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*The Pastor's Family*

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Requests for information should be addressed to:

Zondervan, *Grand Rapids, Michigan 49530*

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part 1

**the  
pastor's  
heart**

"It's Not You -  
It's Me"

## chapter 1

# the problem

{brian }

Early in my ministry as a pastor, I found that the most noticeable problems typically get the most attention. In other words, “the squeaky wheel gets the grease.” Though this maxim originally referred to the regular maintenance of a tractor or car, it is certainly true when it comes to pastoral ministry in a local church. The day-to-day reality of pastoral ministry generally means a pastor must tend to the immediate and pressing needs of his congregation. For most pastors, their schedule is determined by focusing on the most obvious problems. Those that seem the most problematic are the ones that get his attention.

I won't try to deny any of this. Let's be honest as we begin — a pastor should prioritize the most immediate needs in his church. I'll admit this is how I often determine what I'm going to do on any given day. If I have to choose between a weekly discipleship meeting

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with a young man in the church who is battling loneliness and a visit with an elderly lady who is dying from cancer, I'll go to the hospital every time. Even though the choices may not always be this obvious, scenarios like this one tend to define much of the pressure a pastor feels each and every day. A pastor knows he needs to meet with that young man — he needs to be making long-term investments that will bear fruit over time — but he also knows there is a dying woman who needs him. The demands on those who pastor are always greater than what they can meet. This tends to create some default patterns in which “the squeaky wheels” of ministry get the grease, so to speak, while other, equally important areas of responsibility are less attended.

Often, the pastor's family is the wheel that squeaks the least. Why is this so? Most pastors' wives are keenly aware of the demands of ministry. More so than any other member of the church, a pastor's wife is aware of how hard her husband labors to care for the flock. And because she wants to support and encourage her husband, she is gracious, not wanting to add to the pressures that already exist. In the midst of these demands, pressures, and expectations, a pastor's family can easily get squeezed out. A pastor may not even be aware that it's happening, at least not at first.

There are many demands on a pastor's time, and most of them are legitimate. Yet the real problem of neglect is actually rooted in something deeper than just competing demands for time and attention. The problem is something that is innate to our nature, something that does not vanish with better planning and more deliberate delegation of pastoral responsibilities. Getting organized won't fix this. Learning to manage your time won't solve it.

Before we address the root of the problem, we'll look at the

the problem

demands that commonly pull on a pastor's conscience. What are the competing demands faced by pastors? What makes them so compelling? So tempting?

## The Demands of Approval

Everyone wants to be liked. Pastors are no different in this regard, especially when it comes to the people they have been entrusted to care for, pray for, and minister to — the people for whom they must ultimately give an account (Hebrews 13:17). But what happens when a pastor finds that those he seeks approval from (the people he shepherds) do not give it to him? He tends to follow his innate desire to be liked and accepted. I remember how this worked when I was in middle school. I had a group of friends, and I desperately wanted to be accepted by them, so I endeavored to earn their favor. I started to do things I knew would win their approval, following their suggestions and doing the things they wanted me to do. In doing so, I was regularly tempted to compromise my own convictions. Most of the time, I was more interested in being liked than in doing what was right.

Sadly, my pathetic pursuit of acceptance in middle school wasn't much different from the pull of acceptance a pastor feels toward his flock, the group of people he labors to serve. For many pastors, their entire livelihood — their financial income and position in the community — lies under the control of their congregants. Even if this isn't the case, the life of a pastor is often consumed with meeting the needs of the people he serves. Many of the sacrifices a pastor makes are for them. I am aware of this demand on my own life and regularly find myself pressured to do something I do not necessarily want to

do, something that someone in the church wants me to do. A pastor who underestimates the powerful pull of the approval of his flock will also be blind to how easily this demand for approval can lead to an unhelpful and unfulfilled obsession.

{ cara }

*I was a bit different from Brian when I was in middle school. While I, too, felt the pressure of trying to fit in, instead of trying to change myself to fit in, I rebelled against this pressure instead of accommodating it. I refused to change and tended to withdraw from those who pressured me to change. I still wanted the approval of my friends, but I wanted them to accept me as I was. This response is just as sinful because it leads to an unhealthy focus on ourselves. We turn inward and nurse resentment or bitterness instead of reaching out to others. This response reflects a selfish heart — we “look out for number one,” as the saying goes. Sometimes we become so concerned about what others might say or think of us that we become paralyzed with fear. Rather than risk changing, we do nothing. Wanting approval from others is still at the heart of the issue — even if we don’t respond by changing who we are to please others.*



## The Demands of Appearance

It has been said that “perception is reality.” Whether we like it or not, perception drives much of what a pastor does. It can have a positive effect, for an awareness that others are looking to us and our example can lead to a concern for personal holiness and help us avoid scenarios that might compromise our integrity. Taking seriously the truth that perception matters, that others are watching our lives, can

## the problem

encourage a pastor to give due diligence to the call to manage his household well (1 Timothy 3:4). Yet there is also a danger in caring too much for appearances, especially if it leads to an environment that stifles honest confession of sin and the need for accountability and help. Because the family of a pastor is under such close scrutiny from the church, it can be tempting for a pastor to care more about the way his family appears to other people than about actually caring for his family. Certainly, the way a pastor manages his family is important — indeed, it is a biblical qualification that confirms his calling (1 Timothy 3:2, 4–5). But an unhealthy focus on perception — caring *too much* for what others think — tempts a pastor to seek a quick fix or to cover up unhealthy patterns and problems instead of honestly dealing with the sins he commits and the challenges he faces in his family life.

