

***Capabilities will get you into ministry; character will keep you there.  
Your ministry will never exceed the level of your character.***

As an intern preparing for the ministry, you have more than likely discovered that God is not only preparing you academically, but also refining your heart and character--lovingly leading and guiding you to be more like Him. We won't be able to effectively walk out the call that God has on our lives to lead others if we do not yield our full heart to Him.

As you start your internship and before your first meeting with your mentor, read the following article about a minister's heart. Highlight areas that you found important and meaningful. Pray and talk to God about them. Be courageous enough to ask if there are areas in your heart that you are not even aware that need His touch. At the end of the sections, there are reflection questions to self-assess your strengths and challenges that God has talked to you the power of the Holy Spirit to address.



## **The Heart of a Minister - Certified Level**

### **DEVELOPING THE RIGHT HEART**

The Lord had sought for a man after his own heart (**I Samuel 13: 14**). Tall and talented, the ultimate picture of a leader, Saul stood out among his generation. This son of Benjamin seemed to possess all the abilities and charisma the fledgling nation would require in its first king. But Saul lacked one thing—the right heart.

With God, the focus is centered on the attitude of the heart. At the start of life in the ministry, individuals may already be aware of certain God-given gifts that they believe can be used for the benefit of the ministry. Indeed, God has invested gifts into each of His servants, but He has shown throughout the Scriptures that His eye is more intently turned toward the development of the heart.

While gifts and skills may set one apart or establish evidence of a call to ministry, it is the heart that will determine the lasting benefits one will bring to God's purposes. Having the right attitude of heart will ultimately be the deciding factor in how useful a minister can be in the kingdom of God. But what does the right heart look like, and how does someone develop such a heart? As we often discover, the standard of a right heart is different from God's perspective than from ours. The heart God seeks must possess a consistent bend toward righteousness and the desire to honor Him above all else.

## AN HONORING HEART

### The Essence

To honor is to defer to or give place to another. One of the fundamental realities a minister must establish is a place as God's servant – keeping the honor of God as the central focus. Honoring God is acknowledging His place as Lord and affirming His majesty, supremacy, and sovereignty. Simply put, as servants of God, they must always know for whom they labor.

There are many ways to demonstrate the honor that is due to God. First, there is worship. The act of worship is the effort to ascribe worth to the one adored. An honoring heart is a heart that rejoices in and recognizes the greatness of God. As such, the minister must cultivate a heart that worships God for who He is and for what He does.

In **Psalm 8**, David reflects upon the majesty of the almighty God and considers the meager state of man. He is humbled and amazed that this majestic, powerful God cares for his seemingly insignificant existence. This is the attitude of an honorable heart; it bows in humility as it sees the beauty and work of God, particularly in the hearts of men and women, boys and girls. We can never be worthy of even a little of what God provides. We find access into His presence, though we deserve only judgment. Yet, by His grace and mercy, we are welcomed and given a place of love and purpose. An honoring heart affirms that there is much for which to be in awe of God.

### The Demonstration

Examples of the honoring heart fill the pages of Scripture, beginning with Enoch who stood out among his contemporaries because of his close fellowship with God. Enoch's desire to love and honor God is a good model for the minister today because this servant possessed all that God requires in a minister's heart. Another example is Abraham, who is often referred to as the Father of Faith. According to the Paul's letter to the Romans, Abraham's faith was demonstrated in his actions – abandoning his home to pursue God's greater agenda for his life and future. Abraham's actions were his statement of honor to the Lord and ultimately brought him remarkable affirmation from God.

Perhaps the most powerful demonstration of a heart that honors God comes from the life of Isaiah. In **Isaiah 6**, the prophet finds himself in the midst of a vision of God's throne room. He is speechless before the majesty of God. In this overwhelming setting, Isaiah momentarily sees his true self and is horrified at his own weakness. He does not belong there, in this holy presence; God's supreme holiness has unveiled his failures, and the prophet collapses in self-loathing. But in that moment Isaiah receives a gift, for God touches something and makes it right within him – something that sets his heart and mind in harmony with the desire of God for His people.

The final scene is a renewed Isaiah eavesdropping on a heavenly conversation: "Whom shall I send?" (**Isaiah 6: 8**). The haunting query explodes in the prophet's ears. Strengthened only by grace, he responds willingly, recognizing a meaning for his life that will exceed all others. In a mere eight verses, a life is transformed and will never change from its new course.

Like Isaiah, ministers must have a clear sense of the superiority of the One they are serving. Jesus demonstrated this same heart as He willingly pursued the plan of His Father and submitted to Calvary.

## The Necessity

Humans' greatest temptation is pride. In fact, no other condition of the heart separates people from the Creator more than pride. As you can imagine, this could be the ultimate snare for the minister. In the shower of affirmations that a minister can receive because of his or her efforts in the ministry or simply by virtue of being the spiritual mentor for the lives the parishioners, the minister can come to see him- or herself through a dangerous, unhealthy lens. Paul and his companions watched in horror as those they had ministered to begin to worship them. Such results can come on the heels of any number of things that a minister may do by the power of God's Spirit.

Indeed, such circumstances provide a lure to the human heart. But the honoring heart guards itself against these moments. The minister who becomes the victim of self-pride ultimately seeks to be served and adored. God has established His unwillingness to share His glory; therefore, we can anticipate His correcting response to our pride. Thus, an honoring heart is essential to the work of ministry. If we fail to see ourselves as servants, we will be left to pursue our own goals. The honoring heart keeps God's purposes in focus and in doing so, finds protection from self-focused agendas or self-serving motivations that can quickly derail the effectiveness of the ministry.

