

Persevering in Ministry



by MICHAEL R. EMLET

The master bedroom of our house is on the second floor and juts out over the front porch. It is supported by two stone pillars. Just after moving into the house, I noticed a bit of erosion and settling at the base of the right pillar. I thought to myself, “I ought to call a contractor to look at that.” But I didn’t. A year later I noticed it again and I said to myself, “I ought to call a contractor to look at that.” But I had this uneasy sense that it wouldn’t be a cheap fix, so I didn’t call. More years passed. And then one February we had a huge snowstorm, followed by a rapid warming spell with heavy rains. A day later I walked out onto my front porch and did a double take. Overnight, the gradual erosion, coupled with the soaked ground, had allowed the pillar to shift out and away from the house. It looked like the leaning tower of Pisa! Only two square inches of the pillar remained in contact with the upper story of the house. Do you know that feeling you get when the roller coaster starts down the first hill? I felt that in the pit of my stomach as I visualized the imminent collapse of the front of my house. I thanked God that my wife and I hadn’t fallen out of our bed onto the front porch and...I called my contractor—who promptly jacked up that corner of the house! God was merciful to protect us from disaster. But it was a costly repair, far more costly than if I had addressed the problem when I

Michael Emler (MDiv, MD) counsels and teaches at CCEF. His most recent book is Descriptions and Prescriptions: A Biblical Perspective on Psychiatric Diagnoses and Medications.

first noticed it. I *saw* the problem—but I didn't take it seriously. And slowly the erosion took its toll.

The same thing can be true of our spiritual lives. Erosion takes its toll. In my experience, spiritual decline happens by degrees, rather than all at once. Those involved in ministry (whether vocationally or in a lay context) are no exception. In fact, it is all too easy for our relationship with God to suffer in the context of helping others.

The apostle Paul must have thought so, too. Listen to what he says in 1 Timothy 4:6–16:

If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come. The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance. For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe. Command and teach these things. Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity. Until I come, devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to exhortation, to teaching. Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

What is Paul saying? He is highlighting that there is an integral connection between our personal walk with God and our ministry. Much of what Paul tells Timothy is related to maintaining his own spiritual vitality. Notice his admonitions: Train yourself for godliness. Set the believers an example in

speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity (an all-encompassing task). Practice these things; immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress. Paul sums it all up in the last verse: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

This article probes what it means for you to keep a close watch on yourself as you engage in ministry to others. The reality is that we remain desperately needy of God’s grace and mercy in the midst of this type of work. We will explore three areas:

1. What are the warning signs of spiritual decline or erosion in your life?
2. What are some of the unique pressures and temptations you face in doing one-another ministry that might contribute to this decline?
3. What are some practical ways you can cultivate your spiritual life in the midst of service to others?

By addressing these questions, I hope you will be able to assess how you are doing spiritually and then, with God’s help, make any needed changes. God cares about your welfare as you serve him and his people.

One final word of orientation before we proceed. You may feel discouraged or burned out in ministry right now. This is a heavy topic, and as we look at warning signs you might be tempted to feel even more discouraged—and sense a greater weight of failure. Or conversely, you might feel like you need to buckle down and work harder. You may hear your inner drill sergeant shout: “Drop down and give me ten, you lazy bum!”

But don’t forget what is embedded in 1 Timothy 4—hope! Did you catch this verse? “For to this end we toil and strive, [*why?*] because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.” That’s why I’m confident that we can persevere in ministry and even thrive spiritually, because *God* is the author and finisher of our salvation. He will complete the good work he has begun within us (Phil 1:6). So yes, I hope you find this material challenging. It is to my own soul. But I also trust you will come away with a sense of hope-filled determination grounded in the transforming work of God.

To continue reading this article, visit ccef.org/jbc to purchase the individual journal issue or subscribe to the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

The Journal of Biblical Counseling

(ISSN: 1063-2166) is published by:

Christian Counseling & Educational Foundation

1803 East Willow Grove Avenue

Glenside, PA 19038

www.ccef.org

Copyright © 2017 CCEF

All rights reserved.