

Discerning Darkness: “Cleanse Thou Me From Secret Faults” By Stephen L. Martyn

When I look back over all of those splendid young men from the Northwest Texas Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who attended Asbury Theological Seminary with me in the mid 1970's, my heart becomes deeply saddened with their dramatic drop out rate from ministry. Of 32 men, over 50% of them are long gone from any kind of official ministry today. Some fell through grievous sin; some became frustrated and walked away from ordained ministry; others simply decided they had missed the call to begin with and were happy to return to the life of the laity. Unfortunately this tragic dropout rate has proven to be normative for clergy leadership in the church today. This article is an attempt to lay open the life of one of those young men and how he almost became a dropout from ministry himself. It offers a rather candid view of the nature of sin, not for the purpose of parading fallen nature, but rather for the purpose of alerting women and men in ministry today to the insidious nature of evil and the precautions that must be maintained to guard the heart from darkness. In the seasons of pastoral life, there must be ongoing discernment of darkness if the light of Christ is going to shine without obstruction.

Pride Goes Before

When I graduated with a Masters of Divinity from Asbury Theological Seminary in the summer of 1976 I had a brimming expectation that I would do well in ministry. I had confidence that I had one of the finest degrees in the world, which, when matched with the natural gifts of speaking and persuasion that the Lord had given me, would result in God's church being grown and blessed.

Though these thoughts were mostly implicit in my mind (that is I really could not have fully explicated them at the time) they were nevertheless very much driving forces within. The shocking truth to me now is the heart attitude I nurtured then. My attitude toward life and ministry was summed up in four terrible words: *I can do this.*

I moved forward on the genuinely held belief that through great preaching and a strong, winsome, personality, I could build God's church. "I can do this!" Now, over three decades later, I see the sad truth of my heart's condition in the season of early adulthood. Before ever even entering into full time ministry for the Lord I had thrown myself off of the path of life through what the early church labeled "stupid presumption."

The late 4th century church father, John Cassian, warned of the serious danger of falling off of what he called "the royal road" of discernment (Conferences 62). Cassian very aptly pointed out that lack of discernment would keep us from reaching our end, which is God. According to Cassian two lapses of discernment will prevent us from reaching the goal. He taught that we are to avoid the

extremes of “stupid presumption” on the right, and sinful “carelessness” on the left. Discernment keeps the *monos* (or monk) on the royal road of holiness by preventing him:

From veering to the right, that is, it keeps him from going with stupid presumption and excessive fervor beyond the boundary of reasonable restraint. It keeps him from going to the left to carelessness and sin, to sluggishness of spirit (Conferences 62).

Without even knowing it I had stepped off of the blessed path of humility and right onto the broad plain of “stupid presumption.” I had set out to do ministry for the Lord in my own strength with my own gifts and graces. I was guilty of nothing short of prideful arrogance.

Adrian van Kaam and Susan Muto name this essential form of human sinfulness as the “pride-form.” In their *Summa Forma Theologica, Formation Theology, Volume One, Foundations of Christian Formation*, they write:

The further we delve into applied formation theology, the more we recognize the erratic inclinations of our fallen condition that result in deformation. The root of this blindness is our pride-form; it poses as the make-believe center of our human and Christian existence. This quasi-foundational life form conflicts with the Christ-form of our soul...Promoted instead is a counterfeit spiritual life of self-sufficiency that can never offer us lasting peace and joy (Foundations 19-20).

Maxie Dunnam and his daughter Kimberly Dunnam Reisman write in The Workbook on the 7 Deadly Sins, “Pride is the itch for recognition. It is sin expressed in the need to always put “I” at the center” (Workbook 37).

While waving the Christian flag high, I marched off of the graduation stage in Wilmore to my first ministry assignment in the Texas Panhandle with a swelling and very fallen “I” at the center of my life. There would be some very difficult days ahead.

While it would be wrong to say that everything done in those days erupted from a fallen and prideful heart—there was some very real and good ministry that took place in Jesus’ name—I would deceive myself even now if I didn’t confess that there were serious difficulties in those days because of my “pride-form.” The problem I soon came to discover with the fallen nature of the pride-form was that it was always seeking to exalt itself and its projects and needs upon everyone else.