## The Development

A minister who understands the seriousness of an honoring heart will surely desire to possess and operate out of this attitude. Acquiring the right heart for ministry is an ongoing work in each minister's discipleship journey. Still this attitude of heart is learned; it is a definite choice for the minister. We must work to nurture and protect a heart that honors God. Circumstances will test our hearts and try to pull us away from this important goal. But we must accept the importance of this journey and keep its challenge prominent throughout a ministry career.

Once we have made an honoring heart our target and have acknowledged that it is obtained as part of a journey, it is time to practice those things that will cultivate such a heart. First among them are regular expressions of worship. The minister must choose to worship God in ever increasing ways and times. Daily times of prayer and praise are essential. While we grow from being in God's presence, we equally submit to the priority of His leadership in all that we do. Worshipping God keeps both the servant and the Lord in their right places.

# AN OBEDIENT HEART

## The Essence

A minister with a right heart for ministry must have obedience to God's Word as a chief goal. Samuel scolded Saul for his failure to obey the clear directives he had been given. When Saul offered excuses, Samuel responded by insisting that God requires obedience rather than any substituting acts of worship (**I Samuel 15: 22**).

An obedient heart is a transparent heart. Because we cannot hide any part of our true nature from God, we are compelled to acknowledge and confess the true nature of our lives. An obedient heart is a heart that is clearly open to the truth imparted by the Master and is always ready to turn away from acts of failure.

An obedient heart is a serving heart. No other motivation will prove sufficient for the work of ministry than the desire to demonstrate love for Christ through obedience. Indeed, God has established that the greatest demonstration of worship is obedience to His commands.

A life of ministry can bring many days of heartache and overwhelming demands. To survive emotionally, a minister must hold fast to what will keep him or her earnestly pressing on – the desire to love God through obedience. All other motives will ultimately fail.

Finally, an obedient heart is an essential part of the example God expects of those who lead. James affirms that those who guide others will be held accountable to the highest standards (**James 3: 1**). Without an obedient heart, a minister has little chance of a passing grade in this test of servanthood.

## **The Demonstration**

Throughout the first century, the apostle John continued to teach believers about the precepts of the Christian life. He spoke firmly and clearly concerning the evidence of a believer's connection to Christ – love through obedience. It was John who wrote of Jesus' "new" command (**John 13: 34**), to love one another and that obedience would be the evidence of that love.

Unfortunately, some ministers find themselves sliding into the same mindset as the Pharisees of the New Testament. But strict adherence to human-made and often meaningless ideals provides a poor example of a healthy spiritual life that is marked for ministry. Obedience to Jesus' command to love takes one to a higher level of personal fulfillment. And those that look on can see the nature of God as He relates to His children.

Perhaps the best gauge of a consistent resolve to serve out of obedience is the attractiveness of a person's life. A modern-day concern is that ministers succumb to many compromises and distractions that detract from the commitment of serving the Lord in obedience. The result is failure to please God or man, and the frustrated or defeated leave the ministry. Is there a remedy for this modern-day pattern? Holding fast to a walk with the Lord, with obedience as its foundation, is certainly the start of any remedy. Jesus' love and obedience to the plan of the Father attracted literally thousands of people. A leader that keeps this model in his or her heart will do the same.

## **The Necessity**

An obedient heart is essential for maintaining an aggressive attitude toward conquering sin. In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds the church that it is completely unworthy of the righteousness in which it stands. We have been given grace – a gift of perfect righteousness only earned by Christ. Jesus received what we deserved while we received what only He deserved.

Failing to understand this will lead to numerous errors. Among them is a false sense of one's own righteousness. Church history is littered with periods of emphasis on legalism. Nearly every group seems to pass through periods of failing to understand the nature and purpose of its behavioral choices. When we forget our own unworthiness, we begin to see our choices to do right as evidence of personal superiority. The result is often a judgmental approach toward others and a diminished interest in their salvation. Without an honoring heart, we are quick to travel the road of self-righteousness. It is a journey that alienates us from the true purposes of God and leaves us with no ability to portray His nature.

For the minister, obedience is the true, essential act of worship. Our obedience does not make us more worthy of God or His grace. Such worthiness is out of reach. But we demonstrate our awareness of what we have been given by pursuing a righteousness that will bring glory to our Savior.

## The Development

Obedience is cultivated through various means; one is the willingness to be transparent before others. Occasionally a minister feels pressured to appear invincible or beyond daily struggle. However, if we are not honest with ourselves and with God, we can limit our own ability to be honest about our weaknesses and neglect the help God desires to give us. Transparency with God is most effective as a daily habit. Honest confession of failures and accompanying repentance reinforces our need of God.

In addition to transparency with God, we must be transparent with ourselves concerning our deepest desires and motives. Consistent reflection on that which drives us will help us guard against self-serving ideals that can replace the purposes of God. Journaling or an accountability relationship with another minister can aid in protecting us from developing defeating desires.

In addition to transparency should be the commitment to integrity. A minister must decide to live by what is right. It has been said that integrity is *who you are in the dark*. Such a definition points to the necessary choice to do what is right when no one other than yourself and God are looking.

Finally, there is no separating obedience from love. Love is the greatest command our Creator has placed before us. By choosing to love and growing in love, we will nourish an obedient heart. Indeed, the premier way to show our love for God is by obeying His command to love others.

