

## Overcoming Leadership Digression

The Apostle Paul drafted a letter, which we call 1 Timothy, to a young pastor named Timothy centuries ago with a warning that 21<sup>st</sup> century pastors need to heed. Throughout most of the letter, Paul is advising young Timothy on matters concerning how to lead the church. Timothy was leading the Ephesian Church, a church whose leaders happened to be heretics. So, the seasoned apostle guides the rookie pastor on the importance of teaching sound doctrine and on the selection of church leaders.

An abrupt shift occurs, however, in 1 Timothy 4:7-16. Paul has spent most of the letter guiding Timothy on how to lead others. Now, the apostle focuses his words on challenging Timothy to lead himself. Paul writes, “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness” (4:7) and “pay close attention to yourself” (4:16). It is almost as if Paul realized at this point in the letter that Timothy has no chance of leading others if he cannot lead himself. A message like this one to church leaders will never become outdated.

When pastoral leaders neglect self-leadership, we enter into a digression that could potentially destroy our ministry. Here is the digression:

- **The Pharisee Syndrome:** The Pharisees of Jesus’ day tended to put a “yoke” on other people that they themselves were not willing or able to bear. In other words, they expected more from those they led than they expected from themselves. This is bad leadership, to say the least. In one of the church’s I served, a lay person came to me with a strong desire to lead. I gave him the chance, but he wasn’t reliable. He would call meetings and then show up late and unprepared, or forget to show up at all. He was hard on others who showed up late and he was hard on volunteers who didn’t do what they promised. I suspect they had learned this from him. In short, he expected more from those he led than he expected from himself. A lack of self-leadership destroyed this person’s leadership influence immediately.
- **Vision Leak:** When Christian leaders neglect the importance of leading ourselves to the waters of Christ’s refreshing love through bible study, prayer, and other spiritually-formative disciplines, we quickly forget why we’re doing what we’re doing in ministry. Neglecting self-leadership causes the leader’s vision for ministry to leak out. When this happens, the leader begins to see ministry as a career through which to build one’s personal kingdom instead of as a vocation through which to build the kingdom of God. The passion for ministry dies and the pastor goes through the motions of ministry robotically, sort of like the guy in the old Dunkin donuts commercial who woke up and rolled out of bed saying, “time to make the donuts.” Doing overtakes being when the pastor stinks at self-leadership.
- **Dry-Up:** As vision leaks and what the pastor *does* matters more to her than who she *is*, the pastor begins to dry up. When the Christian leader dries up, that leader has nothing left to give to other people. There have been a few times when I have dried up, due to my inability to lead myself spiritually and emotionally. On several of these occasions I recall seeing one of my church members in Walmart and hiding behind a cereal box or running to the other side of the store to hide from them. I am embarrassed to admit this, since I usually relish the opportunity to minister to someone “off campus.” My inclination to avoid people is a huge red flag that reminds me to get on the self-leadership track, especially in the area of my devotional life.

- **Act-Out:** On the heels of dry-up comes the tendency to act-out. When people are not receiving what they need from our leadership because we are spiritually dry, they will begin to challenge us. Of course, unless we have gotten on the self-leadership track we will begin to act-out toward those who challenge us. While I have never overtly acted out, I have been in board meetings where I envisioned myself overturning the board room table and yelling at particular board members “if you think you can do a better job leading the church, here are the keys to the lead pastor’s office!” Thankfully, I never actually did what I imagined myself doing, but just entertaining the thought was a sobering wake-up call to refocus on my self-leadership.
- **Burn-Out:** I do not believe burn-out is caused by busyness in ministry; it is caused by trying to do the work of the Lord without the Lord. There are few ministry contexts more challenging and busier than impoverished villages in Africa. Pastors in that context are bombarded with the challenge of caring for dozens of orphaned children whose parents have died of AIDS or other diseases. People are starving, sometimes to death. Warlords and gang members threaten to make matters worse. If any pastor is expected to experience burn-out, as commonly defined, it is the African minister. Yet, the African pastors I have known evidence not burn-out but passionate zeal for Christ and the villages they serve. I’m convinced that these pastors maintain self-leadership as a high priority or they would indeed burn-out in no time at all. The pastor who neglects self-leadership will dry-up, act-out, and, eventually, burn-out. The burned-out pastor gives up trying to minister and has not even the energy left to fake ministry anymore.
- **Fall-Out:** Unless the burned-out pastor takes a break from ministry to get some major help in some of the ways outlined below, the pastor will eventually experience the fall-out known as moral failure. Long before a pastor is running off for an affair with his secretary, long before a pastor is embezzling ministry funds for her time-share in Hawaii, and long before a pastor finds himself addicted to pills and alcohol, the pastor has neglected self-leadership. Not only does fall-out destroy the leader, it almost always devastates the community the leader was called to lead. If only the leader would have seen one of the previous red flags listed above and pursued help, fall-out could have been avoided.

It’s not too late for you. Perhaps you are beginning to see the *Pharisee Syndrome* show up in your ministry as you challenge others to pray and read the bible, though you haven’t done either in weeks. Maybe you’ve had a *Vision Leak* by slipping out of ministry and into career mode as you find yourself more consumed with the work of the Lord than the Lord of the work. Could it be that you have had a *Dry-Up* and, therefore, have little energy left to give the people you are called to serve. A ministry *Dry-Up*, if not treated, will often evolve into an *Act-Out* causing you to harshly snap at the people you have been called to lovingly lead. If self-leadership is still neglected, *Burn-Out* will occur leaving you depleted of any spiritual, emotional, or physical energy at all. Unfortunately, being human, you will still have enough energy to sin. *Burn-Out*, unless confessed and remedied, will eventually lead to the *Fall-Out* of moral failure.

Whether you find yourself in the early or late digression of neglecting self-leadership, here is what you can do:

- **Confess it to God.** When we voice our confessions to God we are also moving beyond self-deception and telling ourselves the truth God knows we need to hear.

- **Call in some friends.** No matter where you are in the debilitating digression, you will need your spouse and friends to offer both support and accountability. Invite them into your struggle. You will be glad you did.
- **Consult a counselor.** Ongoing professional Christian counseling ensures that you take seriously your process toward health, since you have to pay and make time for it. More importantly, a qualified counselor has likely sat with people in your dilemma many times before and has learned, through trial and error, how to help people like you.
- **Contemplate the Psalms.** If you have gone far down the road in the digression, praying may be too much of a challenge at this point. The good news is that you can pray the prayers of others by reading the Psalms. The Psalms are prayers known more for their honest angst than their theological profundity. Pray them aloud and with emotion when you don't have your own words to pray. When you do, you will experience soul-therapy.

If you find yourself digressing in self-leadership, I pray you will utilize the resources above. Don't wait until you reach the next stage of digression. Do something now so that the grace of God can make you into the leader He has called you to be for your congregation.

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