The formula is quite simple: if I think I have what it takes to be successful for God, then I expect the people, events, and even things of my life to all cooperate in promoting my success. In my clouded thinking, my success became synonymous with the advancement of the kingdom of God.

The simple signs of my arrogance, *“I can do this! I know what it will take for the church to be successful in fulfilling her mission. I need everyone to be on board with me!”* are all painfully clear to me now in this season of mature ministry. Then, however, I was oblivious to my sin.

Inevitably when the direct object of the sentence becomes “me” life and ministry begin to degenerate. Self-exalting pride stands in sharp contradiction to God and how he works for the redemption of the world. The Heavenly Father simply will not long allow an ego-driven individual to stand within the church. In my situation, as I know in many others, life and ministry became problematic very quickly for out of pride began arising the other deadly sins.

THE ONSET OF GREED

I well remember having to face very quickly the realities of living within a pastor’s salary. The Lord had blessed Diane and I with our first child in 1977. We were serving a small rural congregation over 60 miles from a major city. This meant frequent trips to visit hospitals in that city. The ministry position simply required that I do a huge amount of driving both within the expansive West Texas county that I served and back and forth to various hospitals in the area. We soon came to realize that after covering my professional expenses we were not able to make ends meet for the basic requirements of our family.

Anxiety thus crept in the door of my heart. How would I ever be able to send my children to college? And how in the world would Diane and I possibly be able to retire? The situation seemed intolerable to me.

Many years later I would read about the tactics Satan used in the lives of some of the first Christian monks in order to entrap them in the sin of avarice (greed). John Cassian wrote that once the disease of avarice began to grip a monk’s heart, it made him concerned about even very little amounts of money:

For he complains that what is supplied in the monastery is inadequate and can hardly sustain a healthy and robust body. What if he were struck with bad health and there were nothing special set aside for curing his illness? The monastery’s allowance is meager, and there is gross neglect of the sick. If there were nothing of his own with which to regain his bodily health he would surely die a wretched death. Even the very clothing that is supplied is inadequate, and it is up to him to find out where he can get something else to wear (The Institutes 171).

A temptation described in the late 4th century now repeated itself in the late 20th century. How in the world could I make it on the pitiful salary I was being paid? From the fear and anxiety that arose out of my concern of not having enough to provide for basic needs, I began investing small amounts of money. In fact I

could only invest \$50 a month. Then in addition, I began “moonlighting” with three additional part time jobs. I worked for a funeral home, helped run a community ambulance service, and took vacation time to work on a farm during harvest seasons.

In retrospect I now know that the absolute worst thing that could ever happen to a young Christian minister of the Gospel happened: over a period of three years pretty much everything I invested in turned to gold! I had done it! I had been highly successful in investing. We would have a retirement after all; the kids would be able to go to college. We would have something in life. God was going to let us be millionaires!

But a slow disease was creeping into my heart. Its affects were seen by what seemed to be both an insatiable desire to make more and the insane thought that God was on my side enabling me to make more. In the most amazing incident of all, in a four-day period I cleared in one single investment more than my entire annual salary. Then rather than taking the earnings and placing them in a relatively safe instrument, I turned them over into increasingly risky investments.

Before I knew it I was up and about before 6:00 am not in order to have prayer and devotions but to listen to the Hong Kong gold and silver markets. Cassian described the disease exactly, “when he has eventually made the money that he wanted, he is all the more fiercely and vehemently tortured with how to double it...for when money increases the frenzy of covetousness intensifies” (Institutes 171-172).

Thus the young man who had been sent out to shepherd God’s church turned his heart, mind and affections to becoming a millionaire for God. John Cassian anticipated my heart again:

All his thoughts are preoccupied with gain, and with his heart’s gaze he searches out nothing else than where he can get hold of money so that he will be able to flee from the discipline of the monastery as soon as he can. His faith disappears whenever there glitters some hope of gain (Institutes 172).

In his infinite love God allowed the small fortune I had made in just a few years to collapse. I had done the classical foolish thing of thinking that I was invincible and thus overextended my holdings to such a dangerous degree that when the silver market collapsed in the late 70’s followed by the grain embargo imposed by the United States on the Russians, my gain was reduced to substantial debt.