## A THANKFUL HEART

### The Essence

Though we have addressed several fundamental characteristics that are evidence of a right heart for ministry, we must not fail to mention the need to possess and nurture a thankful heart. We have seen how Saul's failure to honor and obey cost him dearly with the God who had elevated him to the position of king over all of Israel. But the loss touched more than his life. The kingdom passed not only from him, but from his descendants as well. In their place, a new king was chosen – David, a man known for his thankful heart.

The simplicity of David's love and relationship with God spilled over to the collection of psalms. For David, his job was to behold what God was doing! When good things came, David gave God the credit, the glory. When heartache or disappointment came, David knew his hope was in God, and when a battle ended in victory, David's first reaction was to praise His Deliverer.

A thankful heart is one that sees God not only in times of blessing but is aware of His presence in every challenge. Too often ministers will rely on their own resources until all strength is gone. This is when the needy one looks up. But a thankful heart anticipates the hand of God and begins addressing difficulty by calling unto God. Simply put, if you look to yourself in times of trouble, you will have little motive for thanksgiving when relief finally emerges.

A thankful heart guides others to thankfulness as well. When a minister credits God for the events of his or her life, those who follow will cultivate the same habit. As with honor and obedience, the evidence of a thankful heart in a minister's life may be most clearly seen by those whom the minister leads. The minister's thankful heart will begin to be imitated by those under his or her influence. Whether through word, attitude, or behavior, a thankful heart is contagious. And God wants this side of a leader's heart to be seen, by all. Thanksgiving is not reserved for the inner man but is intended as outward expressions to be heard by all peoples (**Psalm 57: 9**).

## The Demonstration

A thankful heart manifests with an overflow of joy. When an individual lives with a thankful heart, that person maintains a keen sense of God's presence – here is the source of the joyful spirit. David possessed such a heart at each stage age of his life. In **Psalm 9**, David lifts up praises to God for the presence of joy in his life; he knew that the reason for his praise was God's faithfulness (**Psalm 9: 1, 2**).

A thankful heart generates from the trust one has in God. The person who maintains an awareness of God's presence and activity in daily living finds many opportunities to demonstrate trust in God. Thus, thankful becomes an automatic response to living.

## The Necessity

The best evidence of a need for a thankful heart is the fruit that is seen when it is missing. A lack of thankfulness will send an individual down many potential paths, none of which brings honor to God.

A lack of thankfulness can grow into an ungrateful spirit. Such a spirit is unable to recognize the real source of all blessings, while taking for granted the works and acts of God. A minister's life and demeanor ought to point to God in a way that brings Him glory. An ungrateful heart offers no potential for joy to those who follow.

Of course, the pitfalls of an unthankful heart grow even deeper. If we do not cultivate a thankful heart, we can drift into self-reliance and pride. After all, if we cannot recognize the hand of God in our lives, we have little explanation for our ability to do good other than to think more highly of ourselves. A thankful heart takes the focus off the minister in times of blessings and calls attention to God, the true source of blessing.

Finally, a heart that lacks thankfulness will ultimately bury itself more deeply in sin. Without thanksgiving in times of blessing, times of difficulty are more overwhelming. Failure to acknowledge God will shrivel faith and magnify moments of hardship, leaving the man or woman of God with the feeling that there is little benefit in pursuing or living for God. A thankful heart is insulation against hopelessness.

## The Development

A thankful heart is not developed accidentally. A weekly habit of gathering with others and singing praises will not yield a thankful heart. Thanksgiving grows out of an awareness of God in every part of life. The apostle Paul told the Thessalonians to "pray continually" (**1 Thessalonians 5: 17**). Of course, we cannot think he meant an unending kneeling with petitions. Rather, Paul is encouraging them to abide in an ongoing awareness of God and His abiding presence and provision.

Extended times of worship are also essential for the thankful heart. The life of ministry will provide its busyness, but the minister must step away from the endless list of tasks, separate from a self-consumed heart, and offer genuine praise.

Finally, a growing trust will lead to thanksgiving. While it is possible to receive from God and fail to be thankful, the more genuine the trust in God, the more alert one becomes to the need for thankfulness to fill all the recesses of that heart.

## **The Lesson**

While the ministry is dominated by tasks and demonstrations of gifts, it is the nurturing of the right heart that will bring the greatest and most lasting results. The Bible has much to say about the heart, pointing out that from the heart all of life will ultimately emerge. Therefore, ministers must cultivate the right heart above all other efforts to fulfill their greatest potential for God's kingdom.

There are many components to the right heart – too many to include in this lesson. But among the most essential are a heart that honors God, obeys His commands, and gives thanks to Him. The first two kings of ancient Israel demonstrate these essential qualities by their absence from the heart of one (Saul) and their abundance in the heart of the other (David). Ministers must recognize that the condition of their hearts will ultimately shape their effectiveness in ministry.

### **Let's Apply That!**

- Define the traits of an honoring heart, an obedient heart, and a thankful heart.
- In what ways do you express an honoring heart, an obedient heart, and a thankful heart in your life?
- Take it to prayer and ask the Holy Spirit to identify areas in your life in which you could improve.

## TURNING FROM THE WRONG HEART

“Above all else, guard your heart, for it affects everything you do” (**Proverbs 4:23, NLT**).

Tiny and unseen, the rudder of a ship wields a powerful influence over the mightiest of vessels. Though buried beneath the waves, this little piece of metal dictates direction by parsing the stream of water according to its own bent. A passing ship will cross the same waters, but take a different direction based on the angle of its rudder. So it is with our hearts. Each of us can encounter circumstances that are virtually identical to the experience of another but find our course through them unique, based on the condition of each heart. For this reason, the Bible compels us to guard our hearts, to protect this rudder of our lives. Our lives will be channeled wherever our hearts turn.

