“Following Christ, Not His Leaders” Part I

Various Scriptures

Sermon Manuscript

I’m sure many of you heard of the recent news in the Christian music world of the lead singer of the very popular Christian band Newsboys, Michael Tait, confessing and admitting to his reckless behavior, drugs and alcohol, and homosexual, unwanted behavior towards other men. In the first paragraph of his public confession that you can find online, Michael Tait said this, “*Recent reports of my reckless and destructive behavior, including drug and alcohol abuse and sexual activity are sadly, largely true. For some two decades I used and abused cocaine, consumed far too much alcohol, and, at times, touched men in an unwanted sensual way. I am ashamed of my life choices and actions, and make no excuses for them. I will simply call it what God calls it—sin. I don’t blame anyone or anything but myself. While I might dispute certain details in the accusations against me, I do not dispute the substance of them*.” I remember earlier in my life I would listen to the Michael Tait era of Newsboys and would watch Christian movies like God’s Not Dead that had the Newsboys featured on it. I even went to a concert they held in the Tacoma Dome and it was a cool experience. Thankfully I still have my hearing.

But sadly, Michael Tait is not alone. There have been numerous disqualifications from ministry in the pulpit and in other places of Christian leaders… some not as prominent…but some very prominent… that have happened this year. I found out recently through one of you during the week of VBS that a close friend of yours who was a missionary was taken off the field for abandoning his family and committing adultery with another woman in a foreign country. So not only is this subject of moral disqualification a very relevant topic to discuss and to think about because of how many leaders are falling, but also because this topic hits close to home for some of us as we known friends who have fallen from their leadership positions in public ministry…and although this is a sobering topic, it is good for me as the pastor to go through this as a way of preaching to myself. So this sermon is as much a sermon for me as it is for you…I NEED TO HEAR THIS…and that’s why I want to address this subject today. And I realize that the title for this mini sermon series, “Following Christ, Not Leaders,” is a little bit of a provocative or controversial title because someone might take that to mean we are to reject the teachings or influence of any Christian leader and only “follow God or Christ,” which shouldn’t be the case. There’s nothing wrong with having pastors and Christian leaders that we look up to and respect and admire for their faith. But the reason why I have entitled it “Following Christ, Not Leaders” is because so many put their faith in and follow after men rather than Christ. And when people place a majority of their hope and confidence in the faith in the faith of other people, when those people fail in ministry and in running the race of life, they often get disillusioned, angry, and question why God would allow this to happen. So many believe in Christianity because of this pastor’s faith, rather than believing in Christ Himself. And my goal is that by the end of next this little sermon series on moral disqualification, is that the reason you follow Christ is not because other people you respect and admire are faithful to Christ, but because Christ Himself is faithful. So I want to divide this subject into three Sundays. Today and next week we will look at “why” and “how” does a pastor disqualify himself? And the Sunday after those, we will conclude with how we as believers should respond when we hear of the next Christian leader disqualifying himself.

But for today, we are going to focus on “why” and “how” a pastor disqualifies himself. So why does a pastor leader fall and disqualify himself from public ministry? How can a man who is in the Word of God for his daily profession, the very Word of God that’s supposed to protect him from sin, fall into sin? How can someone like Michael Tait sing about Jesus and praising and glorifying Jesus, live a double life of sin? You can put your own blank in there, how can a… “missionary, elder, deacon, pastor, evangelist, etc.” fall into reproach and disqualify himself? Well ultimately the answer is sin right? But what is it that constitutes that sin? How did he get there? Well, I think there are several potential reasons ways a pastor can get to being disqualified in ministry. **Number one**, he may lack a proper sense of biblical humility. **Number two**, he may lack proper accountability. **Number three** he may lack a proper fear of God for sin. **Number four** he may lack a proper love for Christ. Usually, a ministry leader who disqualifies himself lacks at least one, if not, multiple of these qualities in his life. Sometimes, it’s all of these qualities. And these qualities are not disconnected from each other, usually they go hand in hand with each other…because for example if you lack humility, you are prideful and you start believing you are a somebody, and so you want the people surrounding you to be yes men, which is not proper biblical accountability. And if there aren’t true men of God that you are accountable to, then you are less likely to have a sense of the fear of God for sin in your life because nobody is warning you about potential pitfalls into sin. And if you aren’t fearing sin and fearing the Lord, then you aren’t properly loving the Lord either because if you truly loved the Lord, you would also fear doing anything to tarnish His name right?

