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PRAYER AND FASTING

By the mid twenty-teens, Central Florida had been shaken by a string of pastoral failures. In 2011, a prominent ministry leader from our area was found dead of a drug overdose. Between 2012 and 2013, three more prominent pastors had affairs, one committing suicide shortly after. It was devastating.

Almost instantly, the pastoral team at my church began to wrestle with the realities around this type of fall. We engaged in an ongoing conversation about how to keep each other out of the shadows. It was both encouraging and deeply practical.

Then just before Easter in 2014 I got a text from Joel, one of the other teaching pastors at my church. “Another pastor went down,” it said. I could tell he was brokenhearted.

I had met this latest leader recently at a conference where he was speaking. The topic? The importance of stability in marriage. It was painful to hear this news after he had ministered to my own marriage only months before.

A *Christianity Today* writer observed that while the Christian press speculated that “the recent trend is the spirit of Jezebel . . . picking off pastors one by one as they succumb to the evil desires in their own hearts, David Swanson, senior pastor of First Presbyterian

Church of Orlando, told the *Orlando Sentinel* that it's probably more related to the feelings of isolation experienced by large-church leaders.² While it may be worse for leaders of large churches, isolation is common to virtually all pastors.

As the leader of a church, I was stunned by this assessment. It woke me up. Is it inevitable that I am going to steal, become addicted, or have an affair? If so, I was prepared to quit ministry. There's no way I wanted that story to be my story.

Developing Intimacy

I wondered what was missing in the lives of these leaders to create the space that allows anyone to make such devastating decisions. My first assumption was a lack of accountability; these guys were probably lone leaders who didn't answer to anyone. However, my assumption was off. These pastors had solid accountability parameters in place. The trouble was that over time they started actively hiding the truth.

As my ministry team and I continued to explore this problem in our profession, we found that these leaders cultivated an environment for deception. They became more and more isolated and less and less connected to key people in their lives, starting with God. This disconnection caused a deep lack of intimacy. And in this breakdown of intimacy, we began to discover the key. This is how you will not fall, how you will not destroy your life and your family, how you will not embarrass yourself and your congregation: You need intimacy.

When we are in love with the God who created us and in love with our spouse and in love with our biblical community—when we are intimate with them—there are no giant, devastating

decisions we will make. We simply don't make those kinds of decisions when we are deeply connected with these key relationships.

When it comes to developing intimacy with God, my team and I have found that nothing compares to the spiritual disciplines of prayer and fasting. Prayer and fasting are key practices that solicit God to move in us, through us, and around us. In biblical history, prayer and fasting saved a nation from genocide (Esth. 4:16) and brought life-saving clarity and wisdom (Ex. 34:28; Dan. 10:2-3). They have also been integral to revivals throughout church history. When we incorporate prayer and fasting into our regular practice, they remind us that ministry must be done with God's power and intervention. They keep us at the feet of Jesus instead of trusting in our own strength to transform others. These are reasons enough to practice prayer and fasting, but there is something even deeper in these two competencies that keep us safe and free.

In our obsession to produce fruit and be "good and faithful servants," producing something worthy that will have a lasting legacy, many have neglected the inner life. William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward wrote, "Prayer, secret, fervent, believing prayer, lies at the root of all personal godliness."³ As leaders desiring to remain faithful to Jesus, the most important skill is keeping our soul. Many, if not most, of us struggle mightily in this. It's no wonder so many ministry leaders strive to create outward success while simultaneously constructing inward disasters. So often our eyes are fixed on whatever our church culture deems ministry success, when our prize should be the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ.

The Power and Purpose of Prayer

Years ago, I encountered a statement about prayer that has haunted me ever since. It has become a window into my own soul. Richard

Foster, in his classic book *Celebration of Discipline*, writes, “To pray is to change. Prayer is the central avenue God uses to transform us. If we are unwilling to change, we will abandon prayer as a noticeable characteristic of our lives.”⁴ Foster’s insight into prayer launched me into a personal journey of understanding the power and purpose of prayer beyond anything I could imagine.

I have discovered that a life submitted to Christ results in my soul desiring to be more like His. By the same token, a soul submitted to no one desires no change at all. In fact, a person obsessed with self, openly or secretly, resists change. The more I am submitted to Christ, the more deeply I desire change. The more deeply I desire change, the more consistent and authentic my personal, private prayer life becomes. As Foster suggests, prayer is a natural by-product of the heart that desires to be shaped by God’s transforming work. So, my personal, private prayer life is a direct reflection of my inner desire to change and become more like Jesus. Stated another way, my personal prayer reveals how much I really want my life to be about Jesus.

When my prayer life becomes inconsistent or inauthentic, it immediately alerts me that something deep within my soul has shifted from being captivated by Jesus to being captivated by something else. Consistency in prayer is the gift for detecting soul erosion early.

Prayer is both a thermometer and a remedy. It is a thermometer in that its absence from our lives reflects deeper things about passion, intimacy, and trust. A prayerless life reveals that our eyes are fixed on the wrong prize. Prayer is also a remedy in that it reconnects us to the gospel and catapults us back into God’s world, God’s heart, and God’s love. Prayer safeguards our lives, our families, the church, and the gospel.

