Following Christ, Not His Leaders Part III

Various Scriptures

Sermon Manuscript

You may have heard of the phrase “Leadership is Everything,” emphasizing how everything rises and or falls on the way a person leads. Robert Murray Mc’Cheyenne, a Scottish pastor from the 1800s once said, “your people’s greatest need is your own holiness,” which is very true as well. But I want to give two caveats to those two phrases. The phrase “Leadership Is Everything” is true in so far as the leader is perfect and perfectly leading, but it becomes not “everything” when the leader fails those he is leading. “Your people’s greatest need is your own holiness” is true in so far as the pastor’s holiness directly influences the holiness of the people he is shepherding. But what if that pastor becomes unholy and disqualifies himself from ministry? Is the greatest need of the congregation for the pastor to become holy again? While that former ministry leader or pastor should desire to be holy as Christ is holy, at that point, the people’s greatest need is not the holiness of the pastor, but Christ. They need an unshakeable, unchangeable rock that they can cling that will never leave them nor forsake them no matter the circumstances.

So that is my hope and goal today, that if there are any of you who are placing too much faith, hope, and trust in a ministry leader’s faithfulness instead of the faithfulness of Christ, I pray that what you will hear today would encourage your faith to be anchored to the One who will never fail you, leave you, or forsake you; Jesus Christ, instead of in fallible men. And for those of you who are rightly basing your faith on Christ’s faithfulness and not man’s faithfulness, I pray and hope that your confidence and trust in Him will only grow stronger through hearing today’s message. But along with that, I also want to go over a perspective that you may not usually think of when you think of a ministry leader disqualifying himself. (Now I am going to use the term “ministry leader” as a broad term to include not only pastors, but missionaries, preachers, evangelists, and other people as well that have positions of leadership influence in the church, although primarily pastors are in my view).

Our usual reaction to another disqualification in ministry is “how could this happen?” or “How could God allow this to happen?” But what we usually don’t ask ourselves is “What is God teaching me through this man disqualifying himself?” “What are some reasons that God could have had that allowed this man to fall instead of preventing his fall?” And that is what I want to go over today as well how can be apply what we’ve learn from a pastor’s fall. I want to give you four reasons why God has allowed a pastor to fall. **Number one: To remind the church that unbelievers are watching. Number two: To purify His church. Number three: To show that Christ alone is head of the church. And lastly, number four: To help us examine whether we are following Christ or people.**

So the first reason why God allows a pastor to fall: To remind the church that unbelievers are watching. God allowed this person to fall to wake us up to the sobering reality that public sin skews an unbelievers’ view of the Christian faith. Sin skews an unbeliever’s view of the Christian faith. Turn to 2 Samuel 11:26-12:15. “*Then**the wife of Uriah heard that Uriah her husband had died, so she lamented over her husband. Then the time of mourning passed by, and David sent and gathered her to his house and she became his wife; then she bore him a son. But the thing that David had done was evil in the sight of Yahweh. Then Yahweh sent Nathan to David. And he came to him and said, “There were two men in one city, the one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a great many flocks and herds. But the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb which he bought and nourished; And it grew up together with him and his children. It would eat his morsel of bread and drink of his cup and lie in his bosom, And was like a daughter to him. Now a visitor came to the rich man, And he was unwilling to take from his own flock or his own herd, To prepare for the traveler who had come to him; Rather he took the poor man’s ewe lamb and prepared it for the man who had come to him.”*

*Then David’s anger burned greatly against the man, and he said to Nathan, “As Yahweh lives, surely the man who has done this deserves to die. And he must make restitution for the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing and had no compassion.” Nathan then said to David, “You are the man! Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘It is I who anointed you king over Israel and it is I who delivered you from the hand of Saul. I also gave you your master’s house and your master’s wives into your care, and I gave you the house of Israel and Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added to you many more things like these! Why have you despised the word of Yahweh by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon. So now, the sword shall never depart from your house, because you have despised Me and have taken the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your wife.’ Thus says Yahweh, ‘Behold, I will raise up evil against you from your own household; I will even take your wives from before your sight and give them to your companion, and he will lie with your wives in the sight of this sun. Indeed you did it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel, and before the sun.’” Then David said to Nathan, “I have sinned against Yahweh.” And Nathan said to David, “Yahweh also has taken away your sin; you shall not die. However, because by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of Yahweh to blaspheme, the son also that is born to you shall surely die*. *And Nathan went to his house*.”

