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A Funny Thing Happened To My Devotional Life On The Way To The Pulpit

By Prentice A. Meador, Jr.

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**& How can a preacher provide for his
own spiritual renewal?**
**& Why is it so easy to fake being a spiri-
tual person?**
**& What is the greatest danger a minister
faces in his own personal
spiritual life?**

* * * * *

If you have spent any time in the pulpit, you know the temptation of guiding the spiritual life of others only to neglect your own. A very observant follower of Christ once remarked, "There is a God-shaped blank in each one of us that only God can fill."

So an angry Eugen Peterson indicts today's pulpit ministers as "a company of shopkeepers . . . preoccupied with shopkeepers' concerns—how to keep the customers happy, how to lure customers away from the competitors down the street, how to package the goods so that the customers will lay out more money."¹

If Peterson is right, the most vulnerable area of ministry is the minister's inner life. Paul knew something of this danger and held up a yellow flashing light to any of us who would follow him in preaching. He compared himself to an athlete in training: "I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."²

Gerald Kennedy mentions that "A friend of mine who has been in ministry for many years said what troubled him more than anything else was that so many preachers he knew were not very religious men."³ "The alarming thing about some Christian leaders today," writes Sam Stone, "is that they seem oblivious to the implications of the message they preach. They can shout about holy living; they can

write about the need for devotion; they can teach about Christian behavior—but seemingly they fail to realize that the message must first be obeyed in their own lives."⁴

Before this begins to look like an indictment of every other preacher, let me readily confess that books such as Gordon MacDonald's *Renewing Your Spiritual Passion*, Stuart Briscoe's *Spiritual Stamina*, and Eugene Peterson's *Working The Angles* have refocused my attention for developing my own spiritual and inner life. As these and other books point out, if I am to have anything to say to my congregation on Sunday, I must be developing my own spirituality Monday through Saturday. But that's hard!

Hindrances to Developing Our Spiritual Life

A major hurdle I encounter in my ministry is letting the urgent crowd out the important things. This is what Charles Hummel calls the **Tyranny of the Urgent**. How easy it is to become naive and to think that one can drive the car on gas that has never been put in his tank. Simply doing more, even good stuff, can lead to inner emptiness and spiritual void.

A second hindrance is living in a culture when instant results are expected. This is what Bill Hybels

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calls “The Instamatic Era.” Businesses talk about “the bottom line.” We Americans are obsessed with results. Our culture screams at us: “The point of life is success.” Or as Oscar Wilde put it, “In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.”⁵ Looking for harvest without attention to planting is deadly.

A third hindrance is failing to value the importance of crashing through the quitting points in life. This is what the Bible calls “perseverance” (James 1:12; Hebrews 12:1ff). As a runner, I have faced numerous times when I was tempted to quit the race. My legs were too tired, my back was aching, and I felt I couldn’t go any further. Yet, like so many other runners, I have learned to crash through those quitting points and just keep running. It is so tempting at times to quit ministry. The criticisms, the depression, the expectations, the public arena—these and other forces can cause you to give up. So I really like Timberlake’s book—*It’s Always Too Soon to Quit*. You can’t quit and live the spiritual life.

Another hurdle to developing our spiritual life is failing to appreciate the importance of day-to-day practices. This is what we call “habit” or “constant use” (Hebrews 5:14). Maybe it’s because ministry is given to interruptions. Or maybe it’s because some of us have decided that we can push a magic button to become spiritual or take three easy steps to become Christ-like. Whatever the reason, a failure to appreciate process—habits—can paralyze spiritual growth.

Another hindrance is allowing our energies and talents to be over-worked and frustrated. This is what psychologists call “burn out.” “We are Americans and we have been taught that all things are possible to him who works hard. And not only possible, but expected! We are competitive—may the best man win,”⁶ writes Richard Exley.

He concludes that a minister is not immune to the achiever syndrome of burn out: “If his public ministry is any indication of his work habits, then it’s safe to conclude that he is a confirmed workaholic. He thinks nothing of putting in 80 to 90 hours a week. Suddenly, at mid-life, he realizes the futility of it all, but he is at a loss to make a change. He doesn’t know anything else. Lonely and depressed, he’s especially vulnerable.”⁷

What I’m saying is simply this: there are some

major hindrances to developing a spiritual life in a minister’s life. What seems natural, almost second nature, and very crucial is not at all easy. Of course,

God never said it would be easy!

