

PITFALLS OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Part III

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I recently heard someone quote a study that has been done of Old Testament leaders. That study found that, of the dozens of Old Testament leaders, only about one-fourth of them finished well. Isn't that amazing? These men and women had been personally picked by God to accomplish His divine plan, and yet, they fell so short on so many occasions. I think that if we analyzed these leaders, we would find that they fell into many of the pitfalls we have been examining in this three part teaching!

The Purification Process

Let's continue this examination of the pitfalls those in ministry face. (And remember, I believe that all of us are called to the ministry in some form or another.) Some of the pitfalls involve sin, others do not. God will not tolerate endlessly those that involve sin, especially sin of gross immorality. Sooner or later He will deal with the minister who is enmeshed in gross sin.

But what about those of us who have read this teaching and believe that we aren't snared by any of the pitfalls? We think we're on top of things. We say to ourselves, "This is interesting reading but it doesn't apply to me."

Let's not be too hasty in that conclusion. As I see the condition of man described in Scripture, there are seeds of sin in every human heart. Some seeds take root early, others lie dormant only to sprout later in life. When the right conditions exist, the right soil and the right amount of sun and rain, the seed comes to life. So it is with the seeds of sin in the human heart.

God knows the seeds are there. In fact, He has a divine itinerary in which He, by His Holy Spirit, exposes those seeds. The Holy Spirit identifies them, digs them out, and destroys them through the process we call sanctification. This is a life long process. As long as we cooperate, the process continues smoothly, but not painlessly. It is always a painful process to have one's sin exposed, dealt with, and removed. But this process is one of the works of the Holy Spirit. He ". . . will teach you all things . . ." (Jn 14:26 NIV) "All things" include the sin in our lives.

As long as we do our part in not allowing the seed to develop, God keeps the enemy at arms length. He doesn't allow Satan to exploit the unexposed seed. The Holy Spirit exposes and convicts, we confess, repent, and forsake. . . one less seed. The process continues over the years.

But suppose one day the Holy Spirit exposes a seed and we refuse to deal with it. In such cases God invokes what I call the "Five-Step Plan."

The Five-Step Plan

Remember, it is God's unyielding will to have a pure church. Our unrepentant minister with the "seed denial" problem is part of that church. Here's how God deals with that person.

Step One - The Holy Spirit Speaks

God first sends His Holy Spirit to speak to our inner self. Again and again, we hear that voice pointing out our sin. If we refuse to hear Him, then Step Two begins.

Step Two - The Written Word

At this point every time our unrepentant Christian opens his Bible, it speaks of his sin! He is reading in Genesis, and there it is. He turns to the Psalms and there it is again. He looks in Revelation - again, he reads about his sin. Everywhere he looks the Bible speaks of his sin! If he refuses to yield to God's Word, then Step Three begins.

Step Three - Friends and Loved Ones Speak

By this time those who are close to our sinner are beginning to notice traces of his sin. God will use a spouse, friend, brother or sister, or pastor at step three. One day someone who is willing confronts the sinner and points out the sin she has seen. If our sinner repents, praise the Lord. This is the purpose of spiritual confrontation in the body of Christ, to deal effectively with sin. But if he does not heed that word, he may soon find himself facing Step Four.

Step Four - Church Discipline

Although the purpose of all church discipline is "to restore" those in sin to church fellowship (See Gal 6:1), the process is so painful to all concerned that it is rarely administered today. And often when it is administered, it is improperly done, but that is another subject. If our unrepentant Christian has refused the correction of the first three steps, church discipline is the next appropriate instrument to be used to bring about repentance.

But if the church fails to administer discipline, or if our sinner refuses the church discipline, he is then scheduled for Step Five.

Step Five - Let's Go Public

Remember, the Holy Spirit's objective with our sinner is repentance. If he has stubbornly refused the first four steps, the Holy Spirit says, "Alright, since you won't repent, I'll tell the whole world about your sin! I'm going to expose your sin publicly."

In a few short days, or weeks, our sinner is caught in the act of his sin! "Did you hear about the pastor of such-and-such church? He was caught in adultery!" (or stealing money, or lying, or whatever.) It is in this manner that individual leaders in the church, and even whole ministries, are brought down.

