

The Subtle Danger of Idolizing Pastoral Ministry

by Jesse Barrington | *Interview*

James: What are some of the most subtle pitfalls and attacks from the devil that you can warn others about? You know, Paul said we shouldn't be ignorant of the schemes of the devil.

Jesse: It seems to me there's a summary that Satan is continually working on. Now, the means he will go about; the schemes he will go about to bring us to this place are innumerable. But it seems to me it keeps getting to one point, and that is this: to get your eyes off of Jesus Christ and onto yourself.

And so there are many different ways he goes about this, whether it's through different relationships, whether it's spiritual pride, whether it's in sin, temptations, but inevitably, as I talk with people or look at my own life, we come to find out there's been a shift and I'm no longer looking to abiding in Jesus Christ. And if he can get you to stop abiding in Jesus Christ, and get your eyes off of Him and onto yourself, then what John 15 says is true - without Him you can do nothing. It will just unravel very quickly. So the subtlety of Satan in so many different ways to just slowly get your eyes off of Jesus Christ.

I confess last year in the conference, he did it with me in the area of ministry, where I was finding identity in ministry rather than the identity of a resurrected Savior in Jesus Christ. And things began to unravel. And as I would look at my life, I would say what's wrong? I'm reading. I'm studying. I'm preaching. I'm evangelizing. I'm praying. What's going on here? Well, what had subtly happened is I no longer found my identity as a person under Jesus Christ or in Christ. It was: I'm a pastor. So it's very subtle, but usually, you'll find that, oh, I've taken my eyes off of Christ.

James: As you look back, how did that subtly happen to you?

Jesse: Well, I began to see that I was asking of pastoral ministry what it could never give me. I was asking it to be my functional savior. And so you begin to put demands on things. And you can do this with your marriage. You can do it with friends, your job, your workplace. The moment you ask something to be what only Christ can be for you, then you put demands upon that thing. And it will eventually begin to expose and show, hey, you've done something wrong here. And so, I was asking of ministry to be my joy. I was asking of ministry to be my identity. And I was so looking for it in ministry, that I was willing to begin to neglect other areas

of my life that God's called me to, namely, my marriage, my children. Because I'm so wanting to find joy and identity in ministry, not in Jesus Christ.

Paul Washer - this has been 14 years ago. Probably the first time I met him or second time. He looked me in the eye and he said, "*Jesse, the will of God for your life is perfect.*" I said, "*What do you mean by that?*" He said, "*God will never ask you to forsake one area of stewardship to fulfill another.*" And you apply that to where I was at last year. I don't have to forsake my wife to fulfill my call in ministry. There are always going to be strains. There's always a constant reforming - *semper reformanda* - we're always reforming. We're always looking and examining. But you never have to forsake the one to fulfill the other. And that's a sign that we're off.

James: And I guess this kind of deals with the one question. Have you ever struggled with being burned out as a pastor? If so, why? And what helped you to get out of that season? And what did you learn?

Jesse: In 1 Thessalonians 5, Paul says, we ask you, brothers, to respect those who toil, who labor among you. And he asks them to respect them because of the work that they do. And so I take from that that the role of the pastor is going to be one that is a toiling and an exhausting role. And that's different though than being burned out. So when we're fulfilling our role pastorally, we should be exhausted. And that's not wrong. The difference is being burned out. And what I came to see is I was beginning to be burned out because I was relying on my own strength, my own power, and again, I was looking to ministry to be my functional savior. And it's a very subtle change. It happens gradually over time.

You know, one of the evidences you can see in this is you'll fill your schedule with so much busyness, that one of the things that will begin to slip away is prayer. And prayer always reveals pride. In other words, the more I'm praying, probably the less proud I am and the less I'm praying, the more proud I am. So, your prayer life is revealing your pride life. Your dependency upon Jesus is seen in your prayer life. And so as I began to see prayer begin to take a back seat, and as I began to look to ministry what it could never be and ask of ministry to be what it never should be, which is my functional savior. And I began to be willing to give up things to get from ministry what I was looking for which can only be found in Christ.

And so, pastoral ministry in the true sense has always been energizing and exciting for me. But when you see yourself beginning to be burned out, then you are looking to ministry for what it shouldn't be, you're relying upon your own strength instead of the power of the Holy Spirit. Or, you've given ministry the

priority it should not have in your life. Meaning, you're willing to neglect other things, like your wife and your children. And when you do any of those things, you're going to burn out. Because now you're in it alone. And praise God that He brings you to that place. Our church was very gracious with me. My co-pastor who pastors me and I pastor him came to me and said, brother, you just need to take some time. And so I stepped away. I went and got with the Lord.

James: How long?

Jesse: It ended up being three months. That was the best and the hardest time of my life. Because I woke up every morning, James, with nothing to put before the Lord for His approval - in the sense of ministry. Like, look at the sermon I preached. Look at these people. Look at the counseling. Look at the souls. I had nothing. I woke up in desperate need of a resurrected Savior every day, and found my identity and acceptance before God in Christ alone. And it was healing. I repented to my wife. Repented to my kids. Repented to the church. And God has graciously restored me in that. And the church was so gracious and kind with me. And I think one of the great challenges with pastoral ministry is that when you begin to give it a wrong priority - meaning, you neglect things in your life that you shouldn't - and I'm not accusing anyone in our church of this - but it's almost accepted, because you're doing kingdom work. Where if someone was giving up their wife for the stock market, we would say, oh, look how impure this man is. Look how ill-motive and wrongly prioritized he is. But a man can do it in ministry and people will almost applaud him. And brother, it's wrong. It's wrong. So, yeah, by God's grace - three months. And we stepped away from the church. Because I knew if I was in the church, I would pastor.

So we went to Mack's church quite often. We went to a few other brother's churches. We traveled some. And it was a very restoring time for the church and a very restoring time for me. So, praise the Lord.