O Wretched Lust

With the onset of avarice it seems that the door of my heart was sufficiently pried open to allow several of the other deadly sins to come rushing in at the same time. The first one I noticed was lust. To my absolute shame I started struggling

with emotional fantasies about women other than my wife. This baffles me now because clearly and literally I was married to the single most beautiful woman in the church. My wife was and is a precious gift to me; one that was completely undeserved. Why in the world was illicit sensual pleasure even being allowed in my thought process? And what kind of hole was in my spiritual heart that would permit me to be attracted to someone other than my spouse?

At this point all I can do is get down on my knees in gratitude and thankfulness that no real opportunity for adultery ever presented itself nor did I pursue such a possibility. I have to laugh and say that there are some strong advantages to being bald-headed and unattractive! Nevertheless, an actual sin had been committed in my thought processes (“But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery...” Matthew 5.28).

Commenting on the admonition by Jesus in the above verse, Maxie Dunnam and Kimberly Reisman write:

I don't believe Jesus was condemning everyone who has ever experienced the natural surge of sexual excitement; those feelings are a good, necessary, and important part of being human. To condemn them would be cruel. Yet, Jesus is demanding a great deal from us. The demand comes because the path of lust is so insidious. Sex never "just happens." It is always a step-by-step process, beginning with a look or a thought, and progressing, often so slowly as to go unnoticed, until it has wreaked its havoc. The demand also comes because...lust is an overmastering preoccupation. When we become preoccupied with an object that we desire, our energies are refocused in a new direction; other areas that might have previously commanded our attention no longer do so, leaving a void. It is no wonder that many persons instinctively sense when there is something "not right" about the way their partners are now relating to them, even when nothing has happened yet. So Jesus' words are not some harsh condemnation of our natural sexual appetites. They are a warning: Lust is a deadly preoccupation. Sometimes that preoccupation results in action, sometimes it does not, but always it disrupts healthy relationships and endangers promises of faithfulness (Workbook 144).

Thus I was faced, once again, with the reality of my own sinful nature: some insecurity, some screaming need, some fallen desire, some crossed emotional wiring was threatening to not only take over my will but to destroy my life and the lives of those I loved.

Very quickly I had to come to grips with the call of Christian integrity as a pastor, which asked me to love every person that I served with a chaste love; that is with a love that sought to bring the goodness of God into their lives. Chaste love simply would not allow me to love anyone for my own selfish, fallen purposes. In addition, chaste love required me to keep very strict borders on wandering thoughts.

Several years later I would be introduced to the term “custody of the eyes” which is a term the church has historically used to describe the restraint we are called to place on inappropriate “wanderings” of eyes and heart. To be honest, I am deeply thankful during those first years of ministry in the late 70’s that Internet pornography was not yet a reality in that I don’t know if I could have withstood the temptation. Whether it was inappropriate gazing on the physical beauty of those I served or the temptation to view pornographic trash, of necessity custody of the eyes had to become an adopted way of life. The consequences of not guarding my eyes and heart were simply untenable.

The open door of lust also served as a huge wake up call to the need to develop the primary relationship of my life with my wife, Diane. This would unfortunately take years for me to get my feet on solid ground. It was the jewel of her quiet, calm, and loving spirit that drew me over the years to learn how to live in an ongoing relationship of love; and it was clearly the white hot fire of the Holy Spirit that singed me away from a full blown collapse into lust, fantasy and corruption.

Slouching At Noon

John Cassian offered the amazing insight that when a monk opened the door of his heart to greed then a complaining spirit was soon to follow. That very progression began to unfold in my life as well. After several years in that church I began to feel restless for another appointment. The church was not going down hill at all. It was definitely holding its own. But we were not growing in a manner that I thought we should. Again, Cassian captured what was transpiring in my heart:

Not content to set his hands to any kind of work, he finds fault with everything that the well-being of the monastery demands must be done. He keeps careful watch for occasions that will surely offend and anger him, lest he seem moved to leave the discipline of the [calling] for an insignificant reason (Institutes 173).