Many ministers find their effectiveness derailed by the emergence of a wrong heart. For some, it is a momentary period of slipping off course; for others the result is a long trek downhill. In this lesson, we will look at some of the characteristics of the wrong heart and how we can avoid the destruction that comes from it.

## A DOUBTING HEART

### The Heart Defined

A doubting heart is more than an uncertain heart. An uncertain heart seeks direction, but a doubting heart rejects the direction it has received. To doubt is to call into question what one has received. When applied to our spiritual journeys, the doubting heart demonstrates reluctance to follow the path God has revealed.

Faith believes that God will do as He has spoken. Some operate from a more dangerous definition of faith – the belief that God will do what I want or deem that I need Him to do. Guided by this definition of faith, they live in the expectation that they can have what they want if they believe hard enough. But this is not the faith to which God calls us. Biblical faith knows God will fulfill His Word, even when the results are not yet evident and if they are different from what we want or feel we need.

To doubt, then, is to call into question the promises of God, such as His abiding presence, His promise of eternal life, His commitment to build His church, and many more. The minister who cannot trust God to fulfill what He has promised will cut a very jagged path for others to follow.

### Biblical Examples

There are many examples of doubt that peppered the disciples' lives as recorded in the Gospels. Chief among them took place at sea, amidst a violent storm (**Matthew 8: 24**). Though several in the boat were accomplished seamen, none could match the peace Jesus displayed as He slept in the bottom of the boat. Panicked, they shook Him awake, asking if He cared that they were on the verge of dying.

After calming the storm with a mere sentence, Jesus chided them for their lack of faith. But if they had faith, what would it have looked like? How should they have reacted? Some might think that they should have commanded the waters; after all, they are children of God. Or perhaps they should have ignored the water and pretended they were not in trouble at all.



These responses, while extraordinary, would not demonstrate biblical faith. Likely, the response Jesus criticized was the panic and assumption of His lack of concern. Had they possessed sufficient confidence in Jesus, they could have responded with peaceful hearts and simply ask that He help them. But doubting His love and concern for them led the disciples to a panicked, demanding response.

Others demonstrated doubt at the words of Jesus or the ancient promises He was fulfilling before them. Each time, the doubt brought a storm of anxiety and took the doubter farther from the peace God promises to those who trust in Him. Not all lack of faith is an expression of doubt, but when those who know, what God has promised fail to trust Him, doubt is usually the culprit.

## **Evidence and Results**

James writes that a doubting heart is as unsettled as a wave on the sea, tossed about by the winds (1: 6). It is interesting that this is the first issue James tackles as he teaches the scattering church. To doubt is to shift between following or trusting God and relying on oneself.

For leaders, doubt takes on a greater dimension because others are following their example. It is difficult to follow people when the path they cut is unclear or their direction continually shifts. Such leaders are usually driven more by their emotions than by the knowledge they have of God.

Fear is a common evidence of doubt. When a leader allows circumstances to become larger than God, fear will overwhelm him or her. That fear may not reveal itself in panic, but it will be evident in the shifting flow of doubt.

Self-reliance provides yet another evidence of doubt. When we are reluctant to trust God to fulfill His promises, we tend to seek to fill the gaps of our faith with activity. A leader who depends on God one minute but takes matters into his or her own hands the next does not have inner peace and loses the ability to lead effectively.

James says that the result of doubt is clear – one is tossed back and forth with no apparent control over one's direction. Waves rise and fall, and the boats they toss are navigated with great difficulty. But those who turn away from doubt live with peace and a sense of direction that makes life clear for followers.

## **Pursuing Change**

The steps of conquering a doubting heart are few but powerful. First, we must know what God has said and put confidence in it. The promises God has given to His children are discovered through the study of His word. While we cannot categorically claim every promise God made to an individual in the Scriptures, each of us is admonished to believe and stand in the hope of numerous others.

Once we are armed with the promises of God, we must choose to act on them. We must believe, depending upon God's promises of presence, provision, and power. His methods of response will vary according to His own sovereign purposes, but His faithfulness to fulfill His Word should be unquestioned.

Finally, we must deal with the causes of our doubt. Satan will surely seek to question the validity of God's promises, and we will never fully avoid his whispers, but we can conquer our self-reliance and the manner in which we allow non-believers to influence our thinking. We can learn to live in expectation rather than anxiety because God will be faithful. Remember, without faith it is impossible to please Him.

# A PROUD HEART

## The Heart Defined

In the previous lesson, we saw how a prideful heart is the enemy of a heart that honors God. Since it is the central product of our sinful nature, a proud heart shows itself in many ways. Self-reliance is the first snapshot of the proud heart. Over time, self-reliant people come to depend so deeply on their own wisdom that there develops a dullness to the direction of God for the local church. No longer do these people see lasting changes in the lives of those who are influenced by that ministry.

The proud heart will ultimately lose its self-awareness and melt into hypocrisy. For the proud, the failures of others are clearer than one's own weaknesses. In fact, the proud can even magnify the sins of others while ignoring the presence of the same sin in their own lives. A person who easily sees others' faults gives evidence of his or her own proud heart.

Self-focus is an even deeper picture of the proud heart. Here pride demonstrates itself as envy, greed, and ultimately rebellion—demanding its own way. The minister who labors for the affirmation of others, even to the point of silent pleasure when others fail, has journeyed well down the path of pride. Self-aggrandizement is incompatible with the call to servanthood. Repeatedly we are called to a focus on God's will and the good of others. A proud heart has little desire to achieve either.