But we are going to focus on the first two qualities for today. So the first quality that a Christian leader may lack, which is necessary for finishing this race of life well, is a proper sense of biblical humility. A proper sense of biblical humility. And the Scripture that is good for us to keep in mind for this point is Galatians 6:3 “*For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing he deceives himself*.” Perhaps you can argue that moral failure all starts here, when we do not judge ourselves rightly as we ought…because what do you call it when you think you are more than what you actually are? Pride! Pride right?! We all have innate pride in our hearts. One theologian called pride the “mother of all sins.” When we are prideful, we refuse to humble ourselves and listen to godly counsel or correction. When we are prideful, we are more likely to think we deserve a reward like money or sex. And pride in its worst form can lead to murder because that person so offended and infuriated “me” that I need to show him that nobody messes with “me” and gets away with it because I, not God, determines who gets to live and who doesn’t. How dare a person make “me” angry because “I” am just that important and significant to the point where I should be able to get my way all the time. And if anyone gets in the way of me and my desires, then they deserve to die.

And you know? This digital day and age we live in does not help with lowering our pride and humbling us. Smartphones, social media, and the internet are double-edged swords. It can be a blessing to spread the gospel and connect people with other people in ways unimagined before. It can save us time and effort now that so many things are digitalized. Heidi and I are thankful for the ability to video chat our parents because if it weren’t for that capability, parenting Leon would be harder without that moral support of seeing our family’s faces on a screen. However, the other edge of the sword of digital technology can be dangerous and cut us instead when it comes to platforming Christian leaders to notoriety or fame. It doesn’t help with our ego when literally overnight, with a click of a button, you go become a viral sensation to the whole world and you get a million likes just because you said a very memorable and powerful quote. Even if a pastor himself does not necessarily want that attention and fame through social media, sometimes other people have a part to contribute for making that pastor famous by posting something about him that goes viral without his consent. And all too often, given enough time and fame, Christian leaders start believing their own press, their ministry becomes no longer about making Christ more and about His slaves less, but their ministry becomes a means by which his ego gets puffed up more and more.

He may have a very charismatic personality! He may be very gifted in his ability to teach and communicate and preach! He may even appear to be very godly on the surface…but many fall into this pitfall of celebrity culture in the church and they start on the delusional path that they think are something, when Galatians 6:3 says they are nothing. I appreciate Sandy Bishop telling me once after I delivered a “great sermon” “hey pastor, I just want to say that you preached a great sermon…but don’t get a big head.” I appreciate that when people say that, and frankly I need more of that. I think the Lord has been protecting me from getting swelled up with pride in the way you give feedback after my sermons. Sometimes, I feel like I hit a home run on a sermon. I feel like I preached it with passion, clarity, and that it was fire. But then when I expect people to compliment me on that sermon, nobody compliments me on the sermon. I will ask my wife, how was the sermon? Oh, it was good…and then she would walk away. But then there are other times where I know this sermon wasn’t going to one of my best sermon…because I didn’t prepare as much for it and I felt very tired preaching it…and then I get like 3 or 4 compliments that “Oh pastor that was a great sermon! That touched my heart!”

We are the dust of the earth…from dust we are and to dust we shall return. That’s why I appreciate translations that translate the word “doulos” to “slave” instead of “servant.” While there might be some cases in the Bible where it’s more proper to translate doulos as servant instead of slave, I think the majority of cases, especially in the New Testament, “doulos” should be translated as “slave.” (illustration of wooden plaque mom gifted me) Because of our history with slavery and because of the humbling nature of the word “slave” as opposed to “servant,” we like to call ourselves “servants” of Christ, because “servant” has more the idea of us voluntarily serving Christ as if we were free to choose to serve Him or not. It gives us a little bit more control than for us to think we are slaves. A slave has no say, has no freedom to do as He pleases, is not his own person but is solely tied to His master’s bidding. Whatever his master says for him to do, he does. But that’s what we are…the Word of God says that Christ purchased us, redeemed us, bought us…that is slavery language!! We are not our own, we were bought with a price. John Calvin, the famous reformer from the Reformation understood rightly who he was in light of Christ, when he died, he wanted the tombstone above his grave to be in an unmarked location, so that people would forget about his significance and focus their faith on Christ. We need more leaders who will cry out like John the Baptist “He must increase, but I must decrease.” Is that how you think of yourself?