For example, when marriage problems come to the surface, a pastor and his wife may try to put on a happy face and pretend things are fine instead of transparently dealing with their struggle. At a recent conference, a poll of more than one thousand pastors revealed that 77 percent of those surveyed felt they did not have a good marriage.<sup>1</sup> Knowing how difficult it is for most pastors to share their struggles with the people in their congregation, I think we can safely assume that very few of these pastors have revealed their marriage struggles to their church. To appear competent and spiritually mature, a pastor may be tempted to downplay very real problems, even to the point of ignoring sinful patterns in his life.

A pastor once shared with me about some of his church members who were becoming increasingly hostile toward him. They were trying to build a case to have him removed from the church. Some had begun driving by the church at various times to keep a



## the pastor's family

record of when his car was at the church and when it wasn't, thinking they could indict him for being lazy or catch him not working. As silly as that may seem, it had a very real effect on this man. He confessed to me that he was still tempted to accommodate his critics, to prove to them that he was a hard worker. He sought to change his schedule, doing less visiting with people outside the church so he could appear to be around more. He felt compelled to do this, even if it meant compromising what he felt God was calling him to do. Perception is reality for many pastors, and it can exert great power and control over their lives, even leading to the neglect of those whom they should be shepherding.

### {cara}

*Wives, don't you feel this as well? Let me ask you a couple of questions. How do you feel on Sunday morning when your children are sitting with you and they seem to have ants in their pants and are talking loudly enough to be heard down the hallway? Doesn't it make you want to crawl under the pew and hide or, better yet, leave the building altogether? Do you worry about what food to bring to the potluck? Heaven forbid we overcook it! What about your house? Do you worry about what your house looks like when church members come over? There are doors my husband is forbidden to open when we have people over. If you relate to any of these scenarios, then you feel the powerful demand of "appearance" too. We want people to think we have it all together — the perfect house, the perfect kids, the perfect dog, the perfect cook. We worry about what people might say if we are anything less than perfect. This demand of appearance goes hand in hand with the demand of approval.*



## The Demands of Success

The demand for a pastor to be seen as “successful” may be greater in America than anywhere else in the world. In addition to our own inner need to prove we are successful, the consumeristic measuring stick of the American church that judges pastoral performance by numbers and nickels is an unhelpful and unbiblical yardstick that has little to do with kingdom fruitfulness. Sadly, the pursuit of “success” in the pastorate inevitably leads to the neglect of other priorities. And one of the priorities most commonly sacrificed in the pursuit of pastoral success is a pastor’s family.

A man’s identity is often equated with his level of success within his chosen occupation. A man who is unemployed or failing at his job is usually a very discouraged man. And pastors are certainly not immune to this aspect of masculine identity. Paul David Tripp, a well-known author and a pastor to pastors, explains how his early years of pastoral ministry led him to an identity crisis:

Ministry had become my identity. No, I didn’t think of myself as a child of God, in daily need of grace, in the middle of my own sanctification, still in a battle with sin, still in need of the body of Christ, and called to pastoral ministry. No, I thought of myself as a *pastor*. That’s it, bottom line. The office of pastor was more than a calling and a set of God-given gifts that had been recognized by the body of Christ. “Pastor” defined me. It *was* me in a way that proved to be more dangerous than I would have thought.<sup>2</sup>

The crisis of identity caused by the drive to be successful is one of the main reasons many pastors feel discouraged today. Many of these men work hard and make great sacrifices, but they feel like

they have little to show for it at the end of the day. In desperation, many pastors succumb to “doing whatever works” to find the success they long for in their church. Pastors who feel like a failure easily succumb to the pull of pragmatism.<sup>3</sup> Not only does this desperation for success breed a pragmatic mentality in ministry; it can also lead a pastor who finds that his family life isn't “working” well for him to neglect them, prioritizing the schedules, decisions, and needs of the church over those of his own wife and children.

## **The Demands of Significance**

One of the easiest ways to discourage a pastor is to make him feel like he is unneeded. Pastors often struggle with a desire to be significant in some way. The most obvious way this surfaces is in the tendency to volunteer to do all the work. This creates an unhealthy pattern of ministry in which the pastor's need to be needed leads the church to depend on him for everything. He has to make every visit. He has to preach every Sunday. He has to be at every meeting. He has to conduct every wedding and funeral. Because of this, he will not delegate any of his tasks to others. He will not take his vacation time — even though he badly needs some time away with his family. He will not allow others to help him — even though he is close to burning out as he tries to balance the demands of church and family. His desire to be needed leads him to unconsciously create a church culture in which he seems to be irreplaceable. This can easily be camouflaged as faithfulness to the Lord or as a zeal to labor hard in the work of the ministry, yet it eventually leads to two common results: burnout and family neglect.