## Biblical Examples

In Scripture, while there are many examples of hearts controlled by pride, the Pharisees of Jesus' day offer perhaps the most poignant picture. Jesus labeled them "white-washed tombs" (**Matthew 23: 27**) to symbolize their hollowness. Though on the outside their abilities and performances caused others to think them spiritual, within they lacked much.

The minister can slip into the snare of functioning the same way. Good performance at ministry tasks can mask a growing emptiness within. The affirmation that comes with successes can add to the lure. Ministers who nourish their self-worth on the praise of others will ultimately make praise a goal and ignore the Spirit's tug toward a sincere and humble heart. A proud heart takes control and leaves one bankrupt of true success. Thus, the proud heart ultimately seeks for itself at the expense of others. Without question, it destroys its host.

## Evidence and Results

There is no denying that pride comes in many forms. The beginner must understand that humans cannot outrun the temptation of a proud heart, so there must be a guard set against allowing the seeds to take root.

Justification is another sign that hangs on the door of a proud heart. While it seems unconscionable on the surface, a proud heart can lead a minister to ignore grievous sin in his or her own life while the minister is hard at work leading the rest of the church in spiritual pursuits. In ancient Israel, the high priest was careful to purify his own heart before offering sacrifices of atonement for the people because he knew sin in his own life would bring death inside the holy place. Today, God's grace shields us from this kind of punishment, in most cases, and the proud of heart take advantage of that grace with a portrayal of spirituality that covers neglect and sin. Because a proud heart sows seed that will ultimately choke out the purposes of God in one's life and ministry, the minister should note that pride tops the list of behaviors God finds abominable (**Proverbs 6: 16 – 19**).

## **Pursuing Change**

There is but one way to counteract a proud heart – to humble oneself before God and others. As children of God, we must acknowledge our sins and turn from them in order to move toward God. There is no special prescription for the minister. The minister's pride is conquered just like any other sinner.

However, the minister ought to consider the impact of personal pride when desiring to turn from it. While public confession may not be warranted, true humility will take into account those damaged and make appropriate effort to repair. The prescription for maintaining a heart free of pride is worship.

## **A RESENTFUL HEART**

### **The Heart Defined**

Life in the ministry can be most difficult. Surveys typically find the ministry as one of the most stressful occupations. The expectations of people coupled with being the recipient of that occasional hurtful expression make a resentful heart.

By definition, a resentful heart is one that has failed to forgive past wrongs, and instead allowed those wrongs to grow beyond their original size. A resentful heart can emerge from a variety of circumstances. While the wrongdoing of others can get it started, there are also the wounds of sorrow. Periods of sadness and depression can also corrode the heart with resentment, as can lost dreams or shattered successes.

Unforgiveness is the ugly conscience of a resentful heart, so a minister needs to stay on the alert for the many ways and circumstances in which it steps to the forefront. While its form may vary, the end result looks much the same – a hardened heart, inability to love, and absence of joy.

### **Biblical Examples**

No one knows better than the minister the magnitude of God's forgiveness. In your life of ministry, you will see God's grace extended to the most impossible situations. This is the nature God has revealed and the message of hope He has placed within us.

Jonah, however, lacked a desire for the forgiveness God could extend. He demonstrated many efforts to avoid the proclamation of God's love when it came to the people of Nineveh. After all, they had been wicked and unfair to Jonah's people. Perhaps Jonah's own family had even felt the brunt of Assyrian domination. For whatever motive, Jonah would have rather died than see such people worship God. And he almost did.

Jonah's story is not too far removed from us. While we may lack the same fervor or national hatred, a grace dependent on us would fall well short of the grace we have been given. Jesus told of a servant who was forgiven a huge debt only to go out and treat his own debtor harshly. The minister's knowledge and experience of God's grace must eliminate unwillingness to forgive offenders.

It is of note that Jonah's story ends with him still wanting to die though he is sitting amidst one of the greatest revivals of human history. As with Jonah, a resentful heart will steal the true measure of ministry from the minister's heart.

## **Evidence and Results**

Ministers have feelings. Such a statement may seem obvious and unnecessary, but the minister will occasionally be treated as though it is impossible for him or her to be hurt. If a hurtful experience continues to affect the minister, he or she may be harboring resentment. Such a heart needs only two things to develop – a cause and time. Jesus warned His disciples of this potential condition when He spoke of His coming death. He told them they would be treated similarly, and they were. The minister must understand that to follow Christ still means to suffer for Christ.

Like the disciples, most ministers choose this path hoping to make a difference and receive God's rewards for their effort. They do not enter the ministry looking forward to heartache and mistreatment. But such was the experience of the Master; can His servants expect less?

Therefore, when past hurts keep haunting you, step back and take inventory of your heart. Have you truly forgiven? Do you still wish the offenders would get their deserved punishment? If these feelings continue to flood your thoughts, resentment is present and should be dealt with before it steals your joy.

## **Pursuing Change**

A number of the prophets came to a place where they wanted to die. Elijah hid in a cave from Jezebel just a few days after his greatest victory. He was persuaded that he had endured all that he could. God understood the struggling prophet and cared for him, just as He understands His modern servants during their times of hurt. He will help us when we are ready.

When a minister recognizes the signs of resentment, it is time for him or her to return to the path of forgiveness. First, the minister needs to reflect on God's forgiveness. One cannot truly justify withholding forgiveness from others once it has been so gloriously experienced personally.

