) before the awesome task of the redemption of mankind (the **objective**) began. Let's look at Jesus' testing as recorded by Luke:

Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the desert, where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He

ate nothing during those days, and at the end of them he was hungry.

The devil said to him, "If you are the Son of God, tell this stone to become bread."

Jesus answered, "It is written: `Man does not live on bread alone.'"

The devil led him up to a high place and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And he said to him, "I will give you all their authority and splendor, for it has been given to me, and I can give it to anyone I want to. So if you worship me, it will all be yours."

Jesus answered, "It is written: `Worship the Lord your God and serve him only.'"

The devil led him to Jerusalem and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down from here. For it is written: "He will command his angels concerning you to guard you carefully; they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone."

Jesus answered, "It says: `Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time. (Lk 4:1-13 NIV)

Unfortunately, many of us look at Jesus' temptation as being unique to Jesus. We mistakenly think that His temptation has no relevance for us today. That is not so. We are also tempted by the devil. Let's examine the Biblical principles Jesus used to overcome His temptations.

a. **Turning Stones Into Bread**

I have never been specifically tempted to turn a stone into bread. But I have been tempted by the devil using the same principle. The principle of this temptation is:

To accept the devil's provision in place of God's.

Adam was tempted by the devil using this principle and he failed that test. God gave Adam the Tree of Life for food, admonishing him not to eat from the Tree of Death (the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the devil's tree). The devil succeeded in causing Adam to come to him for his food. The Bible says that the devil's fruit was ". . . good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom. . ." (Gen 3:6 NIV) Here is a very important observation: the issue is not whether something is "good" or "bad." The issue is always **where did it come from?** Yes, the devil's fruit can appear to be good. So "good or bad" should never be the test. The only valid test is to examine the source. Where did it come from? Did God provide it? Or did the devil?

Now let's bring this temptation down through the ages. Where is the pitfall for us today? It is simply this: any time we go to any source other than Scripture we are turning stones into bread! It is so significant that Jesus used the word of God as His response in all three of Satan's temptations.

I want to apply this principle specifically to the area of preaching. Any time we go to any source other than Scripture for messages to preach, we are turning stones into bread! Now I am not saying that we cannot draw from the writings or sermons of others. The Lord may well lead us to use them as a source of learning.

What I am saying is this: Satan has packaged the fruit of his Tree of Death as attractive loaves of bread. For example I am convinced that much of the "self-help" teachings used by

many ministers today are the devil's bread. Most such teachings that I have heard or read are designed to assist the Christian in attaining some desirable goal without the painful trip to the cross. Put simply, it often teaches a crossless Christian life. But this is not possible in true Christianity, is it?

Yes, Self-help preaching may cause your church to grow. Self-help teachings on "how to have a happy marriage," or "how to control your anger" may bring more people to your church. Teachings on "how to increase your church's giving," and so forth will indeed increase the giving, but at what cost? Now, don't get me wrong. These are great topics and they should be preached. But the basis of every message must be solidly grounded in Scripture.

The best way to get a church to grow is to allow the Holy Spirit to control it. The best way to have a happy marriage is to make it Christ-centered. The best way to control your anger is to be crucified with Christ. The best way to increase your church's giving is to make the Holy Spirit the treasurer. Every self-help teaching that is not riveted to Scripture is a subtle substitute used in place of the Holy Spirit.

Furthermore, my *self* doesn't need anyone's help. It is fully capable of managing my life apart from God. It is fully capable of guiding me firmly along the "broad road that leads to destruction." (Matt 7:13 NIV) But my Bible teaches me that my "self" has but one destiny from God's view, the cross. Did Jesus not say, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"? (Matt 8:34 NIV)

b. **The Kingdoms of This World**

What is the significance of Satan's offering Jesus all the kingdoms of the world if only He would bow down and worship him? God's will is to establish His kingdom on earth. Part of God's plan was that Jesus had to fulfill His destiny on Calvary to usher in the kingdom. Satan offered Jesus *his* kingdom in place of God's! It was painless, no Calvary! Had Jesus accepted Satan's offer, there would be no kingdom of God on earth today as we know it.

Satan is still offering earthly kingdoms to us in place of God's! All anyone must do to get his or her own kingdom is to do it the world's way. Use all the right techniques, the right music, make the church "seeker-friendly," and substitute good, soothing, ear-pleasing messages in place of preaching the cross on which Jesus suffered, bled and died.