A pastor's need for significance can also lead to the neglect of

## the problem

his family when certain people in the church make him feel more significant than his wife and children do. A pastor can easily fall into this deception. He can become convinced that he really needs to meet with a young man in the church to help him work through his problems — even if it means missing dinner with the family for the third straight evening. The young man who thinks you hung the moon and hangs on every word you say can be powerfully persuasive when compared to the demands of your tired, spent wife and the cranky toddlers who await your homecoming.

## The Demands of Expectation

In every local church we find two sets of expectations: the ones the church has for their pastor and the ones the pastor places on himself. These two sets of expectations are present in every church, and rarely do they match up. A pastor friend in the first year of his pastorate was once approached by two separate deacons at two separate times. One of the men came to criticize him, telling him he was not in the office enough and needed to spend more time in the building so he could be available to people stopping by the church. The other man came in to complain that he wasn't visiting the elderly members often enough and that he needed to get out more frequently to see people in their homes. Wisely, this pastor met with both of these men to discuss these conflicting demands and to talk about setting some realistic expectations instead of trying to figure out how to be in two places at the same time. That conversation proved fruitful and led to increasingly realistic expectations for the future.

As unrealistic as the expectations of a church may seem, most faithful pastors know that the most difficult expectations a pastor

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faces are the ones he places on himself. A pastor wants to be Superman. He thinks his people demand this of him. Personally, I know that when I'm faced with competing expectations from the people in my church, I am the one who is most disappointed at my inability to be there for everyone who needs me. Pastors commonly place unachievable, unhelpful expectations on themselves, and when you combine the expectations of the congregation with a pastor's own unrealistic, Superman mentality, it's a toxic combination — one that often leads to the neglect of the pastor's family.

### { cara }

*Wives, we deal with the demands of expectations too, but this plays out a bit differently for us. I think it most commonly shows up in two ways. First, a pastor's wife feels a strong pull to be overinvolved in the life of the church. Though the pastoral committee may say they're hiring only your husband, not you, it doesn't mean you don't have expectations placed on you as his wife. If there is anybody the church will want to see more than their pastor, it is his wife. After all, shouldn't she be able to head up the hospitality committee, the women's ministry, and the children's ministry — and be at every service every week? As a pastor's wife, you will need to protect your time — and your family. You cannot sacrifice your family and neglect your husband because you are so worn down from serving the church.*

*The second way in which these expectations show up is in our own expectations of our husbands. Are your expectations realistic? Or do you reinforce the superhero mentality, expecting your husband to be Superman? To be clear, we must be honest in communicating our needs and being open about the needs of the family, but we need*

the problem

*to remember that our husbands cannot meet all of our needs. Be realistic about your communication (don't expect him to read your mind), and be willing to give him grace. Allow for the fact that the church will interrupt your life from time to time.*



## The Demands of Friendship

The only person lonelier than a pastor in a church may be the pastor's wife. While this isn't true of every pastor, it's still a common reality in ministry today. This truth is difficult for many people who are not pastors to accept. After all, their pastor is so loved by the people. Shouldn't he have the most friends in the church? And the pastor's wife is the person all the women go to for counsel. Surely she has lots of friends! Research from Focus on the Family, however, reveals that 70 percent of pastors do not have close personal friends and have no one to confide in.<sup>4</sup> My own experience leads me to believe that the percentage of lonely pastors' wives is even higher. But why is this true?

Being a pastor and the wife of a pastor can indeed be a very lonely position. In some circumstances, the culture of the church makes it difficult for them to have meaningful relationships where it is safe to be genuine, transparent, open with their struggles, and honest about church issues. At some large churches, serving with other pastors and their wives can create a place for this type of sharing, but in many cases the most meaningful relationships pastors and their wives will have are the ones outside of their local church.

As a result, pastors and their wives must put in extra effort to cultivate meaningful, safe friendships, both inside and outside the

## the pastor's family

church. Because these friendships take extra work to develop, many pastors and their wives end up lonely, with few friends who really know what they are struggling with.

### { cara }

*Brian isn't saying we can't have meaningful friendships in the church. Some of our closest friends have come from the congregation we serve. However, we still need to be cautious and wise about what we share and with whom we share it.*

*There is an additional, unique emotion that a pastor's wife may face in this regard — envy. Some nights Brian comes home from the church exhausted. We sit down for a family dinner, and I am looking forward to some downtime with him — and then that dreaded phone rings. Sure enough, it is a church member who has suddenly been admitted to the hospital or someone whose marriage is in crisis. I watch my weary husband drag himself back out for the evening, and I sit alone, with the children, not sure when he will return home.*

*At these moments, it is hard not to be envious of the time these people are getting with my husband. We easily let envy into our hearts. We quickly become resentful of the time our husbands need to give. We feel like all we get is the leftovers, and sometimes even those are taken. It is easy for the wife of a pastor to grow bitter toward the church in these moments. This battle is very real and our struggle is understandable. This is why it is important that we make the extra effort to develop healthy friendships where we can be honest about these things, relationships where we can share our hurts and disappointments before they have a chance to become established and turn into bitter roots of resentment.*



## the problem

The demands and expectations placed on a pastor and his wife are very real, and they make it difficult to develop close relationships. But having close friends is still possible, even if it takes extra work. Pastors need to exercise wisdom, cautiously seeking out people (and couples) both within the congregation and outside it with whom they can be real and honest.