Second, ministers must identify the scope of their feelings by considering every aspect of how the circumstance has affected their lives. Then, the minister must give God the troubling emotions and allow Him to heal the residual hurts.

Third is the point of separating the offender from the offense and finding ways to renew the person(s) in love. Then, finally, the minister must proclaim freedom for the offender and the offended. If necessary, inform the offender of your past resentment and assure him or her of your choice to forgive. It is the resentful heart that needs to be free, so proclaim your own freedom and allow God's healing to finish its work.

## **The Lesson**

The heart dictates a life's direction. The heart shapes perception and leads to decision-making. Many ministers have found themselves stunted by the fruits of a wrong heart condition, and God's gifts have been compromised or abandoned. To have the right heart, a minister must choose to turn from the self-centered state of a wrong heart. The Bible admonishes us to avoid certain things if we are to guard our hearts from unholiness and fruitlessness. Among these are doubt, pride, and resentment. Each of these characteristics conflicts with the essence of the Gospel and the purposes of God in this world. The doubting heart turns us from trust. The proud heart teaches us self-focus, and the resentful heart undermines the forgiveness that can set us free.

## Let's Apply that!

- Define the traits of a doubting heart, a proud heart, and a resentful heart.
- In what ways have you experienced victories (large or small) where you have turned away from a doubting heart, a proud heart, and a resentful heart. What areas is the Holy Spirit speaking or warning you about a proud, resentful, or doubting.
- Why does God emphasize the importance of turning away from a doubting heart, a proud heart, and a resentful heart?

## GOD'S TESTS FOR LEADERS

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts” (**Psalm 139: 23**).

In his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, Rick Warren proclaims that life is a test (2002, 42). He goes on to explain how God is at work in the circumstances of our lives, using them to develop us more in the principles of His nature and kingdom. For the minister, there should be no doubt that these tests will come. After all, as stewards of God's kingdom, ministers should set the pace among God's people.

Tests are the tools God uses to shape our character and give us understanding of His heart. Tests are not a sign that something is broken or that we have failed in some capacity. Instead, they are the strategy of a loving God to develop us. Do not aim to avoid the tests – aim to pass them.

### THE TEST OF TRUST

#### Understanding the Test

Scripture tells us that faith is necessary in order to please God. It makes sense, then, that the test of trust would play a significant role in the development of the minister's life.

In the twenty-first century, people think a lot about the pursuit of ease and comfort. The achievement of these modern-day treasures – along with wealth and success – is an indication of a good life. This makes it hard to accept difficulty and to experience uncertainty. It is more unfortunate when we realize that we have let ourselves believe ease and prosperity are synonymous with knowing the blessings of God.

When a test of trust comes, this modern pursuit of comfort is interrupted. God makes us uncomfortable and forces us to face the uncertain. We are left feeling abandoned and hopeless. Sadly, this is the time when some turn away from God, abandoning all possibility that this is a test to see where their trust lies.

Both for personal benefit and as an example to others, the minister has to see this process for what it is. God has not abandoned or failed His servant. Rather, the moment has come for the minister to demonstrate the life of faith – a life that cannot exist without unanswered questions.

#### Why You Cannot Afford to Fail

As we have noted, God requires faith from those who would serve Him. This is reason enough to put all diligence toward passing this test. But there is more to the urgency for success in this area than divine compulsion.

The minister has launched into a life much different from that pursued by others. First, the minister has agreed to the call to live sacrificially as a servant of God and the purposes of His kingdom. When God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac (**Genesis 22**), He was not being impulsive or trying to stretch Abraham to breaking point. He had a specific purpose in the test. God would ultimately lead Abraham to places where absolute trust was needed, often without understanding or prior discussion. Abraham had to pass the trust test in order to be ready for the life God had placed before him. The same requirement holds for today's minister.

## How to Get a Passing Grade

First, success in the test of trust demands focusing on the faithfulness of God. His trustworthiness is a proven reality. If you know He has come through for you on past occasions, it is easier to trust Him for the situation at hand.

Second, consider the places where you have invested your trust. Perhaps it has been placed in your own abilities, in a long-standing organization, or in a very influential friend. You may have more trust in your resources or may be hoping for good fortune to deliver you. Once you locate where your trust is placed, begin to identify the weaknesses of such trust.

Finally, confess your fears to God as you take steps of obedience. God understands our weaknesses, but He will not tolerate a decision to let those weaknesses paralyze us. Walk as God has revealed and let Him help with your feelings of uncertainty. Each step of trust becomes stronger.

## THE TEST OF OBEDIENCE

### Understanding the Test

In a relationship with God, obedience is an aspect of trust. But obedience is also an expression of love and a demonstration of a servant's willingness to be used in the plan of God. God will test our obedience frequently.

Very little of a minister's life goes untested when it comes to obedience. In fact, it is hard to think of an area or an occasion when a minister is not challenged to choose between obedience or ignoring some principle of Christian living or faithful servanthood. Sadly, many well-seasoned ministers who frequently passed this test in their younger years grow lax and become less faithful in their example and ministry. One trip through the test of obedience, even if successful, does not bring an end to this challenge.

### Why You Cannot Afford to Fail

The apostle John writes that if we say we love God but do not obey His commands, we lie (**I John 4:20**). Failure to obey God is tantamount to complete failure of mission, for if we do not obey, what hope do we have that those who follow us will choose better?

While we can only speculate about what God's response would have been had Abraham refused to obey Him in offering Isaac (**Genesis 22**), it is reasonable to assume that Isaac would have been taken from his father by other means. God will respond to our disobedience by removing whatever we place before Him.

