

DANGEROUS CALLING

BONUS CHAPTER

PAUL DAVID TRIPP

Bonus chapter for *Dangerous Calling: Confronting the Unique Challenges of Pastoral Ministry*

Copyright © 2012 by Paul David Tripp

Published by Crossway

1300 Crescent Street

Wheaton, Illinois 60187

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher, except as provided for by USA copyright law.

Cover design: Dual Identity inc.

First printing 2015

Printed in the United States of America

Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

BONUS CHAPTER

A PERSONAL LETTER TO PASTORS AND LEADERS

Dear Pastor/Leader:

I saw her weeping as I was speaking, and I knew that we would be talking when I finished. The couple's story was familiar to me; somewhere in his ministry he had lost his way. It had gotten so bad that he had lost his ministry position, and they were now buried in marital and family stress. My heart went out to this man who had preached the gospel to others but seemed to have little ability to do the same to himself.

Since the original release of *Dangerous Calling* I have had hundreds of conversations with pastors and ministry leaders. Not all of them have been as dramatic as my talk with that couple that afternoon, but in those conversations I have been asked the same question again and again: "What do I do now?" I want to answer that question in the most personal way a book allows. That is the reason for this letter to you.

As a writer, I have thought many times that the most important thing about any book I have written is what the reader does with the material after they are done reading. I think this is particularly true of *Dangerous Calling*. So having thought about my own life in ministry, having prayed much for all who would read this book, and having reflected on many conversations in light of its content, this is my personal counsel to you.

1) CELEBRATE GRACE

Those of us in ministry have to constantly fight against allowing the stress, struggles, and temptations of ministry to form our identity and worldview.

I have talked to many pastors who have simply forgotten who they are and what they have been given. They celebrate a good ministry week, they celebrate a good ministry meeting, they celebrate growth and financial stability, but it has been a long time since they celebrated grace. The delight of being a spokesman for the gospel has morphed into the daily grind of a religious occupation. In the middle of the grind it is possible to lose any real sense of the *nowism* of the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is possible to functionally forget what you formally teach, that Jesus didn't just die for your past or your future but for your here and now. That means that in ministry you are never, ever left to the limited resources of your own strength, wisdom, and righteousness. It means that Jesus will never send you into ministry without going with you and that he is not only after the success of your ministry—he is after you. The completeness of his sacrifice tells you that he has no plan to sacrifice you on the altar of your ministry.

2) COMMIT TO BEING HONEST

Many of my brothers in ministry live with a fear of being known. They don't know how to deal with the weaknesses that ministry has exposed. I have had many pastors say something like this to me: "Everyone else in the body of Christ can confess sin, but if I confess sin, I'm done!" The problem is that every ministry leader *is* a sinner. Every ministry leader ministers in the middle of his own sanctification. Hiding, denying, covering, and living virtually unknown won't ever take you any place good.

So here's what you need to do. Daily remind yourself that nothing could ever be exposed about you that hasn't already been covered by the blood of Christ, and then fire your inner lawyer. Open your eyes and open your heart and watch what God will do.

3) ASK THE OPINION OF OTHERS

Here is a first step in coming out of hiding: go to the members of your family and the people on your staff and ask them to speak candidly about you. All of us want to think that no one has a more accurate view of us than we do, but it's just not true. Since sin blinds, as long as there is sin inside us, there will be pockets of spiritual blindness in our view of ourselves. So everyone in ministry needs instruments of seeing in his life in order to see himself with accuracy. Here's a practical approach: ask the people who live and work with you to write down on a piece of paper five character traits that they think best describe you. Then don't defend yourself but look for themes that will give you a more accurate view of yourself and be thankful.

4) TAKE A PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

It is hard for you and me to look at ourselves with openness and objectivity, so I have prepared a series of questions to help you.

- Is there evidence that you have lost sight of the fact that you deeply need all that you teach and preach?
- Have you become less than open to the essential sanctifying ministry of the body of Christ?
- Have you come to expect of others the perfection that you think you've achieved?
- Do you assess that you are qualified to have more control over your ministry than any pastor/leader should ever have?
- Have you lost a sense of need for daily meditative communion with Christ?
- Are there places where you have come to take credit for successes that only grace can produce?
- Do you feel entitled to what you could never earn or achieve on your own?

