

# COMMON PITFALLS IN MINISTRY

by Dr. D. W. Ekstrand

*Much of the following was shared at a Revival Conference by author and radio host, Nancy Leigh DeMoss. Her life has touched the lives of millions of women through “Revive Our Hearts” ministry.*

**Ministry is an awesome privilege – it is also a weighty responsibility.** Finishing well and staying faithful to the end is the “goal,” but that will only happen by the grace of a faithful God. Tragically, many of God’s servants stumble and fall after years of ministry, discrediting the message and the Savior they once served. The *lives* of those who have remained faithful *preach* as powerfully as their preaching – their lives are a tremendous encouragement to the rest of us to *continue faithfully to the end* (cf. 1 Cor 9:24-27; Phil 3:14; 2 Tim 4:7; Heb 12:1; Rev 2:10; 3:11). We have an “*active enemy*” who is determined to cause us to stumble. Here are a number of “**the most common pitfalls by Christian leaders**” —

1. **They Lose the Wonder** – This may be the most common pitfall of all. It is so easy to lose the wonder of the great theological truths of the faith... of what it means to be a child of God... of the majesty and greatness of the God we serve... of the privilege that is ours to serve Him... and of His love and grace. They say familiarity breeds contempt, but it also breeds neglect and complacency. When the supernatural becomes “*commonplace*” in our lives, ministry then becomes a “*job*” rather than a “*passion*” – if ministry is not your passion, ultimately, it will become a heavy, joyless burden upon your life. Writes DeMoss, “*I have a holy dread of losing the freshness and the passion.*” Paul had a lifelong passion – he speaks of the “glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted” (1 Tim 1:11). Ministry was a great privilege to Paul: “I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service” (1 Tim 1:12). It has been well said, “*To keep a right focus, we must preach the gospel to ourselves every day!*”

**Application:** Have you lost the wonder of your relationship with Jesus and His call upon your life? Do you have a passion for Christ and for ministry, or are you just going thru the motions?

2. **They Neglect their Relationship with Christ** – The bride in the Song of Solomon laments to her beloved that she has been so busy *tending the vineyard of others* that she has neglected to care for *her own vineyard* (Song 1:6). That picture describes the tendency for those of us in the Lord’s service: we are constantly tending the vineyards of others, and neglecting our own spiritual well-being – as such, we fail to cultivate and prioritize our personal walk with the Lord. Remember the story of “*Martha*” in Luke 10 – she was so anxious in her *serving* the Lord, that she forgot the most important thing – sitting at Jesus feet and *listening* to His Word (Lk 10:38-42). **Robert Murray M’Cheyne** says, “*no amount of activity in the King’s service will make up for neglect of the King Himself.*” Activity for God cannot make up for lack of a relationship with Him. At all costs, we must be “intentional” about eliminating the unnecessary noise and clutter in our lives, and finding a quiet heart, so that we can actively pursue intimacy with God.

**Application:** Do you have a vital, growing, intimate love relationship with Christ? Are you cultivating God’s presence through daily times in the Word and prayer?

3. **They Proclaim What they are Not Living** – Isn’t it interesting that *doctors* are often the last ones to get physicals, and *lawyers* are the last ones to write wills. Sadly, many *servants* in ministry are

the last ones to deal with their own spiritual needs. A. W. Tozer said that one of the greatest curses of our day is that we think because we know something, that we possess it – the distance from the head to the heart is the longest 18 inches in the universe! What compounds the problem is that we are so easily deceived. The Lord’s blood brother, James, tells us that it is foolish self-deception to listen to the Word and not do it (Jam 1:22). To live a life that is inconsistent with what we proclaim is to risk the spiritual sinkholes that inevitably result when what’s under the surface is unable to support the message we claim to believe and the public image we portray. Oswald Chambers reminds us: *“The message must be part of ourselves – before God’s message can liberate other souls, the liberation must be real in you.”*

**Application:** Is your private lifestyle consistent with what you proclaim to others? Can you say as the apostle Paul said, “Be imitators of me... follow my example” (1 Cor 11:1; Phil 3:17)?