And this illustration is only one example of how to have one's own kingdom. There are many, many ways to do it. Satan is printing new brochures almost daily. But the only way to enter into and possess the kingdom Jesus died for is through prayer, trials, heart-break and much pain -- the same way Jesus ushered in the kingdom through the New Covenant. Of course, our Lord gives us great and wonderful blessings along the way. But our way, if it is also God's way, always includes the cross.

c. **Throw Yourself Down From Here**

When Satan tempted Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple Jesus responded by quoting Deuteronomy: "Do not test the Lord your God . . ." (6:16 NIV). Notice that Satan cleverly quoted Scripture in his attempt to lure Jesus. But Jesus saw that the real issue was testing God and He refused to do so.

Unfortunately, I'm afraid many of us "jump" not realizing that in so doing, we are testing God. In fact, I myself recently jumped from the pinnacle of the temple! But with the help of the Holy Spirit I finally saw my error and have received the Lord's forgiveness. Here is how it happened:

Some years ago the Lord promised to supply our needs as we fully obeyed His leading to travel, minister and write. This worked well until we encountered a long period of financial shortfall. Funds began to decrease as our publishing expenses rose. The situation continued until we began to use some credit to fulfill the Lord's instructions to us.

One day I became quite angry over the situation. I told the Lord, "You said that if we obeyed, You would supply our needs. You never said that we would borrow money to do Your will! Now, God, where's the money?" Very shortly after that showdown with God, I was reading the Psalms when these verses leapt from the page to smite my heart:

But they continued to sin against him, rebelling in the desert against the Most High. They willfully **put God to the test by demanding** the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, "Can God spread a table in the desert?" (78:17-19 NIV, emphasis added.)

I can assure you that when I saw these verses I was fully aware by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit that I had done precisely the same thing Israel had done. I had done what Satan tempted Jesus to do. I had put God to the test. Besides that I saw another, even more painful Scripture:

In the desert they gave in to their cravings; in the wasteland they put God to the test. **So he gave them what they asked for, but sent a wasting disease upon them.** (Ps 106:14,15 NIV, emphasis added.)

After repentance and confession, it has now become my intent to apply another Scripture . . . "a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise." (Ps 51:17 NIV).

I have resolved never again to jump from the pinnacle of the temple!

The Cross Versus the Comfortable Lifestyle

Every human being has a desire for comfort. I don't think this is wrong. Nor do I condemn comfort or those living in comfort. I enjoy comfort as much as the next person. But when this desire for comfort becomes a primary life concern or motivation it can quickly become a snare to our ministry call.

There are those in ministry today who have managed to hold a steady course through many of the pitfalls until the issue of creature comfort comes along. Then they become hopelessly ensnared. They have strayed from God's will in order to live a more comfortable lifestyle. Notice that I am not necessarily blaming Satan for this one. I view this pitfall more from our own flesh than as a device of Satan's.

Now I am not saying that if any Christian or any pastor/minister is living in comfort he is in the devil's snare or has somehow compromised his or her ministry. Here is the issue: Did he or she abandon God's will for the comfort he or she now enjoys? Or, if God wants to take away his comfortable lifestyle and place him in a hardship ministry, is he unwilling to do so? If the answer to either of these questions is "yes" our minister has traded his ministry call for comfort. I know a missionary couple who were living in comfort in an African nation when God called them to start all over in the austere, hostile environment of another country. They said, "Yes! Lord" without a moment's hesitation! They were not tied to a comfortable lifestyle. They passed the test with flying colors. But there are others who would remain in comfort rather than leave it for God's will.

It is our flesh that craves the comfort. The cross crucifies flesh. It puts flesh to death. If flesh is dead, the comfort it craves is also dead. Paul knew this for he tells us that he had ". . . learned the secret of being content in any and every situation. . ." (Phil 4:12 NIV) What he is saying is simply this: if you have comfort, be grateful for it and enjoy it. If not, make the best of what you have and keep the goal of your ministry call in full view. Paul was willing to suffer any discomfort, any hardship, or any indignation for the sake of Christ. We too, must be willing to give up any comfort to move in obedience to His will.

In Part II of this teaching on the pitfalls of the ministry call, we will examine several specific ways Satan uses to snare us.

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Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l provides in-country Bible school courses and leadership training seminars. The classes and seminars are taught by seasoned, anointed teachers. The subject matter is directed towards the development and maturing of Christian leaders. The goal of the Ministry is to produce leaders who will be better equipped to lead and direct national churches.

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