- Are you less watchful and protective than you should be when it comes to temptation and sin?
- Do you load more on your ministry shoulders than you can responsibly handle?
- Do you constantly tell yourself that the blood of Jesus Christ has already covered all the sin, weakness, and failures that ministry has exposed?

5) DO A CULTURAL ASSESSMENT

The material of this book is meant not only to give you a window into the struggles of your own heart in ministry but also to give you a means of critiquing the leadership culture that surrounds you. I am afraid that the board of elders of many churches functions as little more than the corporate board of a religious institution. When this is the case, that board morphs into a community of oversight, maintenance, and achievement, where lots of business is done, but the leaders who are doing the business live virtually unknown. What change needs to be made in your leadership culture to ensure that it is a culture of grace, where leaders no longer live in terminally causal relationships but are known, exhorted, confronted, and regularly encouraged with the gospel of Jesus Christ? What structural and schedule changes have to be made to ensure that your inner leadership circle is the best, most vibrant small group in your church? What changes will you need to make in the way you relate to your leaders so that you can be an example of humble honesty and ministry openness? Are there sins of pride, control, defensiveness, etc., that you need to confess in order to help your leadership community become more of a community of grace? How will you work to deepen your leaders' knowledge of one another and commitment to minister to one another? In the busyness of ministry how will you keep your leadership community from sliding back into old bad habits?

6) COMMIT TO SPECIFIC CHANGE

God has impressed something upon my heart as a writer of books that applies to every reader as well. *Personal spiritual insight is not only a grace but also a call*

to *personal responsibility*. Whenever God, in sanctifying grace, uses Scripture or other gospel resources to open your eyes to an issue of your own heart, God is at that time calling you to confession and actions of repentance. It is a bit of a personal contradiction to thank God for insight and not follow him in repentance. So if this book is being used by God to provide you with insight into the struggles of your own heart as a pastor/leader, then you need to ask yourself, what are the specific responses and actions of repentance to which God is calling you? As you do this, remember that there is nothing God will ever call you to do that he won't grant you the enabling grace to do. God will never send you without going with you. What old ways is God calling you to jettison? What new ways is he calling you to be committed to? As you answer these questions, determine to be specific. General repentance usually proves not to be repentance, and it seldom leads to lasting change of any kind.

7) ASK TO BE PASTORED

There is a debilitating myth that is widely accepted across the evangelical church culture. It is that pastors, being knowledgeable and mature, do not need pastoring. The vast majority of church attenders assume that their pastors are spiritually healthy. Committed members may pray for their pastor, and that is good, but they would never presume to speak into his life. Pastor, this assumption places you in spiritual danger. It puts you on a spiritual pedestal that no one between the "already" and the "not yet" should be on. Isolated, separated, individualistic Christianity is as dangerous for you as it is for anyone else in your congregation. You share identity with everyone to whom you minister. You too are a sinner in the middle of your sanctification, and you too need the ongoing ministry of the body of Christ. Since there is no indication in the New Testament that a pastor is safe living outside the body of Christ, you must resist buying into the myth and ask to be pastored.

This means two things. First, you need to seek out a copastor on your staff or a mature elder and ask that person to pastor you. Ask him to intrude on your private world with questions it would be hard for you to ask yourself. Ask him to meet with you

regularly for counsel, encouragement, rebuke, and prayer. Next, you must find a way to place yourself under the rich teaching and preaching of God's Word. Be committed to attend a service in your church at which you do not preach. If you have only a morning service, find another church in your community where there is sound gospel preaching. If you have no other options, watch or listen to at least one good sermon on the Internet each week. Too many pastors attempt to give, give, give without receiving any life-giving, heart-convicting, gospel-infused teaching themselves. No wonder they begin to dry up!