Thus, obedience is not optional for the minister as the hope of those who follow the minister's example rests on the minister's obedience. God will help and provide for His people, but He cannot make the decision of obedience for anyone.

## How to Get a Passing Grade

What steps does a minister consider when facing the test of obedience? Firstly, the minister must be clear as to what God has commanded. When one comes up against an issue that God has clearly answered in His Word, His expectations are clear. But at other times, one may need to seek counsel or other confirming sources to understand what God requires.

Secondly, obedience is a decision. Once one understands the will of God, the only decision is to do that will. Justifying another route is trying to justify disobedience. To avoid this temptation, the minister must seek and obey.

Thirdly, the leader must also avoid the temptation to justify a weaker response. It is not hard to imagine Abraham looking for a way around God's command. But he did not allow himself to be sidetracked. His obedience was full and complete.

Finally, the leader must take the necessary steps to obey. As with Abraham's experience, the path of obedience may require many steps up the mountain. Take the necessary steps and walk straight toward God's command. Satan has a much easier target if you veer from the path of full obedience.

## **THE TEST OF DEPENDENCE**

### **Understanding the Test**

One of the most difficult tests a minister will face is the test of dependence. This test measures who or what we may be leaning upon as we attempt to serve God. As ministries grow, it seems easier to slip into dependence upon other things, people or methods, rather than on God.

This test usually comes when something we are depending on is taken from us. A small-town pastor's heart may fill with anxiety at the announcement that the family that gives the most to the church is moving to the city. At other times, a key leader may become disenchanted with the pastor and make more than a little noise when departing.

But the test of dependence does not just affect the church and its ministries, the individual minister is measured in this area also. When someone fails, compromising the efforts and effect of the ministry, this is a good sign that God is testing for what this heart depends upon. Even more painful is when a key mentor falls into moral failure. In this moment, the exam can be emotionally excruciating.

### **Why You Cannot Afford to Fail**

The test of dependence can be particularly difficult, but one cannot afford to fail. If our dependence is tested by the threat of losing people, resources, or possessions, we can be assured that though we fail God's check in our heart, the things that we have tried to hold on to will eventually be lost anyway. Succumbing to temptation does not ever lead to a good end. If it is people that we are relying upon, they will fail us too. God is obligated to show their weaknesses so that we can reinvest our trust in Him.

Thus, the minister should be careful about letting others become over dependent upon him or her. This requires consistent teaching on God as the believer's caregiver. A minister's obligation to the church includes training up healthy, balanced Christians who know their God and their source for all good things. Any other perspective is unhealthy.

### **How to Get a Passing Grade**

It is understandable (in those times when our hearts are tender toward God and His will) that failing the test of dependence can result in great loss. This is a hard test for the minister, in the context where he or she is set to be a servant and the primary human example of the right relationship with God.

First, the leader must cultivate dependence on God. Daily times of seeking God and bringing Him the deepest issues will build dependence. This test is designed to help the minister establish dependence on the one foundation that will never crumble. Second, ministers must



consider their weaknesses and determine the reason for their dependence on other things. Perhaps personal fears or lack of faith need to be addressed. God will help leaders discover answers if they ask Him the questions.

## THE TEST OF LOVE

### Understanding the Test

God is love, and the minister is a servant of our loving God. This makes it natural to expect to see love as the central characteristic in the lives of God's servants. God commands our love – for Him and for others. These commands form the most essential core of a minister's assignment.

To reach such a goal, love becomes a test. God may place a minister in the middle of some people who are difficult to love. When those we love act in unlovely ways, it can be a test for us to respond with kindness. Jesus said that anyone could love those who are lovable, but to love enemies or backstabbing friends is difficult.

Joyce Meyer has stated that the "sandpaper" people in our lives are used to smooth out our rough edges. Maybe the greater the number of rough edges we have, the more of those people God sends. Loving the unlovely is what set Jesus apart from His contemporaries. It is, also, what will provide the clearest evidence of a minister's connection to God.

### Why You Cannot Afford to Fail

The ministry will teach the novice to master the techniques of ministry. But without love, the minister has missed God's point and purpose for His work in this world. Paul speaks of this when he tells the Corinthians that mastering spiritual gifts and demonstrating incredible personal sacrifice mean nothing without love (**I Corinthians 13: 1**).

A minister must understand that the most effective tool in the work of God is love. Only love can truly change a life. Laws and rules can form a fence around behavior, but they cannot change a heart. Only love can penetrate a life and establish the believer in a new direction. Without love, we eliminate our hope of making a difference for Christ.

Therefore, as Christ's representative, ministers must realize that their actions portray the Master's heart. When a minister fails to love, Christ's credibility is damaged. Many refuse to enter a church due to the lack of love once shown to them in God's house. Indeed, the modern world is less convinced each day that the answers they seek can be found among God's people. Failure to love renders the church ineffective.

### How to Get a Passing Grade

Walking in divine love is not a natural choice. It is the overflow of the divine relationship with God. The more a child of God abides in that love, the more conditioned that person becomes to act, think, and work with others. A leader should be strengthened for the day's challenges by considering how great a love has been given to him or her. Understanding the depth of that love is a lifetime experience, with so many new facets to explore. It is an unending wonder. The one called to ministry personally knows the love that does not consider worthiness. It is a love of personal sacrifice; it seeks the lasting well-being of the one loved. This must be the first step, daily.

When the mind is renewed in this reality, the loved will want to extend that offering to others. God does not require us to give what we have not received. But He does require us to give what

He has freely given. For this reason, the test of love will be placed before us repeatedly. It is the nature of functioning in God's kingdom.