4. **They Rely on the Natural** – There is a danger of relying on our *natural gifts and abilities*. And the more gifted we are, the greater the potential danger – all of us “naturally” play to our strengths; because we are fairly confident in our strong suits, we tend to rely upon them. Conversely, we oftentimes rely on man-made tools, techniques, programs, and resources – even though, in and of themselves, they are powerless to spiritually impact people’s lives. Jesus said, “Apart from Me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:5; Ps 127:1) – when we are not “abiding in Christ” (i.e., being intimately connected and fully dependent upon Him), our efforts will not accomplish anything spiritually. God must effectuate our efforts for their to be spiritual fruit (cf. 1 Cor 3:6). When we come to the place where we are no longer utterly dependent on the grace and power of God to enable us to effectively minister to people’s lives, we will cease to have a spiritual impact upon people’s lives – this happens when we get to the place where we live as if we can “do ministry” without God. It is helpful at this point to remind ourselves of Paul’s words to the Church at Corinth – “I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling... and in the power of the Spirit, that your faith might not rest on the wisdom of men but on the power of God” (cf. 1 Cor 2:3-5). The 17<sup>th</sup> century theologian William Gurnall in his book *“Exchanging Our Self-life for Christ’s Life”* states, “The only work that will abide for eternity is that which is produced in humble dependence upon the power of God’s Spirit.”

**Application:** What is there about your life and ministry that cannot be explained apart from the Spirit of God? How does your life evidence a dependence on the power of the Holy Spirit?

5. **They Leave the Path of Humility** – We all face the danger of pride: becoming self-absorbed, self-enamored, self-centered. The prophet Samuel said to King Saul, “When you were little in your own eyes... did not the Lord anoint you king?” (cf. 1 Sam 15:17). From that humble start, Saul ultimately began to think that he could be the exception to God’s rules – He developed “I” trouble. We too can become proud of what we know & do & achieve, and what people say about us – as such, we become blind to our own shortcomings, and less apt to solicit the input of others. Writes DeMoss, “The more people there are who look up to us, the harder it is to be truly transparent about our own failures and needs, and be honest with others about where we are in our walk with the Lord.” Note again the words of William Gurnall: “Knowing your strength lies wholly in God and not in yourself, remain humble — even when God is blessing and using you most. God’s favor is neither the work of your hands nor the price of your own worth. How can you boast of that which you did not buy? If you embezzle God’s strength and credit it to your own account, He will soon call an audit and take back what was His all along.” As Steve Brown would say, “You think about that.”

**Application:** Do you have a servant's heart and a teachable spirit? Do you esteem others as more important than yourself, and are you amazed that God would use you?

6. **They Settle for Status Quo** – This is the danger of “*walking by sight rather than by faith*” (2 Cor 5:7), or resting on our laurels, of becoming content with what we have seen God do in the past. As a result, we no longer seek and trust Him for God-sized things. We can come to the place where we no longer exercise faith, we are content to just keep the machine going. After years of fruitful ministry many leaders find themselves being tempted to just settle for what is, for the status quo, rather than continuing to “*step out in faith*” and attempt something so impossible that unless God is in it, it is doomed to fail. DeMoss has been challenged over the years by the account of **Caleb** found in Joshua 14 – he's going hard after God, but when he comes to the age of 85, he wants yet another mountain to conquer for God! Writes DeMoss: “*However long God gives me, it is my heart's desire to keep pressing into the 'realm of faith' rather than settling for the status quo.*”

**Application:** Are you seeking God for fresh vision and opportunities to glorify Him? What are you believing God for that only He can do? Are you praying “God's will be done”?