I am gone almost every weekend, but I do my best to get home on Saturday night so I can worship with God's people and sit under good preaching. Sitting next to my wife while hearing good preaching is not only the highlight of my week; it is essential to what God has called me to do.

8) RUN TO THE BODY OF CHRIST

Most pastors are too private. They live with the fear that if they were really known, they'd end up losing their job. So there is little transparency in their relationship with the rest of the congregation; they become masters at spiritual-sounding nonanswers, and in so doing they reinforce the myth that they are okay. Now it would be wrong to make every sermon about you, and it would be unwise to bare the blood-and-guts details of your sin while in the pulpit, but there are ways that you can be appropriately candid and seek the help of the body of Christ. Many times in sermons, as I was making a point, I would say something like this: "I wish I could say I was good at this, but I'm not, so please pray for me," or, "I found preparing for this sermon to be particularly hard because God used it to expose weaknesses in me." Remember, your confession of weakness does not make you a contradiction of the gospel you preach but reinforces the point that there is no hope outside of the rescuing grace of Jesus.

9) MAKE YOUR LEADERSHIP CULTURE A CULTURE OF GRACE

I've spoken to this generally already, but I want to be more concrete here. Every time you gather, give

one of your leaders about 15 to 20 minutes to share what's going on in his own heart, life, family, work, etc. Press him to be honest, then spend another 10 minutes praying for him. Keep cycling through your leaders, one each meeting, until all have shared, and then start over again. As you are doing this in meetings, assign each leader a partner with whom to get together at least every other week for sharing counsel, encouragement, and prayer. Change partners every six months or once a year. Finally, schedule recreational time with your leaders, getting them together to laugh, eat, and play. You learn so much about another person when you are able to be together somewhat less formally than in a meeting environment.

10) LEARN TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO YOURSELF

Every one of us in ministry needs to be aware of the conversation we are having with ourselves all the time. No one influences you more than you do, because no one talks to you more often than you do. The things you say to yourself about you, others, God, life, and ministry are profoundly important because they are formative of thoughts, desires, choices, and actions. I want to make my own confession here. It is easier for me to preach the gospel to others than it is to preach it to myself. There is often a disconnect, a discontinuity, between what I say from the pulpit and what I say to myself. It is very important that I become increasingly aware of my private conversation and to question and argue with my own heart (as in Psalm 42). Determine to listen to yourself and to confront yourself with the gospel. By the way, don't move your lips as you're doing this; people will think you're crazy.

11) GAZE UPON THE BEAUTY OF THE LORD

This by far is the most important piece of advice I have for you. It comes out of Psalm 27. There are ten thousand reasons for worry and doubt in ministry. There are ten thousand temptations for pride in ministry. There are ten thousand occasions for fear of man in ministry. What I am about to suggest addresses them all. Get up every morning of your

ministry life and take time to do one thing: gaze upon the beauty of the Lord. No, I'm not talking about your daily Bible reading or personal scriptural study. What I'm talking about is giving time each morning for the eyes of your heart to gaze upon the incalculable beauty of your Redeemer. Read Isaiah 40, where the human vocabulary is stretched as far as it can go to capture the glory of God. Or read Job, beginning with chapter 38, where God has that "Where were you when the foundations of the earth were laid?" conversation. Read Ephesians 1, where God's saving plan for the ages is laid out. And as you read, remember that what you are reading not only describes the beauty of the one you serve but also redefines who you are as God's child. Remember that by glorious grace he has unleashed this beauty on you. God is all that he is for you by grace!



Two true things made it exciting for me to write this letter to you: (1) Ministry is war. If you want a useful ministry life, you have to be committed to battling for your own soul. It took me a while in ministry before I understood the importance of this. (2) The most important part of reading a book is what you do when you have read the last word and closed the book. Remember, God-given insight is never an end in itself, but a means to an end; the end is a transformed life, and for that we have the powerful grace of Jesus.

I leave you with these words from the pen of the apostle Paul: "Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it" (1 Thess. 5:23-24).

May God bless you, your ministry, and your family.

Paul David Tripp
October 15, 2014