## The Pastor's Real Problem

All of the demands we have considered exert a powerful pull on the hearts and minds of a pastor and his wife. The temptation to follow these demands can deceive us into making decisions that will negatively affect our families. But these demands, although powerful and consuming, are not the real enemy. In many cases, they are legitimate desires for good things — a need for love, friendship, and significance. These desires are not really the problem. The problem stems not from the demands a pastor faces but from the way he and his wife choose to respond to those demands.

In the heart of every pastor is an innate wiring, a tendency to fulfill his desires and meet the demands of life in broken, selfish, and sinful ways. This is the fundamental problem that leads a pastor to neglect his marriage and his children. It's a problem that dates back to the first marriage and the first family — to Adam and Eve. After God created the heavens, the earth, and all the living creatures (Genesis 1 – 2), he also created man and woman in his image (Genesis 1:27). This man and his wife were united together as one flesh, naked and not ashamed (Genesis 2:24 – 25). God declared all that he had made to be “very good” (Genesis 1:31), yet Adam and Eve deliberately sinned against their Creator and Lord by disobeying



God's command, eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Genesis 3:6). God had warned Adam and Eve not to eat from this tree or they would die (Genesis 2:17). But when Satan tempted Eve, she ignored God's warning and ate from the tree, giving some of its fruit to her husband (Genesis 3:6). Instead of obeying God's command, the man and his wife rebelled against God. They decided they wanted to rule their own lives, make their own decisions, and meet their own needs rather than be ruled by God and trust him.

When Adam and Eve sinned against God, sin entered the world and changed everything. All of us who have been born as children of Adam and Eve inherit their sinful hearts, living under the curse of death and decay. We are born into a fallen, sinful world with defiled hearts and a natural disposition to rebel against God and pursue the pleasures of sin. Jesus affirmed this truth about the human condition. Mark 7:1 – 23 describes Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees, who were arrogantly putting their faith in their deeds and traditions. They were blinded to what Jesus said really matters to God — not the external, physical things we do, but the internal, spiritual matters of the heart.

In this context, Jesus spoke, not just about the corrupt state of our hearts, but about how this corruption affects our relationship with God. Jesus said that what goes into a person from the outside does not defile them because it doesn't go into their heart; it goes into their stomach (Mark 7:18 – 19). Jesus then added these words:

“What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come — sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. All these evils come from inside and defile a person.”

*Mark 7:20 – 23*

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For most of their lives, Jesus' disciples had followed strict laws and traditions that reinforced the notion that defilement came from foods and other objects that had been declared unclean. Yet Jesus taught a counterintuitive truth: that acceptance in the kingdom of God is based not on the external, but on the internal — on the state of one's heart.<sup>5</sup>

A pastor's heart is no different from any other heart. A pastor's neglect of his family cannot simply be blamed on the pressures, demands, and unrealistic expectations that have been placed on him. In the end, the struggle he faces — and the neglect of the family — has one root cause: a sinful heart. The reason a pastor disobeys the direct commands of Scripture to care for his family and excuses his disobedience is his sinful desire. Rather than trusting God in obedience, believing that God will meet his needs, he tries to meet his own needs for acceptance, significance, approval, and friendship. This is a pattern deeply rooted in his heart.

But what does this look like, practically speaking? Let me give some examples of specific sins a pastor might commit, sins that are closely linked to the demands of ministry we examined earlier:

- Being enslaved to the demands of approval and appearance could reveal a sinful struggle with the fear of man — fearing what people think rather than obeying what God says.
- Being controlled by the demands of expectation or significance could demonstrate a struggle with pride, wanting the glory for ourselves instead of humbly giving glory to God.
- Being driven by the demands of success could sink a pastor into an identity crisis that exposes pastoral ministry as an idol in his heart instead of finding his identity in Christ alone.

## the pastor's family

- Being consumed by the demands of friendship could lead to discontentment, emotional detachment from others, and a lack of trust in God's provision.

Every Christian, though forgiven and made new by the power of the gospel, must daily battle against their sinful flesh in this fallen world — and pastors are no different! In fact, I believe the Enemy specifically targets pastors, tempting us to turn our affections to something — someone — other than God, even good things like the ministry. This is a very real problem. A pastor can easily be deceived by his own sinful heart, even as he is deeply engaged in the rigors and sacrifices of pastoral ministry.

Yet there is hope not only that we can identify the sins that so easily entangle us and lead us to dishonor God and neglect our families, but also that we can overcome them. The same power of the gospel that has redeemed the sinful heart of every Christian pastor enables us to put off these sins and put on Christ. The gospel enables us to obey God's commands and answer Christ's calling to be faithful shepherds in our home and church. In the pages ahead, we will look at several biblical strategies for leveraging this restorative power against our broken, sinful hearts to find balance as we respond to the demands we face and learn to shepherd our families faithfully.

the problem

## Discussion Questions

### **For a Wife to Ask Her Husband**

1. To which of these demands are you most prone to succumb?
2. In what ways have these demands caused you to neglect our family?
3. What sinful desire do you identify in your heart that causes you to neglect our family?