In a strict sense I was not lazy at all. I faithfully fulfilled the duties of a country pastor. I preached and taught the Word of God; I visited house to house and then some. I kept up with the administration of the church, and I even helped do physical upkeep and repair on the church. The truth is that I left the church in far better physical condition than when I inherited it including a brand new parsonage. Yet, in all of my “busyness” there was a pronounced and totally unknown (at the time) degree of laziness. I had allowed my life to be directed by the needs of the people I served almost solely to the exclusion of how the Holy Spirit was seeking to lead and grow the congregation.

I was busy, yes. But I was not directed by anything much other than need. Only a few years into the nonsense of anxiously trying to please people I came to the

undeniable conclusion that meeting the needs of the people I served was absolutely impossible. No one could even come close to meeting both their real needs and their expectations of what a “good” pastor should be.

It was at this very point that what I began to see within the congregation was “depreciative” rather than “appreciative.” That is, all I focused upon was what was wrong with the setting verses the goodness that was still very much present. When this happens one’s horizon begins to shrink to where all that is visible are the flaws, the inconsistencies, and the broken places. Separation then becomes the only viable option while a spirit of complaint grows more and more pronounced.

Then yet another deadly sin came slouching through the door of my heart: envy. A couple of the guys that I went to seminary with were promoted to some really outstanding positions within the Annual Conference. The problem of comparison (I am just as gifted as they are!) and outright jealousy (Why are these guys favored and I am left high and dry on the plains?) was now in my life.

As I approached the 5th anniversary of ministry in that country church I had come to the clear conclusion that the only thing I wanted out of the church was out. I was not paid an adequate wage; the demands of the congregation were impossible to meet; and my pride filled competencies had proven inadequate to significantly grow the congregation. Then, in a failed effort to provide financial security for my family I had actually ended up placing us in serious fiscal jeopardy. By the spring of 1981 I had been all but enveloped by the ancient deadly sin of the noonday devil. I just didn’t care about being a pastor any longer.

Exodus

I inwardly quit the ministry. It was an impossible job and I really didn’t want to waste my life in such a frustrating arena. In my far too self-centered thoughts, I made a bargain with God. “I will try one more church but if this same nonsense continues then I will check out of ordained ministry.” I am assured that the Lord laughed.

What I do know for sure is that the Lord moved in a merciful and redeeming way for what followed arose from nothing less than sheer grace. Diane and I were appointed to pastor a marvelously healthy congregation very close to where I grew up. It was a larger church filled with West-Texas ranchers. From the very beginning of that amazing appointment there was a good chemistry between us and the people we were called to serve. We were loved and appreciated and paid a salary that we could live on. We had been transplanted into fertile soil where a wilted plant could be revived.

I knew that if there would be any hope of wholeness in my life then I would have to make some major changes immediately. Two steps had to be taken. With the nonsense of chasing after wealth laid down the first step involved committing every morning to a season of prayer and devotion. In order to have uninterrupted time with God I walked to the church early in the morning (so that my car would not be seen thus signaling my presence) and literally locked myself in the library. I started reading classical devotional texts such as Oswald Chambers, My Utmost for His Highest and The Imitation Of Christ, by Thomas a Kempis. I read the Word of God in order to listen for directives for my personal life rather than just trying to pick up preaching material. And I prayed.

There would be days when I would spend hours in that library simply reading, praying, and meditating on the Word and journaling. The most important issue was that I was allowing the Holy Spirit to form a “heart disposition” in my life of giving God a set time and a space to speak love and truth into my life on a daily basis.

The second step I knew that I had to take was to gather a small group of dedicated disciples together in order to mutually encourage one another in our walk and to hold one another accountable for our lives, our relationships, and our ministries. I invited two of the saints in that church to meet with me every week for prayer and encouragement.

In yet another amazing stream of grace, I began reading Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline and simultaneously taught it to our Sunday evening worship crowd. This text opened to me both the classical means of grace and the freedom of a disciplined and directed life. Right in the midst of reading Foster I received one of the clearest calls from the Lord that I have ever been given. The Spirit directed me to go back to graduate school in order to better grasp and live the spiritual foundations of Christianity.