Connected to that, that leads us to the second quality that a Christian leader may lack but which he needs to successfully run this Christian race of life; which is a proper accountability. Proper accountability. And the Scripture that comes to mind when it comes to accountability is Probers 27:6 which is “*Faithful are the wounds of a friend, But deceitful are the kisses of an enemy*.” If you get into the mindset that God is using you in ministry and making you known in the Christian world because you are significant and important and so gifted, then chances are, you will amass a circle of yes men around you that are not brave and godly enough to confront you when you are sinning or about to sin. I can think of one pastor whom I knew at personally at a big church, a number of years ago, who fell into various sins that disqualified him from ministry. Now to this day, I don’t know the details of this man’s fall. I’ve heard different answers from different people, but it’s ok that I don’t know. I don’t need to know. But I remember this pastor always walked around with two seminary guys who were his assistants. And those guys were not guys I would necessarily characterize as humble, sad to say. The way they walked around the campus was as if they were saying “look at us, we are so prominent, pay us the respect we deserve.” And there were certain things they did and said that others have told me about that did raise a yellow flag in my head. And then eventually this pastor was found out to be living a double life and he was confronted by the elders and pastors of the church. Now to give his assistants the benefit of the doubt, I do believe they were duped to a certain extent by this pastor. Part of the truth is they truly didn’t suspect him to be hiding anything. So in that sense, I feel sorry for them. But I wouldn’t be surprised if they witnessed some things that were questionable that the pastor did, but because of their elevated positions as his pastoral assistants, they were too afraid to speak up, maybe because they were afraid of losing their jobs. Maybe because they enjoyed the praise of man too much to risk not having it by sounding the alarm.

A true friend will love you enough to warn you about certain patterns of behavior that he is observing so that you wouldn’t go too far into that rabbit hole of sin, or worse, to ultimately become disqualified in ministry. Every Christian, whether you are in leadership or not, needs to have at least some people he or she is accountable to. I remember not too long ago Frank Campbell, my brother, you stopped by my office and asked a series of questions related to accountability. Who are you accountable to pastor? How is your relationship with your wife? Are you struggling with anything? Do you have godly and wise men that you can call and meet up with when you struggle with certain things in life? I want to let you know that I am available to meet with you to talk about your struggles. I appreciate Frank that that you cared enough about my soul to ask me the hard questions that few are willing to ask.

Usually, ministry leaders who disqualify themselves are those that you find out that were not really intentional about being accountable to other godly men. And I understand to a certain extent that it can be hard for especially the pastor to be accountable to someone else because usually everyone in the church is accountable to the pastor. And I think that’s why God designed each church to be structured by a plurality of elders, not just one pastor, because often when a church is run by one pastor, he can become dictatorial in his leadership and he becomes used to being his own boss and nobody can tell the pastor otherwise. Not too mention, just in a practically sense, a church that has a plurality of elders will function better and more efficiently because the pastor can’t do everything by himself. But one of the telltale signs of a potentially inevitable moral compromise is if a pastor or Christian leader doesn’t really have an accountability system in place or men that he trusts enough to confide his struggles with. And men that he trusts that is willing to actually rebuke him and correct him when necessary, and not make excuses for sins! One pastor did a series on accountability and he said that when he asks all these questions to see how that person is doing spiritually, have you looked at pornography, how is your relationship with your wife, etc. he asks at the end, “have you lied to me about any of these answers?” Wait, Christians don’t lie! Well, yes they shouldn’t but you would be surprised at how many Christians still lie.

And I will just bring up this example, because it’s relatively recent and because I saw him regularly as a professor taking his required class and a preacher at Grace Community Church….Steve Lawson. And I don’t bring Steve Lawson’s name up because I want to further tarnish his name or bash him while he’s down. I respect him and he has edified me through his preaching, and I know countless others have been edified and have been saved through his various ministries. But for those of you who don’t know Steve Lawson for the past 5 years was in an inappropriate relationship with a young lady that started out as just being friends with her. But then it slowly developed into feelings for each other, and it didn’t turn sexual until right before he was exposed. And btw I’m not revealing details of his situation that I’m not supposed to reveal. All of this information is public knowledge, and is given permission by Steve Lawson to be shared, and you can access it online too.

