

Peculiar Perils of Leadership

by J. Oswald Sanders

The sermon highlights the dangers of pride, jealousy, popularity, infallibility, elation, and depression in leadership, and emphasizes the importance of spiritual maturity and a focus on God.

Scripture: Numbers 11:28, Proverbs 16:5, Matthew 23:12, Luke 10:20, 1 Corinthians 3:4-6, 2 Corinthians 10:12, Galatians 6:3, Philippians 2:3, James 4:6, 1 Peter 5:5

Topics: "Humility", "Leadership"

Description

J. Oswald Sanders addresses the subtle perils faced by spiritual leaders, emphasizing the dangers of pride, jealousy, popularity, infallibility, and the emotional extremes of elation and depression. He warns that pride can lead to self-congratulation and spiritual blindness, while jealousy can arise from insecurity about one's position. Sanders highlights the importance of humility and the need for leaders to focus on God's glory rather than their own prestige. He also discusses the challenge of balancing the roles of prophet and leader, urging leaders to prioritize their spiritual calling over popularity. Ultimately, he calls for leaders to remain grounded in their faith and reliant on God's grace.

Transcript

Although there are occupational hazards in all callings, the perils of the spiritual leader are especially subtle. He is by no means immune to the temptations of the flesh, but the dangers most to be guarded against lie in the realm of the spirit. He must remember that Satan, his relentless enemy, will take advantage of every inch of ground he concedes in any area of his life.

Pride

The very fact that a man has risen to a position of leadership and prominence tends to engender a secret self-congratulation and pride which, if not checked, will unfit him for further advancement in the service of the kingdom, for "everyone who is proud in heart is an abomination to the Lord" (Prov. 16:5). Strong and searching words, those! Nothing is more distasteful to God than self-conceit. That first and fundamental sin in essence aims at enthroning self at the expense of God. It was the sin that changed the anointed cherub, guardian of the throne of God, into the foul fiend of hell, and caused his expulsion from heaven.

Of the myriad forms that sin assumes, none is more abhorrent than spiritual pride. To be proud of spiritual gifts that God has bestowed or of the position to which His love and grace have elevated us, is to forget that grace is a gift, and that all we have has been received.

Pride is a sin of whose presence its victim is least conscious. There are, however, three tests that will help us discover whether or not we have succumbed to it.

The test of precedence

How do we react when another is selected for the assignment we expected or for the office we coveted? When another is promoted and we are overlooked? When another out-shines us in gifts and accomplishments?

The test of sincerity

In our moments of honest self-criticism we will say many things about ourselves and really mean them. But how do we feel when others, especially our rivals, say exactly the same things about us?

The test of criticism.

Does criticism arouse hostility and resentment in our hearts and cause us to fly to immediate self-justification? Do we hasten to criticize the critic?

If we are honest, when we measure ourselves by the life of our Lord who humbled Himself even to death on a cross, we cannot but be overwhelmed with the shabbiness, and even the vileness, of our hearts.

Jealousy

Jealousy is a near relative of pride. The jealous person is apprehensive and suspicious of rivals. That temptation came to Moses through the touching loyalty of his own colleagues. "Eldad and Medad are prophesying in the camp." Said the outraged Joshua to his master, "Moses, my lord, restrain them" (Num. 11:28). Those two assistants had broken into prophecy, and Moses' loyal followers were jealous on his behalf at the usurping of his prophetic prerogatives and challenge to his prestige.

But envy and jealousy found no resting place in the generous nature of the man who used to speak with God face to face. Such matters could safely be left with the God who had called him.

"Are you jealous for my sake?" was his untroubled response. "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets." The leader who is jealous for God's glory need have no concerns for his own prestige and prerogatives. They are safe in His hands.

Popularity

There will always be those unwise souls who grant undue deference to their spiritual leaders and advisers, and who tend to exalt one above another.

That practice was prevalent in Corinth and caused Paul to write: "When one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth . . . We are God's fellow-workers" (I Cor. 3:4-6,9).

An exaggerated deference to leaders in the church is a mark of spiritual immaturity and carnality. And an acceptance of such fawning deference by the leader is an evidence of the very same weaknesses. Paul was shocked by it and vigorously repudiated it. It is not wrong to be greatly loved by those whom one has

endeavored to serve, but there is always the danger that devotion may be deflected from the Master to the servant. Spiritual leaders are to be "esteemed very highly in love for their work's sake," but that esteem should not degenerate into adulation.

That leader is most successful who attaches the affection of his followers more to Christ than to himself. He can rightly draw encouragement from the fact that his service has been fruitful and appreciated, but he must refuse to be idolized.

What leader or preacher does not desire to be popular with his constituency? Certainly there is no virtue in unpopularity, but popularity can be purchased at too high a price. Jesus made that crystal clear when He said, "Woe unto you when all men speak well of you." And He expressed the complementary truth when he said, "Blessed are ye when men revile you and persecute you, and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely for my sake."

Bishop Stephen Neill said, in an address to theological students, "Popularity is the most dangerous spiritual state imaginable, since it leads on so easily to the spiritual pride which drowns men in perdition. It is a symptom to be watched with anxiety since so often it has been purchased at the too heavy price of compromise with the world."

The dangers of popularity and success were constantly before Spurgeon in his unique ministry.