Notice verse 14 which says “*by this deed you have given occasion to the enemies of Yahweh to blaspheme*…” The very king of Israel, the man who is supposed to be a man after God’s own heart, the man who as the king of Israel, was supposed to model godliness and God’s character to His people, instead has done evil in God’s sight. What David did was no different than what other pagan kings do, and so king David gave an occasion for the pagans to mock and blaspheme God. And the same thing is happening today, whenever a ministry leader falls into sin and disqualifies himself, It gives occasion for those mockers of Christianity to say “*Ha see! I knew Christians were hypocrites. I know of other people who are not “Christians” who have lived a more moral life than that sham pastor! What difference would it be if I became a Christian or not*!” The way we live our lives is everything. You can say you are a Christian, you can say you believe, but if your actions don’t back up your words, then your witness for Christ to other unbelievers is not going to be credible in their eyes. Now you can’t successfully witness to someone without also speaking the hope of the gospel from your mouth, but if the way you live your life does not show that it’s transformed by the gospel, then your credibility is that that much more weakened. So the application here is that whenever a ministry leader falls and commits a disqualifying sin, it should cause us to grieve and to have sorrow because it has brought reproach on the name of Christ and it should cause us to be motivated to live a more godlier and blameless life in Christ so that we ourselves do not bring reproach on His name.

But that’s not the only reason God allows a ministry leader to fall. The second reason God allows ministry leaders to fall is to purify his church. To purify his church. To purify it by removing what is impure, namely the corrupted pastor or leader. And in exposing and removing the impurity, God purifies His own people’s hearts towards Him. Turn to Acts 4:32-5:11. “*And the congregation of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and not one was saying that any of his possessions was his own, but, for them, everything was common. And with great power the apostles were bearing witness to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales and lay them at the apostles’ feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), and who owned a field, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles’ feet*. *But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and kept back some of the price for himself, with his wife’s full knowledge. And bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your authority? Why is it that you laid this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard. And the young men rose up and wrapped him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him*.

*Now there was an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter responded to her, “Tell me whether you were paid this much for the land?” And she said, “Yes, that much.” Then Peter said to her, “Why is it that you have agreed together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test? Behold, the feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out as well.” And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband. And great fear came over the whole church, and over all who heard these things*.”

The take away here for us is that God takes His holiness seriously, and if His people, the church, who are supposed to be representing God’s holy presence here on earth is not holy, then God will take the necessary action to cleanse His people. God disciplines and judges first His own people. That’s why 1 Peter 4:17 says “*For it is time for judgment to begin with the house of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God*?” For believers, God’s judgment is for our good, to remove all that is hindering us from fully obeying Him. And sometimes that judgment is very severe in the case of Ananias and Sapphira where God could not tolerate their treachery any more. But let us not mistake God’s judgment as hatred and rejection of His people. No, God disciplines us for our own good and He disciplines us BECAUSE he loves us. Hebrews 12:6-7 says, “*My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reproved by Him; For THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES He disciplines, And He flogs every son whom He receives.” It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline*?”

Think about the kindness and love of God as it relates to His discipline of ministry leaders…When a pastor’s secret disqualifying sin is exposed to the public and that sin is stopped because of the exposure and shame that sin has brought…doesn’t that only show that God still loves and cares for that pastor enough to stop his sin in its tracks from becoming fully formed? Can you imagine how much more damage to his own soul, to his family, to the church, and to the name of Christ ministry leaders could inflict if God did not expose them in their sin? The question is often asked, how could God allow such an important leader in the church to fall? But that’s the wrong question, the better question is, “how could God NOT allow that important leader to fall into his sin?” Yes, I could only imagine how painful and how difficult it would be to lose your ministry position and to lose that position of influence you could have kept had you not brought reproach on yourself. But let me assure you that the other alternative, which is not having your sin exposed and stopped, is much more painful to bear. And can you imagine how many marriages would be saved, how many people would be sanctified by seeing their own sinfulness and confessing it and forsaking it…how many families would be saved from destructive behaviors caused by sin? So the application for us is this: if you have ever sinned or was about to sin, but then God exposed you in some way either by a confrontation or a rebuke of a dear brother or sister in the Lord, even though being exposed and confronted about your sin was probably not the first thing you wanted to hear, consider it a form of God’s kindness and love to you expressed through it working in the hearts of His children to keep you from straying from the family of God.

We have seen that God allows pastors to fall because He is reminding us that unbelievers are watching us, and to purify His church. And the third reason God allows ministry leaders to fall is to remind His people that Christ alone is the head of the church. As I have mentioned previously, we have a tendency to put undue adoration, attention, and focus on the pastors Christ puts before us rather than on Christ Himself. We can see those pastors, we can converse with them, and so it’s easier for us to put pastors up on a pedestal and trust in them rather than in the unseen Christ. Now there is nothing wrong with following and imitating leaders Christ has put in the church for our good and edification. There is nothing wrong with trusting in our leaders that they will lead our souls in a godly way. Hebrews 13:7-8 says “*Obey your leaders and submit to them—for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account**so that they will do this with joy and not with groaning, for this would be unprofitable for you*.” Actually what that passage is also saying amazingly is that God wants you to really trust, and not distrust or be suspicious of, your leaders, because that directly affects how they lead as well, because if you don’t trust your elders or pastors that are over you, they in turn won’t be able to lead you with joy as God intended because you don’t trust their leadership…and if they aren’t leading with joy but with groans because you are not submissive to their leadership, then you are not profited either. It’s a lose-lose situation. Trust is not one sided. Trust goes both ways. Same thing goes for helping others. You can try helping someone who doesn’t want to be helped, but it most likely won’t be successful. You can only really help someone if they want to be helped.