Slowly, like a little stream pulsing into a parched field, new life began running into my heart. The purgative fires of ministry and the repentance that followed had served to open my life in completely new ways to the light of the Gospel. The Lord had moved me on a transformative journey from pride, through humiliation, to a new heart disposition of humility. I was learning the greatest lesson of all: in all things depend upon the Lord! Muto and van Kaam say this well when they write, “If there is any lesson Christian ministry teaches us, it is that we are not made to do it ourselves!” (Growing through the Stress of Ministry 18). By no means was the transformation process complete in my life, but a new direction had been set and the journey home had begun.

Humble Yourselves

My personal story of near collapse has been shared for the purpose of opening pastor’s spiritual eyes to the fact that whatever season of life they are traveling

through, the need for vigilance against the darkness of sin must be maintained. This can be compared to driving a car. Regardless of how new of a driver you may be or how many years of experience you may possess, anytime you are driving an automobile there is need for continual awareness. The second your attention becomes distracted by something else while driving is the very second that you are in danger of both inflicting harm and receiving harm. Responsible driving demands continual focused attention. And please do note that while decades of experience may give one a certain maturity in driving, they do not in any capacity decrease the danger involved. If anything, a long and safe driving record may only serve to increase laxity.

Just as the rules of the road demand continual vigilance, the same applies with our Christian journey. The minute we divide the primary affection of our hearts away from Jesus and faithfully following him to anything or anybody else is the same minute that we are in danger of allowing pride to infect our lives and inflict destruction in our ministries. Spiritual pride reads like this: "Look at who I am! Just look at what I have accomplished! I will demand that life goes my way! I am far more interested in proving my self-worth (ego-project) than in following after Jesus. What really counts in the end is my own well being."

These types of heart descriptors throw our lives open to the spiritual cancer of pride, which if left unchecked, will expose the entire structure of our being to darkness. Arrogance (inordinate and misdirected self-love) in the human heart spreads like the prairie fires I had to fight as a teenager: fast and furious and not leaving much standing behind.

Bishop Lance Webb offers the following warning about the spread of pride in our lives:

Each of the other six sins in a very definite way is a child of pride. Envy is self-love unable to permit anyone to excel or rise above one's own superiority, with resulting hate, jealousy, intolerance, prejudice, slander, gossip, and use of sarcasm or more violent means of leveling others to one's own height. Anger is self-love striking out with hostility and resentment at those threatening or getting in the way of the fulfillment of the image of one's vision. Dejection is self-love in despair and condemnation of oneself, resulting in apathy, carelessness, unconcern, and boredom. Avarice is self-love seeking to exalt or to forget oneself in material things. Lust and gluttony are self-love seeking to exalt oneself in pleasures and sensual satisfactions, or to escape and forget one's failures and wrongs (Conquering The Seven Deadly Sins pp. 41-42).

Humility always stands as the primary guard against self-exalting pride. Peter wrote:

And all of you must clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humble

yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you in due time (I Peter 5.5b-6).

Humility will always move us to recognize that we are “creations,” that is the work and artistry of Another; and that we are fallen sinners. We have volitionally left the loving and good design of our creator. Just as the rich should bring themselves low (James 1.10) because their wealth will not cover up their essential sinfulness, so also those of us who are Christian pastors should humble ourselves because our ordinations will not even begin to cover our sinful natures. Yes, we are called to lead the flock assigned to us. But in doing so we must never deceive ourselves by mis-thinking that we are not sinful and in need of grace. In fact, our only safe refuge is in the essential self-understanding of St. Paul as revealed in I Timothy 1.15, “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the foremost.” The Greek word for “foremost” is *protos* and it means “chief, primary, first.” The application of this verse is pointed: I am the chief of sinners.

The Precautions

The beginning of holiness is the unclouded and undiluted acceptance of the fact that all of the deadly sins reside in my life. I have a mighty savior but I need a mighty savior precisely because I am in such terrible straits. I am thoroughly sinful. If this is the case, then I need to be alert because according to Peter there is one who boastfully roams around seeking to devour anyone who is accessible (I Peter 5.8). Make no mistake, the deadly sins make us vulnerable to the consuming darkness and being a pastor offers no immunity whatsoever.