Success exposes a man to the pressure of people and thus tempts him to hold on to his gains by means of fleshly methods and practices, and to let himself be ruled wholly by the dictatorial demands of incessant expansion. Success can go to my head, and will unless I remember that it is God who accomplishes the work, that He can continue to do so without my help, and that He will be able to make out with other means whenever He cuts me down to size.

Infallibility

Spirituality does not equal infallibility. The fact that a person is indwelt by the Spirit and seeks to be led by the Spirit will doubtless mean that he is less liable to make mistakes than those who do not; but since he is still in the flesh, he is not infallible. Even the divinely called and Spirit-filled apostles made mistakes that required divine overruling.

The leader who knows God, and probably knows Him better than his colleagues, is in danger of falling unconsciously into this subtle peril. Because his judgment has usually proved more accurate than theirs, because he has prayed and thought and wrestled with the problem more earnestly than they, it is difficult for him to concede the possibility of mistake and to yield to the judgment of his brethren. He must be a man of conviction and be prepared to stand for what he believes, but that is different from assuming virtual infallibility. Willingness to concede the possibility of an error of judgment and to defer to the judgment of one's brethren enhances rather than diminishes influence.

Elation and Depression

In every work for God there are inevitably times of discouragement and frustration as well as days of uplift and achievement. The leader is in peril of being unduly depressed by the one and unduly elated by the other. The seventy disciples returned from their mission, highly elated with their success. Jesus quickly checked this natural but soulish reaction. "Do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you," He admonished them, "but rejoice that your names are recorded in heaven" (Luke 10:20). He directed their

attention to the fate of the exalted being who let high privilege go to his head. "I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning."

After the drama on Carmel, Elijah experienced such acute depression that he wished to die. The Lord did not approach his overwrought, self-pitying prophet with a spiritual probe or scalpel. Instead, He made him take two long sleeps and eat two square meals. Only then did He begin to deal with the deeper spiritual problem. He was able to show Elijah that no real basis for his discouragement existed. There were still seven thousand of his compatriots who had never bowed the knee to Baal. By fleeing, he had deprived the nation of the leadership of which it was in desperate need.

It is realistic to face the fact that not all our ideals for God's work will be realized. Cherished idols prove to have feet of clay. People on whom we lean will prove broken reeds. Even leadership that has been deeply sacrificial will sometimes be challenged. But the spiritually mature leader will know how to discern the true origin of depression and discouragement and will deal with it accordingly.

Then there are seasons when everything goes well. Goals are reached, planned endeavors are crowned with success, the Spirit moves, souls are saved and saints blessed. In those times the mature leader knows on whose brow to place the crown of achievement. When Robert Murray McCheyne experienced times of blessing in his ministry, on returning home from the service, he would kneel down and symbolically place the crown of success on the brow of the Lord, to whom he knew it rightly belonged. That practice helped to save him from the peril of taking to himself the glory that belonged to God alone.

Samuel Chadwick summed up the wise attitude to that peril in these words: "If successful, don't crow; if defeated, don't croak."

Prophet or Leader?

A preacher who possesses marked gifts of leadership may reach a place in his church or organization that compels him to choose whether his role is to be one of popular leader or unpopular prophet. Such a dilemma was pictured by Dr. A. C. Dixon, who was pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, and later of Spurgeon's Tabernacle in London:

"Every preacher ought to be primarily a prophet of God who preaches as God bids him, without regard to results. When he be-comes conscious of the fact that he is a leader in his own church or denomination, he has reached a crisis in his ministry. He must now choose one of two courses, that of prophet of God or a leader of men. If he seeks to be a prophet and a leader, he is apt to make a failure of both. If he decides to be a prophet only insofar as he can do so without losing his leadership, he becomes a diplomat and ceases to be a prophet at all. If he decides to maintain leadership at all costs, he may easily fall to the level of a politician who pulls the wires in order to gain or hold a position."

Of course there is not such a clear-cut dichotomy between the two roles as Dr. Dixon suggests, and the one does not necessarily exclude the other. But a situation can very easily develop in which one has to choose between a spiritual ministry and a leadership that would prevent its highest exercise. Herein lies the peril.

Dr. Reuben A. Torrey, whom God used at the turn of the century to bring revival to half of the world, was faced with such a choice. Dr. Dixon wrote of him:

"The thousands who have heard Dr. Torrey know the man and his message. He loves the Bible, and believing it to be the infallible Word of God, preaches it with the fervor of red-hot conviction. He never compromises. He has chosen to be a prophet of God rather than a mere leader of men, and that is the secret of his power with God and men."

Samuel Logan Brengle was one of the truly great leaders of the Salvation Army. A man of scholarship as well as of unusual spiritual power, he outlined the road to spiritual authority and leadership in challenging words:

"It is not won by promotion, but by many prayers and tears. It is attained by confessions of sin, and much heart searching and humbling before God; by self-surrender, a courageous sacrifice of every idol, a bold, deathless, uncompromising and uncomplaining embracing of the cross, and by an eternal, unfaltering looking unto Jesus crucified. It is not gained by seeking great things for ourselves, but rather, like Paul, by counting those things that are gain to us as loss for Christ. That is a great price, but it must be unflinchingly paid by him who would be not merely a nominal but a real spiritual leader of men, a leader whose power is recognized and felt in heaven, on earth and in hell."

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