But when a pastor that we have come to love and trust falls into reproach, it’s a reminder that pastors are replaceable. Pastor John MacArthur just died this past Monday and in one sense he is irreplaceable, no one is adequate to fill his shoes. But in another sense, he IS replaceable because Christ, not John MacArthur, is the head of Grace Community Church. Christ alone holds the keys to the kingdom, and he loans the keys to the kingdom temporarily to His slaves, but He alone holds the master copy. I say this with the utmost respect, but John MacArthur was just a man. He’s just a man. He’s sinful and fallible and weak like the rest of us. In cases of disqualification, Christ forcibly removes the key from the pastor to hand it off to another. But in MacArthur’s case, praise the Lord, as his soul went up to meet the Lord, he handed back the key willingly to God to give to the next pastor of Grace Community Church. When it comes to ministry, ministry leaders are not only running a race to finish well for themselves, but they also are running their part in a relay race so that they can hand off the baton to the next runner who will then run his part. In fact, the interim pastor before me serving at Bethel, pastor Stanley, handed me a baton that has 2 Timothy 4:2 written on it. And Christ has temporarily loaned me a key of the kingdom to serve Him faithfully until my time is up. And when my time draws near, I will also give back the key to Christ to hand to the next pastor who will shepherd Bethel Baptist Church. Every pastor is going hand back the keys to the kingdom back to Christ at some point, just like those 24 elders in the book of Revelation will cast their crowns before the feet of the only One worthy to wear a crown. So dear friends, the application for us is that we are replaceable, we’re not irreplaceable. Wherever you serve in the church, whether you are in leadership or not, know that you are serving Christ and not men. Know that you live to an audience of one, and that ministry is not about you or your name, but about Christ and His name.

And the final reason why God allows pastors to fall is to help examine our own faith to see if we are following Christ for Christ or following Christ for people. This last reason is really what motivated me to want to preach this series on moral disqualification, because I have seen time and time again people putting too much of their hopes and expectations on their pastor or even on their friend’s faith instead of on Christ. Many are disillusioned and even leave the faith because the ministry leader they looked up to was exposed to live a double life of sin, or perhaps even was shown to be a false teacher. And this even applies to people who’ve I’ve met that refuses to have to do anything with “Christian religion” or “organized religion,” because they were burned in the past by those churches and they witnessed hypocritical behavior.

But here’s the simple truth: If you are no longer a Christian or no longer follow Christ because Christians are hypocritical, or because a pastor or a close friend that you looked up failed in upholding their profession of faith, then that shows you were not a follower of Christ, but a follower of people. It shows that your faith was not grounded in whether Christ was faithful, but whether people were faithful or not to Christ. And the Word of God tells us that salvation is not in our works, it is not have to do anything with us, or our goodness, or anything else, or dependent on whether someone else is faithful or not. It has to do everything with the faithfulness of Christ in saving us. So Bethel, my challenge to you all is this: “If everyone you know that is a believer suddenly leaves the faith and abandons Christ to live a life of sin, would you as well?” In fact, let’s use an even more extreme example…”if everyone on planet earth except you abandoned Christianity and walked away from following Christ, would you still follow Christ?”

If you answered yes, not only because you know it’s the right answer, but because you yourself truly know in your heart you will never abandon Christ no matter what others do, then my friend that is a good sign. But if your answer was no, that is a concerning answer. That concerns my heart. Because that’s telling me that you are following Christ not for Christ, but for people. And if the reason you are a Christian or profess to be a Christian is because your other friends are faithful to Christ, then you are not a Christian my friend, because a Christian is someone who is saved and forgiven by the cross of Jesus Christ. A Christian is a Christian because Christ was faithful to obey the Father on your behalf in perfect righteousness and to die on the cross to atone for your sins. And Christ was faithful to rise from the dead defeating sin and death so that those who trust in Him will never die and be set free from the power of sin. And a Christian is a Christian because He trusts with His life that Christ will continue to be faithful forever in insuring by HIS power and HIS doing that He will hold us fast and never let us abandon His grace. A Christian is a Christian because Christ is faithful, no how matter faithful or unfaithful His followers may be. I want to end with 2 Timothy 2:11-13 “*For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we will deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself*.” If we are faithless, He remains faithful…So put all of your trust and hope in the One who is eternally faithful. [pray]

**Benediction:**

*“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or understand, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.” – Ephesians 3:20-21*