### **For a Husband to Ask His Wife**

1. Are you sometimes envious of the time I spend with our church, and how can we work on protecting our personal time?
2. Which demands do you struggle with? What are some ways I can help you overcome this struggle?
3. Are you or our family feeling neglected in any ways that I don't know about?

## chapter 2

# the solution

### {brian}

It was the meeting I had been dreading. I was in eleventh grade, and things had not been going well with my current girlfriend. She requested a “define the relationship” talk. For those of you who have had to stomach these talks, you may be able to guess what happened next. We met, and the words I had been dreading to hear came out of her mouth. She wanted to break up with me and end the relationship. Hoping to ease the pain of rejection, she spoke those famous words: “Brian,” she said, “it’s not you — it’s me!” (*Cara: Just for the record, I wasn’t “the girl” requesting this talk.*)

“It’s not you — it’s me.” Those simple words always have a deeper meaning. They are intended to cushion the blow to our pride and self-worth when we are rejected by someone we love. They are an attempt to place the blame on the person doing the rejecting, but the attempt, however noble it might be, always fails. In fact, the exact

opposite happens. Hearing those five words can crush our spirit. We intuitively know the words are dishonest, that it's just a way of avoiding conflict and quickly ending an unhappy relationship.

Despite the overwhelmingly negative use of this phrase in most relationships, I want to suggest that for a pastor who is guilty of neglecting his family, this phrase is perhaps the most helpful place to begin. When a pastor owns the truth that "it's not \_\_\_\_\_; it's me," it becomes a helpful, honest starting point to deal with his neglect. In the previous chapter, we looked at how the pressures and demands a pastor faces can lead to misplaced priorities in his life. And though it is tempting to focus on the demands and blame them for our behavior, the root problem goes deeper. The problem rests not in the demands and pressures we face but in how we create idols out of those demands, idols that lead us to neglect our family and dishonor God. When we sinfully neglect our family, several consequences inevitably follow.

A pastor's neglect of his family reveals a disregard for several clear biblical imperatives, things that are commanded of every Christian husband and father (Ephesians 5:25 – 30; 6:4; 1 Peter 3:7). Additionally, neglect of his family reveals a disregard for the leadership qualification to "manage his own family well" (1 Timothy 3:4). These biblical imperatives reveal God's priority that a pastor should first shepherd and care for his family before his flock. Despite these clear expectations for leaders, their sinful responses to the demands of ministry lead many pastors to misplace their priorities. A Christian man's neglect of his family communicates that he does not value his family. Because the pastor is an example to his flock (1 Peter 5:3), he not only sets a bad example for the other Christian men in his congregation by his neglect, but even worse, a spirit of hypocrisy permeates his home. His wife and his children see the hypocrisy in

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his life. Pastoral disregard for the needs of their families is a leading cause of the clichéd disenchantment pastors' wives and their children sometimes have toward the church — and even toward Christ himself. The sins a pastor commits have consequences for himself, for his family, and for the church he serves.

### { cara }

*Wives, at times our husbands don't even know we are being neglected. Many women I know want their husbands to be mind readers. We want them to understand us so well that they will just know when things are wrong! But half the time we don't even know what is wrong. The solution is not to beat them over the head with all the ways they fail, every time they walk through the door. At the same time, we should avoid bottling up our concerns and growing bitter and angry. We need to lovingly, wisely, and, above all, respectfully share our needs and the needs of our family, and then we must patiently pray for both our own heart and our husband's heart.*



Despite the serious consequences of neglecting his family, a pastor who succumbs to the demands and pressures of ministry at the expense of his family still has hope. There is power to overcome these sins and to rebuild what has been broken — the power of the gospel.<sup>1</sup> The same gospel that awakens a pastor's spiritually dead soul to life in Christ also has the power to bring victory over the burden of sins. Struggling pastors need to rely on two facets of the biblical gospel if they hope to experience its power: they need to own their sin, acknowledging their neglect and failure, and they need to rely on the grace Christ offers, trusting in the gifts and promises of God rather than in their own efforts to secure what they want and need.

## Examine Your Heart

The first step a pastor must take in this process is to begin rebuilding that which has been harmed by neglect. This is where the power of the words “it’s not you — it’s me” is needed. A pastor should do what any follower of Jesus who struggles with sin must do — acknowledge his sin against God and against his family. He must confess his failure to God, and then to his wife and his children. He must confess that it is wrong to contend that his neglect is the result of the pressures he faces or the overwhelming demands on his time. These assertions can easily become excuses that hide the sin, justifications that keep him from true repentance. Some pastors’ families may believe that the problems in their family lie with them. A husband who neglects his wife may find that she has begun to believe there is something wrong with her, that she is the reason her husband prefers to spend time with church members rather than quality time with her. A pastor’s children may come to the reasonable assumption that their daddy loves the church more than them. To deal with the brokenness his neglect has created in his family, a pastor should begin by looking at his heart, owning what is truly sinful, confessing it to God and those he has sinned against, and repenting — turning away from the sinful patterns and choosing to follow God in faith and obedience.