One thing is certain; the Holy Spirit has worked for years before taking this drastic measure. When you hear of a public exposure of sin, you may be assured that the Holy Spirit has exhausted all previous means over many years to bring about repentance.

I have heard that many people confronted and warned American televangelist Jim Bakker before his public exposure. I personally know two people who confronted him with his sin as many as eleven years before his public exposure. God is indeed merciful.

An Awful End

This section applies to that very small percentage of church leaders who, even after public exposure, will not repent. When it finally becomes evident that there is no repentance despite public disgrace, the Lord then begins the process of purging the impure from His church, the body of Christ. I believe Genesis 6:3 is applicable here. *Then the Lord said, "My Spirit will not contend with man forever . . ."* (NIV) (Yes, I know this Scripture applies to the lost whom the Spirit is wooing, but I believe it also applies to the long-term unrepentant church leader.)

At this point in time, I believe that God finally withdraws His spirit altogether from that person and a counterfeit spirit is sent. (II Thessalonians 2:11) It is at this point that these people begin to believe the lie. This is what happened to Saul. At the end of his life, Saul went to the witch of Endor seeking guidance (I Sam 28). He had given himself over that much to the lie.

I know of a man in America who, forty years ago, was a genuine minister in the church. He had a powerful television ministry. Yet during his adult life, he transitioned from a powerful Bible based preacher to a cult leader proclaiming horribly twisted false doctrines. He ended his public "ministry" denying the existence of sin or the need for repentance. Yet he had thousands of followers even at the end. I believe this man lost God's spirit and embraced a false spirit.

The very thought of this is frightening to me. The idea that God's Spirit can be rejected to the point of abandonment of a man because of his sin is terribly sobering. I once heard a Bible teacher say that the worst

thing God could do for man is to let him go his own way. I believe that is true.

How did this televangelist transition from a genuine man of God to a false prophet? James illustrates the basic principle:

But each one is tempted when, by his own evil desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (Jas 1:14,15 NIV)

From this Scripture it is apparent that there was sin in this minister's life -- sin from which he would not turn. When God cannot bring about repentance, He must purge the impure. Paul addresses this:

The coming of the lawless one will be in accordance with the work of Satan displayed in all kinds of counterfeit miracles, signs and wonders, and in every sort of evil that **deceives those who are perishing**. They perish because **they refused to love the truth** and so be saved. For this reason **God sends them a powerful delusion so that they will believe the lie** and so that all will be condemned who have not believed the truth but have delighted in wickedness. (II Thes 2:9-12 NIV, emphasis added.)

It seems to me that this Scripture tells us that God sends a powerful delusion that causes them to embrace Satan's counterfeit as truth while rejecting God's truth as a lie! Such delusion is indeed fatal! Yet, one may live and "minister" for years after receiving the delusion.

Why did they perish? The answer is found in the Scripture above: because they refused to **love** the truth. Now, before we get too comfortable complimenting ourselves for loving truth, let's examine this concept more closely. It's easy for me to love truth that isn't contradictory to my will. For example, Scripture commands, "Husbands, love you wives. . ." (Eph 5:25 NIV) It's easy for me to love that truth because I do love my wife very much. But what if the truth points to my own sin. Can I love that truth as well? Much more difficult, isn't it?

God's Word is truth. As Christians, we are called on to love that truth. Satan hates the truth of God's Word. The more we commit ourselves to loving this truth, the more immune we become to the father of lies and the more immune we become to his snares.

How Does Our Minister Get Out of the Pit?

All who purpose to follow Jesus in the ministry will face pitfalls throughout his or her ministry. When we fall into one of these pitfalls, we usually lose our orientation. The only thing we really know is that we have hit the bottom of the pit. We lose perspective and don't know what to do or how to go about recovery.

The question at this point is: **What must one do when he or she finds himself snared in a pitfall?**

I don't want to minimize the awful consequences of some of these pitfalls. Some of them are indeed tragic. I understand that. But I want to lay out certain general principles that will help us recover when we find ourselves in the pit. First, we need to recognize that the primary cause of the pitfall is **spiritual**. If sin is involved, we need to view the situation in stark honesty from a Biblical perspective. What was the basis of this problem? Where did I go wrong Biblically? What caused me to act as I did?

