

Lecture #4

Jesus Knew the Need to Guard Himself

We Must Guard Ourselves To Be Effective Leaders

The apostles returned to Jesus and told him all that they had done and taught. And he said to them, “Come away by yourselves to a desolate place and rest a while.” For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a desolate place by themselves (Mark 6:30-33). ¹

Leaders must guard themselves from the struggles of life so they are able to serve effectively, otherwise their ability to lead will be greatly affected, setting a poor example to those under their care. Jesus knew the importance of serving and leading, and He also knew the impact it has on the physical human capacity. We live very busy lives, and most people in a church work other full-time jobs plus balancing a family. The Lord does not want us to sacrifice our family for the church, nor our mental well-being. Jesus knew the importance of guarding Himself from the pressures of ministry and the stress of this world. He protected Himself from these pressures so that He could do the ministry effectively.

Paul states, “will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls.” (2Cor 12:15) knowing that he would give everything for those who he ministered to. We must likewise have the same commitment to our people, however, we can only lead when we are mentally, spiritually and physically healthy. The attacks don't just come from the evil one, but also our own expectations as well as what others place on us. Unless we properly learn to guard ourselves as Jesus did, these areas of our lives will have an effect on our ability to give the Lord our best and prevent us from effectively leading.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Issues we experience because we have not properly guarded ourselves:

1. One of the largest effects upon a Christian leader who is under the weight of stress or sin is that of guilt, which often cripples them, caused by feeling inadequate in their service for the Lord, and we are not doing enough or not sufficient work.²
2. A second sign of having not guarded themselves sufficiently is a withdrawal from their spouse/ family/ friends as they feel overwhelmed. The emotional and physical distancing from those close to us. A desire to be alone and not to socialize with friends. Finally, a general spiritual apathy or legalism, resulting in the decline of our devotional and prayer life. Service is seen as a burden, and the joy of serving the Lord or others is a chore and not a privilege.
3. Spiritual apathy or legalism, marked by the decline of our devotional life and prayer. When the pressure of ministry becomes overwhelming, the work of serving the Lord becomes a burden. Though the work may continue, the servant himself can become spiritually withdrawn, having a poor devotional life and a poor prayer life. This in itself is a downward spiral that will lead to complete burnout from ministry. It is during this time that spiritual defences are down and temptation of the flesh increases.
4. Our spouse and family are affected as they are drawn into our stress.
 - Our children see the stress and experience the lack of involvement we have in their lives.
 - Our spouse tries to defend us and shield us from people and stress, but this too eventually fails as the two become more distant from each other.

² Jay E. Adams, *Competent to Counsel*, 1 vol. (United States: Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1970).

5. Attitude of self-sufficiency or defence mechanism - Leave me alone, I can do it myself.
Isolation increases, and the desire to tackle any problems without the help of anyone increases.
6. We begin to see people as problems, instead of sheep. Everyone is viewed as a current or future problem. We expect to be deserted by people and even prepare ourselves for that eventual event. Everyone is viewed as someone that needs to be kept at arms length.
We develop a critical attitude towards most people and events, expecting the worst case.
Planning in our minds those hypothetical conversations and even planning responses and ways to walk away feeling we won them.
7. Depression in men, which is often expressed as anger that lays just below the surface.
When depression gains a foothold into a man's life, his attitude becomes a quiet trigger waiting to explode with little warning. There is no warning other than a withdrawn nature and distant attitude. At some trigger point, an eruption of anger pours out that is often way beyond mere frustration and can result in some sort of physical harm.
8. Lack of accountability and refusal to be held accountable. When there has been little or no protection from the weight of ministry, there is also little or no accountability.
Spiritual leaders do not want to be held accountable. I remember myself saying, "I give counsel, I don't take it". Comments like that are clear indicators of the state of mental health that that person is in at that time. It is also when the deepest sin can creep into a person's life and take root. With this also comes a life of justification for those same actions. Excuses, reason and a self or being right covers any guilt and conviction.
9. We are hesitant to trust people, as we expect to be hurt by others. Every day is seen as the possible last day because we feel that people will at any moment turn on us and want to

get rid of us. Therefore, those in this state have few if any friends, they want to be distant and vague about their prayer needs, keeping details of their life to themselves.

10. Physical burnout from which you never fully recover. The inevitable end is a complete physical collapse. The mind is still going full speed, but the body can not keep up to the stress, lack of sleep and anxiety. Such burnout often looks like a heart attack or some severe physical nervous ailment.

What Jesus specifically told His disciples to do to protect themselves.

Guard your time with the Lord

People will take every moment of your time if you let them. If they see you at church, they want to talk, and that is fine as long as you maintain your own spiritual disciplines. Your time with the Lord needs to be a priority, not leftover time. If you need to have this time away from the church then do it, but don't feel guilty for not being in the church building if you cannot have a personal, quality time with the Lord.