Envy comes in some not so subtle forms in ministry. It is normally completely wrapped around an attack on the perceived unfairness of life. “This guy is a jerk, why in the world did he get that position! Or, I have every bit as much to offer a congregation as she does. Why was she promoted leaving me behind?” No doubt you have not only heard these stories before, but you have actually felt them as well. Pull your wild emotions in the instant you sense your heart is on the wrong path. Let the ancient remedy of thanksgiving fill your thoughts and return at once to a posture of praise and worship. Lift up the blessed words of the prophets, the kings, and the psalmist, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever” (2 Chronicles 20.21; Psalm 136.1).

Above all be highly cautious around those notorious breeding grounds of envy and disgruntlement: conference meetings and judicatory gatherings. Stand firm in your faith when the babbling gaggle of preachers around you turns into depreciative “gitching” sessions. A complaining heart will only steal your joy, remove the peace of the Lord, and open your heart to the downward pull of a complaining and bitter spirit. Jesus came into the world not to let everyone know how desperately unfair life was but to become the way of life for us. Speak words filled with hope and let your heart overflow with goodly themes.

Anger seems to either be smoldering in the background or blazing in the foreground among the vast majority of male pastors I encounter. And while I do not see it as often in female clergy, I am not naïve enough to suggest that anger is biased only toward males. Anger breaks down the doors of our hearts when we choose to inordinately focus on the injuries of life (especially what we perceive as injurious to us) to the exclusion of Divine sovereignty and providential care. Of course there is a righteous anger that should be directed against evil and injustice. Of course we must fight the good fight by standing for the right. But in standing against injustice we are directed by self-donating love rather than leveling revenge. Self-donating love seeks the good of all involved, even when punishment may be appropriate. The latter desires nothing but destruction.

When we as pastors and ministers of the Gospel have not yet gone down into the depths of life and found that even in the “fiery trials” God really is good and he truly is willing goodness toward us and that this life is a good life despite how hard it may be at times, then we will not be able to close the gate against the seething ooze of disappointment, resentment, and outrage. There is a bottom line here: is God good or is he not? If he is good then I can literally abandon my life to him in faith, hope, and love. If he is not good then I really have been cheated in life and have every right to reduce living to outrage and despair.

Sloth is tragically deceptive in that it will allow the unsuspecting pastor to be very busy, even terribly overextended. But in the midst of excessive “busyness” the harried leader becomes less and less directed by love while succumbing more and more to either the expectations of others or the screaming insecurities of his or her own life. When love breaks down then focus and direction become scattered. As the heart continues to be divided between trying to please others and having some sense of personal fulfillment, fatigue sets in. It almost always begins with physical fatigue even to the point where you are dragging yourself around in an exhausted stupor.

In his redemptive self-disclosure, Rebuilding Your Broken World, Gordon MacDonald writes:

Weariness is a spiritual and physical plague of our time. Modern men and women are choosing to live in constant emotional and spiritual deficit. Most of us are expending more energy than we are taking in (Rebuilding 122).

Burnout will inevitably follow a prolonged denial of physical and emotional limits. Perhaps even worse, an unchecked plunge into rampant busyness and extended fatigue will bring about decisions that will often lead to moral or ethical collapse. When our physical bodies are stressed and our spiritual hearts drained then emotionally we scream out for something to make us feel better. Actions tend to follow that may bring momentary release but lifetime regret.

This disease of sloth leaps onto the heart where it begins narrowing the focus of love to the point that the heart becomes lazy and undisciplined. Laziness right in the middle of rampant busyness is another one of the plagues within ministry today. The ultimate irony of this disease is that it normally clouds the heart of the pastor to such a terrible degree that he or she eliminates any kind of true devotional time from their schedule. Ministry in the name of Jesus is reduced to a career without the power or presence of Jesus. Left without any true reference point, the soul then sets out busily building a kingdom of self. Love for God and humanity collapse to ego project.

Avarice comes rushing in when the soul is no longer anchored in the values and life of the Kingdom of God. If it is ultimately my responsibility to provide for myself then I must procure my own security. Whether fear causes this (the fear of not having enough) or unbridled greed for excess (the selfish demand for the “good life”), the devastating results are the same. The soul shrivels to a grasping, hoarding, clutch on its adulterous substitutes for God. Prestige, status, position, accumulation are now the actual fuel that drives the engine of life. Thus when I sink to the level of defining myself by the church I serve, the ministry I perform, or the wealth I have accumulated, then I have diminished my value as a human being to what I can functionally accomplish. Human history has well documented that functional accomplishment in and of itself simply does not deliver on its deceptive promise of fulfillment or security. The church affirms that we are to work and serve well but that we are never to be deceived by thinking that accomplishment or accumulation will bring any kind of ultimate security. Only within the Father’s house will we find the love to still our restless hearts and the solidity to calm our every fear.