These hindrances to developing our own spiritual life wreak havoc. Not only do we become undisciplined but we also become cozy, unrelated, irritable, and susceptible to spiritual disease. The problem is compounded in that fellow Christians may even encourage us to have this kind of ministry.

“This is not entirely our fault. Great crowds of people have entered into a grand conspiracy to eliminate prayer, scripture, and spiritual direction from our lives. They are concerned with our image and standing, with what they can measure, with what produces successful church-building programs and impressive attendance charts with sociological impact and economic viability. They do their best to fill our schedules with meetings and appointments so that there is time for neither solitude nor leisure to be before God, to ponder scripture, to be unhurried with another person. We get both ecclesiastical and community support in conducting a ministry that is inattentive to God and therefore without foundations. Still, that is no excuse.”⁸

Solutions: Living a Holy Life

“Holiness” conveys to some people stained-glass windows, halos, and a lifestyle that has nothing to do with the 21st century. The Bible, however, describes holy people as being something other than anemic: a suntanned John the Baptist, a tough Elijah, and a real man known as Jesus, are not found living in monasteries. They live in the real world. Instead of being miserable, they are filled with joy. They know how to tame lions, sing in prisons, and look death in the eye. They are real human beings who have learned to daily walk with God and be transformed by that walk.

“Holiness” is not for the elite, but the elect. Holiness is not so much the mark of just a few people selected by the church to be saints as it is a major characteristic of every Christian. Paul “did not use the name **Saint** exclusively for himself and those like him, but applied it to all the members in the church in Corinth and, as the rest of the epistle makes clear,

this included some who had not progressed far in the life of sanctification. All alike are called to be saints (I Cor. 1:1-2).⁹

Maybe we need the reminder — God expects personal spiritual growth in our lives. “Anyone who lives on milk, not being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness” (Hebrews 5:13). Such spiritual growth requires that we be yoked together with God. While we are free to walk in the harmony with God, we are not to wander off and “do our own thing.” Even if members of the church help us to do it (Luke 9:23-24).

When we are yoked together with God, our holy living comes from where God leads us. “From beginning to end sanctification is the work of God. Nobody ever made himself or herself holy, for holiness is far beyond the reach of the natural person.”¹⁰ Holy living is always something into which God guides us on a daily basis. If we are to become one with God, if we are to become holy people, if we are to truly belong to him, then we must stay as close to him as possible. I am particularly impressed with Harry Ironside’s *Holiness: The False and The True* in which Kenneth Prior gives the following three agents of holy living:

Sanctification by the Blood of Christ:
eternal

Sanctification by the Holy Spirit: internal

Sanctification by the Word of God:
external results¹¹

So instead of holiness being for just the elite or a

negative connotation involving the avoidance of sin, a holy, disciplined life is one that is totally given over to service to God. Such discipline requires daily work, sustained effort, self-denial, perseverance, and accountability.

If we are to become perfect like God, if we want to be mature, there are no magic push-buttons or simple short cuts. Holiness is the foundation of the disciplined life, and it is discipline that protects the devotional life of the minister.¹² As you and I read carefully the articles in this particular issue, we will be encouraged to practice the disciplines of holy living. Yet as Richard Foster maintains, “Even spiritual exercises in disciplines can be terribly hollow. The real center is hearing God’s voice and obeying his word.”¹³ The more we listen to God and the more we walk with him, the more we thirst for spiritual things. Perhaps that’s to be expected because in the words of Henri Nouwen, “The mystical has been short-changed in our culture.”¹⁴ So Richard Foster, who has written some excellent books on devotional living, says, “There’s been a great disillusionment with the superficiality of modern culture, especially the religious culture and a longing for something that can really help.”¹⁵

So whether we are dealing with time, distractions, consistency, or other problems, honesty with God demands that we realize that we cannot give spiritual guidance to others until we have spent time with God himself. In the words of Oswald Chambers’ classic, “I must give **MY UTMOST FOR HIS HIGHEST.**”