Repentance is key to this process, not just to experience forgiveness with God, but also to experience restoration in our families by breaking neglectful patterns. Several years ago, I thought I was honestly acknowledging some sinful struggles and patterns of neglect to my wife and children, and I made some necessary changes in our family’s schedule to reflect my commitment to break with my



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old habits and patterns. I will never forget the despair I felt a short time later when my wife confronted me and told me that very little change had actually taken place. She let me know that my children had especially noticed the lack of change. I realized that even though I had acknowledged my sin and confessed it to my family with the intention of making things better, my lack of substantial change revealed a lack of true repentance. When I truly repented, real and lasting change began to occur in my life.

Make no mistake, I still care for my family imperfectly. But my wife and children can now attest to the fruit of repentance in my life. The phone rarely gets answered during dinner and our devotional time as a family. I consistently seek to get home when I say I'm going to be home, not forty-five minutes to an hour later. For the past few years, I have used all of my allotted vacation time. Though every pastor will always remain a work in progress, it is possible by God's grace and the power of the gospel to break sinful patterns that have been established. Yet, without true repentance, little will change.

## Put Off and Put On

Since repentance is essential, we must understand that biblical repentance involves more than confessing our sin and choosing not to do it any longer. The biblical model is “to put off your old self ... and to put on the new self” (Ephesians 4:22–24). In addition to putting off our sin, we must put on Christ; we must find positive patterns and habits to pursue and “put on” in place of our sinful patterns.

I have found four helpful biblical principles that a pastor can “put on” when he repents from his sin — all of which are rooted in God's

design for the family. When applied, God can use these principles to break the patterns of neglect and reestablish healthy new patterns.

## Remember the Biblical Qualifications

The apostle Paul outlines the qualifications of a pastor clearly in Scripture. A pastor (overseer, elder) is to be the faithful husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6) and a good manager of his children and household (1 Timothy 3:4–5; Titus 1:6). Paul's lists in both 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not exhaustive, but they contain several characteristics that can and should be observed and identified in any man aspiring to the office of a pastor (1 Timothy 3:1). These qualifications are also required of any pastor throughout his ministry. Keeping Paul's lists in our minds is a clear and helpful antidote to the problem of neglect. This divine standard helps pastors to remain aware of what is required of them to remain faithful to their family in the rigors of pastoral ministry. Ignoring this biblical standard inevitably leads to family neglect and often to disqualification from the pastoral office.

When the apostle Peter exhorted the elders (pastors) under his care to shepherd the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2), he called them to be "examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:3). Peter had all aspects of life in mind, including the responsibility a man has to his wife and children. I once heard a seasoned pastor, Albert Martin, address a group of pastors with the topic of Christian marriage in view: "What does your church member do when a non-Christian walks through the door and asks them how a Christian man should treat his wife? You know what they should do? Point to you and say, 'Oh, just watch him. He's my pastor. You need to just watch the way he tenderly, lovingly, and sacrificially cherishes that woman next to him.'"

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Pastors need to remember that God has established a high standard for those who shepherd his people in terms of how they live out their calling as a husband and father. As you put off your sin and put on Christ, remember that the fruit of God's work in your life, the things that first qualified you for pastoral ministry, must continue to be evident, not just to your church, but to your wife and children as well.

Let me add a necessary word of grace. You must never forget that the gifts you have for pastoral ministry are fruits of the gospel as well. They do not exist without the Spirit of God mightily at work in you and through you. Guard yourself against seeing these qualifications as a checklist to be accomplished in your own power and righteousness. Instead, turn to God in prayerful dependence, seeking these qualities as the spiritual fruit of God's gracious work in you. The gifts of God come through faith as you depend on Christ for your every need.

### Love, Understand, and Delight in Your Wife

In the spirit of Peter's exhortation to be an example to the flock, it is also essential for pastors to keep before them God's design for marriage. God's redeeming design for marriage between a Christian husband and a Christian wife can be seen in Paul's commands to each of them in Ephesians. Wives are to submit to their husbands as they do to the Lord (Ephesians 5:22), and husbands are to love their wives as Christ loves the church and gave himself for her (Ephesians 5:25). This task is impossible for any Christian man to pursue if he does not make his wife a high priority, second only to Christ. How much more is this true for a pastor? How can a husband who neglects his wife and his family love his wife in a way that demon-

strates to the rest of the flock the unconditional, sacrificial love of Christ?

Peter also communicates God's divine design for Christian marriage, but his approach differs somewhat from Paul's. Peter addresses the man who protests that his wife, like the church, is hard to love. He begins with instruction to Christian wives on how they are to obey Christ in dealing with a husband who is disobedient to the gospel message (1 Peter 3:1). They accomplish this by living a godly life before their disobedient husbands in the hope that their godly behavior will win over their husbands (1 Peter 3:2–4). With this background of a challenging marriage in mind, Peter next instructs Christian husbands: "Husbands, in the same way be considerate as you live with your wives, and treat them with respect as the weaker partner and as heirs with you of the gracious gift of life, so that nothing will hinder your prayers" (1 Peter 3:7).