Prayer allows us to stay close to God. While God's work is to do in us and through us whatever He sees fit, prayer is our work. We remain ever present on the spiritual frontier, and God handles the rest.

Participating in our own sanctification is one of the great privileges of every believer. Incredibly, the Lord promises to finish the work in us, while at the same time inviting us to participate in our sanctification. We have all the privilege of participation, yet the ultimate responsibility to make it happen lies with the Lord. It's almost identical to the idea that if we are interested in what God will do in our lives, all we need to do is pray. If we have a consistent and authentic prayer life with God, He gives us insight into our lives. Isn't that crazy? He gives us the answers! We get to be an active participant in our own beautiful life journey.

Foster says, "A farmer is helpless to grow grain; all he can do is provide the right conditions for the growing of grain. . . . The Disciplines are God's way of getting us into the ground."⁵

Being competent in prayer and fasting is far less about soliciting God to do things for us and far more about placing ourselves in the soil where God does things in us. It is far less about asking God to do things for us and far more about revealing what is in us and asking Him to transform us. It is learning to dare the soul to believe the things God has already said and done and to submit to His renewing work.

This is why prayer and fasting are essential for any ministry

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leader. The presence or absence of our authentic, private, personal prayer and fasting lives is a thermometer displaying the heat of our intimacy with God. This is a must for anyone who seeks to have longevity in authentic gospel ministry. And this is where the true beauty of fasting becomes the companion to prayer in keeping our souls.

Reclaiming Fasting

Fasting is the most misunderstood of the spiritual disciplines. Many of us resist the discipline of fasting. And still more of us believe it's just a tool we use to solicit something from the Almighty God of the universe. But actually, fasting is another means of sanctification. Fasting is a gift through which we can see clearly the idols hiding deep within our heart.

Richard Foster writes:

More than any other Discipline, fasting reveals the things that control us. . . . We cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. . . . Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting. . . . We can rejoice in this knowledge because we know that healing is available through the power of Christ.⁶

Fasting teaches our souls to trust God and His story rather than trusting ourselves and our stories. It is a discipline that teaches the soul to believe in God, reveals our unbelief, and invites us to engage with God in prayer so that His transforming power might reveal the way to freedom and produce the healing we need.

This is where our true journey begins as pastors and church

leaders. It does not begin and end with learning the skills of outward ministry but with the skills of soul keeping, of life living, of making the gospel beautiful inside ourselves. This internal work must happen long before we try to make it beautiful outside ourselves. We must learn the skill of spiritual discipline first, for it leads to a life-giving intimacy with our Creator, the burning center of ministry.

The Gift That Keeps Our Souls Well

Often we see ministry obstacles as our greatest challenges: the management of people, the skills to lead, the structures, strategies and plans to grow, the conflicts to resolve, and on and on. According to Scripture, however, our greatest challenge is in fact a spiritual war that is raging, one in which the enemy is extremely competent and unrelenting. We often think that the enemy is working to try and tempt us and derail our behavior so that we will be ineffective and feel guilty and shamed. The Scripture paints a much darker picture. The enemy does not care about these things. The enemy cares that you are dead—spiritually dead, physically dead, emotionally dead, dead to the gospel, dead to God, dead to life and freedom, dead to belief. He wants our families dead. He wants the church dead. He hates God, he hates you, and he hates me. This is war. Guarding our inner life is our single greatest responsibility.

You can begin to see how fasting and prayer are such gifts to us to keep our souls well. It is in the practice of prayer and fasting that we plant ourselves deeply in the soil in which God transforms us into His likeness. If we are to be leaders sustained in life and ministry in a manner worthy of our calling, we must constantly

inhabit the spaces where God transforms us into His likeness. This is very likely our greatest work as church leaders. It is not to lead others but to be led by Jesus. Then, and only then, will we actually be equipped to lead others.

As new pastors enter ministry, their problems are not limited to a lack of ministry competency but an inexperience in achieving personal holiness through secret, fervent, believing prayer. Without it, they are vulnerable to failure.

Prayer and fasting are not what we do to get our work done. They are our work. Yes, prayer and fasting may solicit God's provision, but more importantly they produce intimacy with God. You may not get what you want, but you will get what you need: a reminder that your soul needs God. And if He grants what you ask, well, that is secondary.

Prayer and fasting are critical skills to master as a church leader. If we neglect them, we will certainly cultivate a space where intimacy dissolves. Once that space is created, the enemy who wants us dead will most certainly move in. And we will most certainly begin to make devastating choices that hurt our congregation and destroy our families.

Be the church leader who does not fall, but instead stands strong, like a tree planted by streams of living water (Ps. 1:3). Set yourself up to defy the odds.

SELF-ASSESSMENT

On a scale of 1 to 5, how developed are you in the competency of prayer and fasting?

1	2	3	4	5
"I admit I am clueless in this competency."	"I know enough to know what I don't know."	"I can get by."	"I have a healthy skill set in this competency."	"I'm killing it in this area."