The second thing we need to do is to recognize that the consequences of these pitfalls are usually both spiritual and natural. This means that we must make sure we do the right things in both these realms.

Once we have understood our sin, we must 1) repent and confess that sin to God, and ask His forgiveness. If other people are involved, we must then 2) confess our sin against them and ask forgiveness of anyone whom we have hurt, wronged or sinned against. Once we have done this fully and completely, *the spiritual basis for the continuation of the pitfall is destroyed.*

Then, only the **natural** consequences remain. If you have stolen money, it must be repaid, and so on. Sometimes natural consequences diminish over time. However, sometimes they are permanent and cannot be removed. In such cases, God's grace enables us to live with them.

Concerning confession of sin to those whom we have hurt, let me remind you of some practical guidelines. If the people we have sinned against are aware of the sin, then full confession is a must. Their forgiveness is desirable. If one refuses to forgive, the burden then becomes his or hers, not yours. You are forgiven because you obeyed the word of God.

If the person you have sinned against is not aware of the sin, then seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit as to whether or not you must confess that sin to him or her. There are times when a full confession can be devastating to the one wronged without any real fruit coming from the confession. Of course, the Holy Spirit may modify these guidelines. In such cases, always obey the Holy Spirit.

The Wimp Factor

When one is a citizen of any given nation, he has the right to enjoy the privileges that nation has to offer. Strangers from another nation do not have the same rights that a citizen does. Scripture teaches us that we are citizens of the kingdom of God. Peter even goes so far as to say that we are "aliens and strangers" here on earth. (1 Pet 2:11)

God has secretly set a brilliant, powerful, invisible spiritual kingdom in the very midst of this natural world. Those who gain access and abide in this kingdom move in spiritual power and authority. They

enjoy supernatural provision, supernatural power and supernatural authority.

Why then do so few Christians fully enter into that power and authority? Jesus gave a plain answer to this question in Matthew's Gospel:

"From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, **and forceful men lay hold of it.**" (Matt 11:12 NIV emphasis added.)

Here Jesus clearly states that those who are forceful, deliberate, strong, and determined are able to enter into that spiritual kingdom. Please understand, salvation is not the issue here. The issue is **entering into** the invisible kingdom of God and its inherent benefits. So many Christians who have legal citizenship in the kingdom never enter it because they are not determined or forceful.

I am convinced that there are ministers of the Gospel in this category. They are good, faithful servants of God who day after day, year after year, labor in the Master's vineyard. Yet they never display enough force, energy or determination to enter into the kingdom where the full benefits are. God, help us to see this and divinely energize us to be forceful enough to enter into your kingdom and it's benefits! And if necessary, help us to exchange all we have to enter in. Is not this the proper meaning of the parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price?

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." (Matt 13:44,45 NIV)

That is being forceful. That is determination. That is audacious. That is total abandonment. But what are these verses saying about the indecisive, the cautious, the fearful . . . ? I think this could be labeled as the sin of complacency. Jesus is telling us, "Wimps will never enter in!"

A Radiant Church

The Bible specifically describes the kind of church Jesus intends to have. Look at its description as found in Ephesians:

. . . Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Eph 5:25-27 NIV)

This description of the church Jesus intends to have is indeed pure. As I read these verses I am very

aware of my own shortcomings compared to this radiant church. But I do not measure my shortcomings by my own abilities, otherwise I would become discouraged, even to the point of giving up. I have learned to measure my shortcomings by His ability to lift me above them. In this I place my hope. Christ Jesus gave Himself up to make the church -- that's you and me -- holy. His labor is never in vain! He will have a holy church.

The call to ministry is a sacred call. Human nature, sin, the flesh, and the devil have set many obstacles in the path of every minister of the Gospel. But God has, by His word and His Spirit, made every provision for the successful completion of the ministry to which He has called each of us.

None of us are perfect. If we begin to look back at our failures and the pitfalls that have snared us, we certainly will feel less than adequate. But Scripture admonishes us not to look back. God's grace and mercy are far greater than any of my failures. Not many in ministry today can claim a failure rate as high as that of King David -- murder, adultery, failure as a proper father, etc. -- yet God vouched for David by saying, "I have found David son of Jesse a man after my own heart"! (Acts 13:22 NIV) This gives me great joy, peace and hope!

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