The minister must therefore recognize what makes him or her reluctant to love. Perhaps a past hurt hinders you from opening your heart to others. If so, take the necessary steps to forgive. If selfishness keeps you from loving, your pride must be conquered. This is a test you must pass, or you will be rendered ineffective for God's purposes.

## **THE TEST OF TIME**

### **Understanding the Test**

The western world moves at an accelerated pace. Waiting implies that something is not working properly. Yet, much of what is spoken to us from the Scriptures was originally addressed to an agrarian culture. In such an economy, periods of waiting were reflected in all of life. A crop was planted but reaped many months later. Activities of life were planned around seasons or segments of a day; battles, entertaining guests, everything happened in the framework of prolonged time. God's timetable is like this; discipleship is a life-long journey that will demand much patience.

God sees the needs and future of His church, so He helps His stewards learn patience as they lead His people. The writhing that we create in our spirits over who owns our time is useless, and God's tests help us to learn this truth. Our own impatience becomes an enemy to the work of the Lord, an enemy that the test of time will help us conquer.

### **Why You Cannot Afford to Fail**

There is much to learn as we wait on God. In fact, the majority of God's great lessons require a period of waiting. Waiting establishes dependence and helps attribute value. That which we can have instantly is not treasured like that which comes after a good season of waiting. The minister who cannot wait on God will never experience the true provision and abundance God desires to give.

The leader sets the pace for those who follow. No one will believe a message preached that is not practiced by the preacher. People face many challenges, and their desire for instant answers works against the peace they seek. The minister who cannot wait on God must manufacture reasons for His delay – reasons that typically work against genuine faith.

### **How to Get a Passing Grade**

While waiting is not easy, learning to wait is even more difficult. The first step is to identify the one on whom you depend. Have confidence in God's love and plan. If you know God will bring the best possible result, waiting becomes simple. Inability to wait usually reveals a lack of confidence in God's love and the perfection of His plans.

Finally, if you are still struggling to wait, occupy your heart with other things. Often when we face the test of time, we become so obsessed with our need that we get overwhelmed and decide we can wait no longer. However, just a little more confidence in God's faithfulness will prove to be worthwhile. Anchor your heart in His love and wait.

## **THE TEST OF SOLITUDE**

### **Understanding the Test**

Another common test for the minister is the wilderness experience or the test of solitude. Every minister—young and old, experienced and novice – will face wilderness moments in his or her tenure of ministry for God. It is inherent in the journey, and Scriptures teach this as surely as it teaches of God's love. Most of us prefer the bounty and refreshing of those moments when we are experiencing God's love and have a clear understanding of His plan. But there will be times in a minister's life of spiritual dryness, and weeks may pass without any refreshing, or so it seems.

Some make the mistake of assuming that a dry period or a wilderness experience is evidence that they have stepped out of God's will. However, this may simply not be the case. Throughout Scripture, God led His servants to the wilderness for testing and strengthening. Even Jesus was led by the Spirit to the wilderness; it was there that Satan unleashed his greatest temptations. But the Spirit led Jesus in and out of the wilderness!

Times of solitude make us thirsty for God's presence. This is part of its function. If we run from these times or give up our pursuit of God's purposes because the sun seems not to be shining on us, we will fail this essential test. Inability to face the wilderness will keep us from the true blessing of great moments with God.

### **Why You Cannot Afford to Fail**

The wilderness is always a part of the journey to the Promised Land. We have come to see the wilderness experience as a time of being off-track. After all, if we are truly living where God desires, we should experience unlimited blessing. But these are the same types of ideas the false prophets spoke to Israel.

The truth is that if you reject the wilderness, you will never find the Promised Land (the answer or the place you are seeking). You will never learn the lessons that will guide you in times in the future, and you will never come to love and lean on God the way that He desires. Though you may not see or feel Him, this is a precious time for just you and God.

A minister who fails the solitude test will also breed followers who cannot survive apart from God's clear presence. Such disciples wilt when difficulty comes and only follow Christ if they can be spoiled by constant blessings. These are not the type of disciples God expects His servants to produce.

### **How to Get a Passing Grade**

Passing this test starts with accepting the nature of the test. Times of solitude should be embraced just as strongly as times of blessing. If you abandon the feeling that something is not right or fair, your endurance will be enhanced.

The leader needs to be honest with the Father in the wilderness. Here, dependence on Him will be maximized. Just as David cried out his whole heart to God, all ministers must lay open their hearts before the Lord. God does not ask us to pretend we are not feeling alone, broken, confused, empty or scared, but He wants us to bring all of ourselves to Him so He can meet our need. In turn, God's honesty will be reflected upon our hearts, and our true need will become clearer. Then God can work from there.

Praise God for the wilderness. Moses likely thanked God often for the lessons he learned in the wilderness. They were the equipment he needed to lead Israel when their path crossed the wilderness. God will use your solitude to equip others.

## The Lesson

Life in the ministry will be one test after another. The tests have a purpose – the equipping of our lives for greater effectiveness. Those who resist God’s testing lessen their chances of making it in the ministry. But those who trust Him to lead find He has a plan ideally suited for their growth.

Be careful not to oversimplify your journey or that of another. Tests require careful attention and preparation. Those who disregard their importance are like the student who neglects study and then hopes to achieve his or her best.

## Let’s Apply That!

- Explain characteristics of the tests of trust, obedience, dependence, love, time and solitude.
- Identify times in which you have experienced the tests of trust, obedience, dependence, love, time, and solitude and what did it teach you about God’s love for you.

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