But one thing I did notice over the years about Steve Lawson was his apparent lack of accountability. He was an itinerant preacher who went traveled a whole lot across the country and over the world preaching. But the thing that was a red flag for me was he traveled without his wife! I remember, I remember in class he was talking about his personal life a little bit and he said he asked his wife about traveling without her, and she was ok with not going with him! I don’t know the reason why she said yes, maybe she thought she would be less of a financial burden for Steve Lawson’s ministry to accommodate her in all of his traveling. But whatever the reason, I just don’t think it was wise for him to travel without his wife. And here he is his public ministry is over, he just about destroyed his trust, reputation and respect of his wife and kids, and he brought reproach on the name of Christ. I read an article that came out recently written by a good friend of Steve Lawson’s where when he texted Steve Lawson about the incident and asked how he was doing, Lawson replied saying his “life was a shipwreck.”

And accountability is especially needed when it comes to sexual temptation and sin. Perhaps this is the number one sin that disqualifies Christian leaders more than any other sin. It is most men’s kryptonite. And if we think or if you think your favorite pastor or preacher cannot fall into sexual sin or is somehow above that, you are deceiving yourself. Voddie Baucham once said in a sermon on sexual sin, “*The strongest man, the wisest man, and the godliest man in the Bible all fell into sexual sin. If we as leaders don’t think we can fall into sexual sin, we are saying we are stronger than Samson, wiser than Solomon, and godlier than King David, and that’s just plain stupid*.” When Samson took a Philistine as a wife, he did tell his father and mother that he wanted her as his wife, and his parents were hesistant whether it was the right thing to allow their child, an Israelite, to marry a Philistine…but they nonetheless caved into his demands. Other than that, it didn’t seem like there was a group of other more mature, wiser Israelites that Samson could go to see their thoughts on marrying this Philistine woman. God forbade His people from intermarrying with any other nation because of the idolatry that is often associated with marrying foreign women. So most likely if there was a true man of God that understood and remembered God’s command to not intermarry because of the potential spiritual dangers it held, they probably would have told Samson not do it.

King Solomon and King David were both kings and had the power to do whatever they wanted. I’m sure they had counselors and advisers that they were “accountable” to, but again I would argue it wasn’t the right kind of accountability. They were surrounded most likely with yes men, and even if there were someone who knew what the king was doing was wrong, they didn’t have the courage to speak against the king. Like when David saw Bathsheba below bathing from high up his palace and lusted after her, wanting her, he sent some of his servants to inquire more about her. And they came back *“Is this not Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite?”* In other words, hey king, shouldn’t you reconsider. This woman is married to a man and you are about to steal her away from him. If King Solomon had proper biblical accountability set in place in his life that would be on the king’s conscience, would he have been able to get away with having 700 concubines and 300 wives?

If king David intentionally choose men he knew were not afraid to speak rebukes and correction to the king, would he have gone through with this heinous act of adultery and murder in the first place? Now I know…I know accountability does not solve issues of the heart. You can have all the right accountability partners and still struggle with sexual sin and if you are desperate you will find a way to gratify those sinful desires somehow. So accountability does not remove an issue of the heart. However, to not have accountability, especially when you are in ministry leadership, is like driving without a seat belt on. It’s like building a potentially dangerous machine without a failsafe built into it. But I want to mention also that your accountability partners are not just there to be those who sound the alarm when you are straying. They should also be your means of fellowship and friendship in the Lord who not only can point out the sin and leave you there dangling, but to point out the sin and help you overcome the sin through the grace of Christ.

I wish I could say more about these topics, but alas, we need to land this plane. We all have that potential evil in us to elevate ourselves and to make the focus of our ministry on us rather than Christ. It’s innate in our fallen and sinful flesh to make idols of others and idols of ourselves. That’s why the Scriptures speak so much and warn so much against the sin of idolatry. And when we have the idol of self residing in our hearts, we have the tendency to manipulate our situation to where we associate with people either who are “yes men” to us, or who are not bold enough to confront us when we need to be confronted. So what is the remedy for idolatry? What is the remedy for a worship of self that can be especially multiplied exponentially through social media? The same remedy that the Apostle Paul gave to a young pastor named Timothy in 2 Timothy. After Paul gives his final instructions to Timothy regarding his duties as a minister, he said this in 2 Timothy 2:8-9 “Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel, for which I endure hardship even to chains as a criminal.” Remember Jesus Christ Bethel, remember Jesus Christ Teru. Remember Jesus Christ oh those who have been saved from death, destruction and hell…Remember that your life is not about you, it’s about Him, making Him as big as you can in your life by making yourself as small as you can be. 2 Corinthians 5:15 “*He died for all, so that they who live would no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf*.”