Being considerate to your wife means understanding God's will for how a Christian husband should relate to his wife. This involves understanding and empathizing with your wife. A husband should be mindful of his wife's needs, struggles, and feelings. A pastor is also called to live with his wife in this way, not just as an example to his flock, but also because a pastor's wife faces unique challenges, demands, and pressures. These will demand his attentive care. An extra measure of steadfastness and faithfulness is necessary to make a pastor's wife feel cherished and honored. A pastor's wife may feel competition for her husband's affections in a way that other wives do not. She may have unique struggles and challenges that the wives of other men do not face. As a pastor and a husband, you will need to learn what these challenges are and how you can best serve your wife in love.

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Although these imperatives for a Christian husband are helpful, biblical examples also help clarify what God expects. Consider Solomon's wise advice to his son in Proverbs 5. Solomon first warns his son about the adulterous woman — who she is and why he should stay far from her (Proverbs 5:1 – 14). Then in a stunning contrast, Solomon uses his vivid description of the adulterous woman to help his son realize why his delight should be solely in the wife of his youth (Proverbs 5:15 – 20). Solomon urges his son to delight sexually in his wife, not in the adulterous woman, by being “intoxicated with her love.” Sacrificial love for your wife, loving her as Christ loved the church and living with her in an understanding way, should grow out of your delight in the wonderful, mysterious grace of God, the grace that has given this woman to you according to God's sovereign and wise plan.

Charles Spurgeon is often pegged as having been especially neglectful of his wife and two sons because he spent much of his time traveling around the world preaching. Yet even if we can find fault in some of his misplaced priorities, it is difficult to ignore the obvious delight Spurgeon had in his wife. This is especially true when we see the letters he wrote to her each day as he was traveling.<sup>2</sup> After Mrs. Spurgeon's appeal that he use his time to rest instead of write her so often, Charles Spurgeon responded with a letter that read, “Every word I write is a pleasure to me as much as ever it can be to you; it is only a lot of odds and ends I send you, but I put them down as they come, so that you may see it costs me no labor, but is just a happy scribble. Don't fret because I write you so many letters; it is such a pleasure to tell out my joy.”<sup>3</sup> On another occasion, he sent her some pen and ink sketches he had drawn of the headdresses of Italian women, and he wrote, “Now, sweetheart, may these trifles

amuse you; I count it a holy work to draw them, if they cause you but one happy smile.”<sup>4</sup>

As they deal with their own demanding schedules and unexpected emergencies, pastors will do well to learn from Spurgeon’s example. A pastor who truly delights in his wife needs to communicate that delight to her so she feels cherished by her husband. His goal is not just to observe the letter of the law; he should seek to be faithful to the intention behind these commands by cultivating a giddy delight in his wife and the intricacies of her personality. Ask God to make your wife grow more precious to you every day. (*Cara: Husbands, we don’t expect much, really; we just want to feel important — and loved!*)

## Shepherd, Train, and Instruct Your Children

The “elephant in the room” when we look at how pastors spend their time is the amount of time they actually spend instructing their own children. A pastor may spend several hours each week instructing and shepherding church members, but when he returns home, he will often take a more passive approach or rely on his wife to deal with the shepherding of their children. Sin blinds many pastors to this neglect of their children, and to combat it pastors must take to heart the clear biblical imperatives God gives to Christian fathers: “Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). There are many different ways in which Christian fathers can exasperate their children and provoke them to anger. A pastor’s child who sees their father repeatedly choosing church responsibilities over spending time with them will eventually grow exasperated and may be provoked to anger. Children need to be shepherded and instructed

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in the Lord just as much as those a pastor is responsible for in the church.

But what does it look like for a Christian father to train and instruct his children in the Lord? In Deuteronomy, God spoke these words through his servant Moses:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

*Deuteronomy 6:4–9*

Three helpful principles can be found in God's words to those fathers who belonged to God's people, the Israelites. First, we should instruct and train our children so they can learn the truth about God and know what he expects from us (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). There is a purpose to what we teach, a desire to see our children know God and believe and accept the gospel. Second, we instruct our children using God's Word so the Scriptures transform our children's hearts (Deuteronomy 6:6–7). The Bible is the source of what we teach and the final authority for our lives. Finally, we should instruct our children in our homes, not just relying on gatherings in the church, so God's Word becomes the central focus of our home (Deuteronomy 6:8–9). We should teach regularly as part of our daily family life together. Pastors need to establish priorities in this regard, committing first to instruct their own children in the Lord and then seeking to instruct the church.

{ cara }

*Wives, we play a very important role in this process. We need to encourage our husbands as they do this. One way to do so is by giving up some of our time with our husbands so they can spend that time, perhaps one-on-one, with the children. Our children are only home for a short time, so it's important that we make this a priority.*

*Second, we need to remember that we are the ones who spend the most time with our children. As a homeschooling mom, I spend most of my day with the kids. I see firsthand their struggles and the ways they are growing. I need to share these things with my husband so he knows how to wisely train and instruct our children. I shouldn't expect him to magically know what has happened throughout the day or to know the specific needs of our children. As husband and wife, we are in this together, so we need to work together.*

*Finally, we need to encourage our children to desire time with their dads, and yet we should teach them to be gracious when unexpected things call their dad away. We do this best by our own example. We should be excited to see our husbands when they come home, and we need to be gracious and understanding when the church needs him.*



## Embrace Your Call to Give an Account

Perhaps the most sobering truth for a pastor comes from the author of Hebrews: "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as *those who must give an account*. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you" (Hebrews 13:17, emphasis added). Even though this particular instruction is given to all Christians, it



holds a penetrating truth for pastors and church leaders. The clear implication of this word from the author of Hebrews is that pastors will give an account for their work of shepherding others. One day, they will answer to the Chief Shepherd.