Most of us in the North American church need to hear two words regarding greed. The first is that within the perspective of the greater world we truly are wealthy. For the most part we have pensions, health insurance, stable salaries, excellent housing, and healthy living conditions—none of which thousands upon thousands of third world pastors have. The second word is that we need to “let go”. We need to let go of and repent of our selfish inner desires to have the self-pampering luxuries and forever-proliferating toys of our hedonistic and materialistic culture. In addition, we need to let go of our own wealth (as little of it as we seem to think we have) and reverse the whole tragic bent toward hoarding in our hearts by allowing Christ to transform us into giving, loving servants of others. No trophies will go with us to heaven. No accumulated material wealth will go either. Only the love that the Lord has grown in our hearts—love for Him, and love for others--will accompany our transformed hearts into the New Jerusalem.

Lust so permeates our culture that it has now become an enemy against which we must do battle on a daily basis. If texts such as Rebuilding Your Broken World by Gordon MacDonald do any thing for us they well demonstrate that a

moral collapse and sexual fall can happen to the best of pastors. By no means does our calling shield us from conflict against this enemy.

Lust is the cavernous, insatiable, illicit desire for intimacy. It is self-centered with no thought for the well being of its “object.” It turns its victims into drooling beasts. While pastors would never intentionally set out on a course to become sub-human, they are, nevertheless, notoriously guilty of disrupting the balance of their lives to where they allow the enemy to come straight into the vacuums created. When, for instance, a pastor fails to adhere to nutritional sanity, fails to physically exercise or enter into any kind of “temple care,” fails to spend regular significant time in developing an ongoing relationship with his or her spouse, or if single, with cherished friends, and fails to intentionally seek out replenishing activities such as having fun at a basketball game or taking a stroll in a park, then a gradual erosion of both ministerial and familial presence is inevitable. Precisely because of the lack of balance in the totality of their lives the emotions of pastors begin screaming out: “Help me! Help me! Do whatever it takes to make me feel better!” And what Arterburn, Stoeker and Yorkey describe in Every Man’s Battle: Winning the War on Sexual Temptation One Victory at a Time as “Satan’s Cruise Missiles” comes flying through the door or pops up on an Internet window (see also Every Woman’s Battle: Discovering God’s Plan for Sexual and Emotional Fulfillment by Shannon Ethridge and Steve Arterburn. Hear the word: when we run ourselves into the ground then we open our lives to the demonic influence of lust. In like manner, when we fail to root our lives deep into the soil of God’s word, then we are subject to being swept away by the themes of the dominant culture.

Gluttony is an insatiable, unquenchable thirst and hunger for more. Rather than moderation in all things, gluttony screams for excess in all things. The sad and tragic result of gluttony can be viewed at any meeting of preachers across the United States today: graphic, widespread obesity.

Gluttony, therefore, drives us away from the historic Christian practices of fasting and moderation by seducing us with the “freedom” of throwing off restraint. This so called freedom, however, is resulting in a major health care crisis for undisciplined pastors. But even more serious is the spiritual damage done when limits and discretion are ignored. The early church actually listed gluttony as the first of the deadly sins. John Cassian counseled:

However high the walls may be that protect a city, and however unyielding its shut gates, it will be destroyed by the betrayal of even the smallest back door (Institutes 123).

The “back door” of gluttony will create an “inextinguishable fire of the flesh” (Institutes 120) that will bring the whole house of the soul down. On the other hand, when this lesser sin is overcome through appropriate fasting and dietary sanity, the soul is free to move on to fight the greater issues of pride.

Penthos

The early church wrote about *Penthos* or the gift of tears and described it as a “*mourning for lost salvation*, whether one’s own or that of others” (Penthos 18). In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted” (Matthew 5.4). After mentioning the blessing of poverty of spirit in the first beatitude (an essential understanding of our impoverished spiritual condition), Jesus then calls “blessed” those who cry over their condition. This “blessed” mourning over our own sinfulness and the sinfulness of the world was taken up in this early theme called *Penthos*.