Jesus had no issues in leaving the public spotlight when He needed to pray. He even left His disciples and went away where they couldn't find Him. "But he would withdraw to desolate places and pray" (Luke 5:16).

Battle the temptation of the flesh, the eyes, the mind.

The world seeks self-satisfaction, and it normalizes and accepts all desires of the flesh. Christian leaders are under continual attack from the entertainment world, advertising world, social acceptance, unsaved friends, and of course Satan and his armies. Sexual temptation will destroy the trust that takes years to create, and pull a believer away from a close walk with God,

fill our minds with self-justification and perceived exoneration. This hidden life of a leader will certainly be exposed. God will not be mocked, and He will not allow His word to be delivered by a hypocrite. The fall is often public and devastating, destroying the ability of many to trust a leader again as they once did.

How to fight the fight

1. Acknowledge to the Lord that we are weak and that our actions are sin.
2. Pray for strength to resist each morning.
3. Daily battle temptation by removing issues of temptation from your surroundings.
4. Find someone to pray with you and not condemn you.
5. Have an accountability partner, someone who will challenge you.
6. Limit ourselves to unnecessary exposure to spiritually unhealthy things.

Recognize the signs of burnout and mental illness.

A burned out leader is not a leader, nor do they want to lead. In fact, it will cripple them from leading for many years, and create a state of spiritual frustration, guilt and broken relationships. You may never fully recover to where we once were before a burnout. Ministry burnout, as we call it, is a state of mental, physical, and spiritual exhaustion, brought on by a long continual period of stress and mental exhaustion sometimes spanning over years. Onset is very gradual, yet when not addressed, it often results in the physical body exhibiting the signs of a stroke. The body gives way, and yet the mind can often continue to race and want to continue working. This leads to guilt and feelings of failure as a leader. Burnout takes years to regain some of the emotional stability back, but you never fully recover. The battle from this point on is to sense

when we are approaching the breaking point again and know when to back off. Burnout in ministry or some degree of this needs to be recognized and protected against by other ministry leaders. Often the congregation members have no understanding of the pressures and anxiety conflict brings upon leaders.

How Jesus Guarded Himself.

We know the word of God tells us that there is no sin that is uncommon to all men, as well as the Lord was tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Since our Lord was fully God and at the same time fully man, there's a real sense in which he needed to protect himself from the same struggles of ministry that we face, yet he did it successfully. With that encouragement, we can look to the Lord and find the best solutions for how to manage leadership, ministry, our families, and personal interactions while still maintaining a close walk with the Lord Jesus.

We need to guard ourselves in the following areas: our own spiritual lives, our spouses and family, and our interaction with other believers.

The first question must be how does it all begin, how does this slow and gradual sense of overwhelming anxiety begin?

From my experience, we begin down this path because of 5 specific things that we have failed to guard against.

1. We allow people to put unrealistic expectations on us.
2. We have our own weak or absent spiritual life.

3. We expect to be disappointed due to previous experiences.
4. We desire changes but are not being allowed to exercise the authority God gives us to make changes.
5. We are the object of spiritual attack of fear of our past.

Jesus guarded Himself by establishing the model of success in how He lived.

1. He spent time alone praying to His Father for long durations
2. He genuinely cared about people
3. He rested physically
4. He used wisdom when interacting with people
5. He used His time wisely

Scripture References: Luke 4:1-15, John 4:1-3

Guarding our family from disillusionment of ministry

We need to protect our spouse, and not dump all our stress on them. This will only cause them mental harm, and makes them defensive against people in ministry when they were never involved. Ask your spouse to pray for you, but have a ministry partner you can rely upon.

Children, who see and hear everything, often become critical of the institution of church, and people in ministry. They need to be protected and yet have an understanding of the calling and requirements. Make family time and personal time with each child a priority as much as a church meeting. Don't be ashamed of telling people "no" when you're with your family.

Practical things leaders can do to help rejuvenate ourselves and our mind

1. Have accountability - Someone to counsel with, someone that shares ministry with you.
2. Have a hobby that keeps your mind on a different level.
3. Take physical care of yourself, lose weight, eat well, and exercise.
4. Daily dump everything in the Lord's hands and leave it.
5. Have spouse/family getaways and don't talk about ministry details.
6. Explain to your children what you do and why it's important.
7. Seek to do something that makes you laugh.
8. Pray for help in overcoming temptations.

What I have Learned

- Everything can wait. If I died today, the church would carry on fine without me.
- Busyness is not Godliness.
- 90% of what we worry about never happens, and of the remaining 10% it is never as bad as we imagine.
- Don't feel guilty about resting or taking time off.
- Time spent with our family is more important than time spent at church.
- Jesus is more important than church.
- Have fellow leaders who support you.

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