I remember the immense pressure I felt when I took my first senior pastor position and realized I would have to give an account to God for the way I pastored and cared for all of these people. I would lie in bed at night, unable to sleep because of this burden. Not long afterward, I realized I was focusing so much on my responsibility to the church that I had forgotten about an equally important responsibility — my care for my own family. I asked myself this question: If I will someday give an account for the way I have cared for the people in our church, how much more of an account must I give for the souls of those in my home? Sadly, some pastors spend their entire life in ministry focused on caring for their church members while ignoring the care of those living under their own roofs.

There is much at stake here. The consequences of these sins of neglect can be disastrous. Yet thanks be to God! We have a great Savior who has not only purchased for us forgiveness from our sins and salvation from the wrath to come but has freed us from the bondage of our sin. Those who have been commissioned by the Chief Shepherd should know the reality of this freedom more than anyone. We must first examine our hearts, confessing our sins to God and to our family and truly repenting of our neglect and disobedience as fathers and husbands. We must put on Christ and commit to doing what he has clearly commanded us to do — modeling what it means to be a godly father and husband for our flock.

## Discussion Questions

### **For a Pastor—Asked by Fellow Pastors or Other Mature Christians**

1. Have you ever acknowledged and confessed your neglect of your family to God and your family? What, specifically, do you need to confess?
2. What have been some of the consequences of that neglect?
3. In what areas do you believe you most need to grow as a father and husband? How do you think your wife would answer that question? Your children?
4. If you had to give an account to God for the way you have shepherded your family today, what would you say? How does the gospel motivate you to shepherd your family with grace and love?

# Reflection

## Signs of Grace in Ministry

Jim Savastio

An older writer once remarked that “the life of the minister is the life of his ministry.” When the Bible gives us the qualifications for pastoral ministry, it repeatedly highlights the importance of a man’s character and his relationships with others—especially his family relationships. By the grace of God, I have enjoyed the dual joys of marriage and ministry for over twenty years now. I was married just before the start of my last year of seminary, so my wife and I have known little-to-nothing of married life apart from our life in ministry together. All of my children have been born and raised in the midst of their dad’s pastoral labors. Yet despite the challenges of pastoral ministry, our lives have been blessed by God, a blessing I attribute to several ways in which God’s grace has been especially evident to me.

1. God’s grace has been evident through the blessing of *bad examples*. I tend to learn more from my failures than from my successes in ministry, and I am deeply affected by the warnings I receive from others. I’ve learned what to avoid from those who have made a shipwreck of their families. When a motorist sees a car spinning out on the ice in front of him, he can take action to stop, slow down, or take an alternate route. In the same way, a man can learn to avoid some of the worst mistakes in his ministry and family life by recognizing and avoiding the mistakes others have made.

2. Along with the warnings of bad examples, I’ve also seen God’s grace through the blessing of *good examples*. When God saved me, he placed me in a fellowship where I saw a godly pastor interacting graciously with his wife and children. I saw the men of the church loving and serving their wives, lovingly instructing and disciplining their children. I saw happy homes, filled with joy. Look around you and seek out good examples. Ask these men what they do and learn from them.

3. The third sign of God's grace has been through the blessing of *good instruction*. When I was training for the ministry, one of my mentors repeatedly reminded me that my calling as a pastor would never negate my calling as a Christian man to love and care for my family. As a young believer I was clearly taught the biblical passages concerning marriage and the family. The truth of these foundational principles of God's Word were vividly vindicated in the lives of men who embraced or turned from God's truth. If you don't fully understand what it means to be a godly husband and father, study the Scriptures and learn from good, godly teachers.

4. I've known God's grace through the blessing of a *praying and supportive wife*. My wife has always been supportive of my ministry. As Cara has pointed out, it is a pastor's wife who most often bears the burden of a sudden emergency or a call in the middle of the night. How a wife deals with these realities will powerfully affect the health and well-being of the family. A wise pastor will not ignore his wife, knowing that her prayer and support are integral to the long-term health of his ministry.

5. Finally, I've been blessed by the support of a *well-instructed flock — our church*. I am blessed to serve a church that faithfully prays for my family and supports me in making my wife and children a priority in my life. The church has never complained when I dedicate nights to being with our family at home, spend time playing with my children on the ball field, or take time away from my ministry responsibilities for a family vacation. They let my wife simply be my wife and do not treat her as an unpaid staff member. They avoid putting my kids in the proverbial "fishbowl," and they protect them from the overwhelming expectations that turn many pastors' children against the church.

These are just a few of the blessings of God's grace that have given me the dual joys of a happy pastorate and a happy family.

**Jim Savastio** has pastored for twenty-five years and is currently involved in training young pastors.