Penthos is a deep sorrow over my own essential sinfulness as well as over the lost salvation of those in the world. It is an inner crying out to God in profound sorrow because of the havoc of sin and the destructiveness of self-will. It was also seen as an outer shedding of tears (thus came the term “the gift of tears”). *Penthos* and the corresponding “gift of tears” were held as essential for holiness.

Gordon MacDonald gives a vivid definition of ongoing sorrow over sin:

It is more difficult to understand that repentance is not a one-time act; it is actually a spiritual life-style. To live in a constant state of repentance is to acknowledge that the heart is always ready to drift into wrong directions and must constantly be jerked back to control. This is not a call to a morbid kind of introspection that is always on a sin-search, putting ourselves down. But it is an honest recognition that the inward part of us is inclined toward rebellion and disobedience against our Maker (MacDonald 157).

We mourn, therefore, over the impact of the deadly sins that we have allowed, even harbored, in our lives. We acknowledge our proclivity toward sin and our entanglement in sin and look to God for forgiveness, cleansing, and healing. In addition, we walk with Jesus as he came near the city and we weep with him over the lost salvation in the world (Luke 19.41).

By the Grace of God

St. Paul offers a great example for each of us in ministry today as to the nature of true humility. As the “chief” of sinners (1 Timothy 1.15) and the “least” of the apostles (1 Corinthians 15.9), he writes in 1 Corinthians 15.10, “But by the grace of God I am what I am.” Despite the early damage of sin in his life he ended his journey as a faithful steward of the mysteries of God (1 Corinthians 4.1-2). What is critical to note is that he thoroughly understood that any goodness at work in his life was due to the grace of God and not to his own efforts.

Herein lies the remedy to pride: a total dependence upon and acknowledgement of the grace of God. This ongoing sense of dependence upon God was the

hallmark of Paul's ministry. Such dependence clearly affirms with John Cassian that there has to be more involved than mere "willing" (the act of saying 'yes' to God) and "running" (obedience to the Spirit and faithfulness in all of the disciplines) (Institutes 259). Ultimately any benefit received, whether spiritual or otherwise, is a gift from God. "I do not say this in order to nullify human effort or in an attempt to turn anyone away from diligence and intense toil" Cassian wrote (Institutes 261), but it is clearly not:

That our asking, searching, and knocking are sufficient unless God's mercy gives what we ask, opens when we knock, and causes to be found what we are seeking. For he is ready, so long as we have offered him our good will, to grant all these things, inasmuch as he desires and longs for our perfection and salvation more than we do ourselves (Institutes 261).

Any good thing that we can accomplish, Cassian insisted,

Comes from the grace of the one who, out of his manifold generosity, has bestowed everlasting blessedness and immeasurable glory on our slender willing and our brief and paltry running (Institutes 260).

Looking back over the boundary lines of my life (Psalm 16.6) I bow down in awe and wonder at the goodness and kindness of God that has heatedly pursued me. The lines really have "fallen for me in pleasant places" and the cup of my life "overflows" (Psalm 23.5) with a stream of blessings from God. I have long ago learned that I know precious little, possess limited gifts, and must continually draw upon strength and wisdom greater than myself to fulfill the mission I have been given.

These three decades later my earlier worries of "not having enough" are quieted under the marvelous historical fact that all of our needs have been provided for and now there are many loaves and fish left over. And as for the struggles with the other deadly sins there is no question that continual vigilance and constant grace are needed to prevent a fall for only the one "who endures to the end will be saved" (Mark 13.13). The classical means of grace (prayer, the Word of God, worship, communion, accountable fellowship, fasting, and service) have become sustaining forces of ongoing formation, reformation and transformation in Christ.

As ministers of the Gospel of grace, stewards of the mysteries of God, and ambassadors of Christ, let us pray the prayer of Psalm 19.12-13:

Who can detect their errors, O Lord?
Only you can clear the hidden sinfulness of my life.
Keep me from presumptuous, pride-filled thoughts,
Let them not have mastery over me.

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