7. **They Serve without Love** – The two greatest commandments are to *love God* with all our heart, and to *love others* as ourselves. If these are the greatest commandments, then what would be the “*greatest sins*”? — to love God with less than all our being, and to fail to love others. Scripture reveals a God who loves His people passionately and who grieves when His people reject Him and pursue other loves. How will the world know the love of this passionate God if they don't see us loving Him and others? There is a danger of exchanging passionate love for God and people for right doctrine and right behavior. It is easy (natural) to become annoyed with difficult people we encounter in ministry, to see them as obstacles. When we become filled with the love of Christ, we want to *love those difficult people to maturity and see them restored*. We want to lay down our lives for others (cf. 1 Jn 3:16; Rom 15:1-3; Phil 2:4-8). If our service doesn't spring out of a love for God and a love for people, it is worthless. The apostle Paul says, “Though we have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, if we do not have love, we are nothing” (cf. 1 Cor 13:2). DeMoss responds: “*I don't want to just give messages to people; I want to love people* – though I don't naturally have that kind of love in myself, God does, and He pours out His love in my heart by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 5:5).

**Application:** Is your service motivated by genuine love for God? Do the things God values motivate you? Do you genuinely love others by looking out after their interests? (cf. Phil 2:4)

8. **They Lose Perspective** – Losing sight of the *big picture* is a recurring challenge in most of our lives. It happens in two ways. The first is *forgetting how big God is*, which leads to discouragement. When we lose perspective, we lose heart and think, “What's the use, the enemy is too great.” We confine our focus to what's on around us, and in the process lose sight of Christ. **G. Campbell Morgan** states in his book, “*A First Century Message to Twentieth Century Christians*” – “The supreme need in every hour of difficulty and distress is for a fresh vision of God. Seeing Him, all else takes on proper perspective and proportion.” In 2 Kings 6, we read of when the Syrian army came and surrounded the house of Elisha – his servant was greatly distressed when he saw this powerful foe; all he could see was the enemy. Isn't that where we end up so often? We become consumed by the forces of darkness and evil. Elisha wisely prayed, “Lord, open his eyes that he may see” (2 Kg 6:17). When God opened the servant's eyes, he saw that the hills were filled with the angelic host! They were there all along; he just couldn't see them. *The power of God and His*

*heavenly host is infinitely greater than all the combined power of evil and Satan.* We need to lift up our eyes in faith to our source of strength. Our strength comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth (Ps 121:2). *Instead of obsessing with the sight of the enemy, our hearts need to be filled with a picture of how big God is.* The second way we lose perspective is by *forgetting how little we are*, which leads to pride. The fact is that apart from Christ, we have nothing, we are nothing, and we can do nothing (Jn 15:5). As Paul says, “We have this treasure [the life of Christ] in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor 4:7).

**Application:** Does your life demonstrate a conviction that God is powerful and in charge? Do you act as if God is big enough to solve every problem you face?

9. **They Seek Comfort and Convenience** – The longer we are in the race, the greater is the risk of *growing weary in well doing* (Gal 6:9; 2 Th 3:13). This occurs when we fail to draw our energy from the God’s Spirit within us. We are also more vulnerable, after years of faithful service, of *wanting to coast*, wanting to let up and enjoy the good life we’ve worked so hard to attain; we start to feel *a sense of entitlement*, that we deserve greater comfort and convenience in exchange for all we’ve sacrificed over the years. After years of dealing with the demands and difficulties of ministry, says DeMoss with great humility and transparency, “there are times when I don’t want to have to do anything hard ever again; I just get tired of pressing on and denying my flesh at every turn.” Wow, what a candid admission – why can’t we be as open and honest before our parishioners? Too proud? Look what a “*comfortable lifestyle*” did to David – rather than continuing in the rigors of battle, he decided to rest up at home for awhile (2 Sam 11:1). The fact of the matter is, the battle needed David as much as David needed the battle – it was during this “*coasting time*” that he committed adultery with Bathsheba. There is danger ahead when we lack vigilance and let our guard down (2 Tim 2:3-4). Writes DeMoss, “*Those things that weary my flesh are the very things that keep me needing God and that keep me pressing into Him for grace – hard as they are at times, I need those things.*” The truth is, pressure situations keep us on our knees and keep us seeking God.

**Application:** Are you self-seeking or self-denying? Are you surrendering your “right” to comfort and convenience?

**As believers, we are all on a “journey” to that city whose maker is God,** and He has put into our hands an *incredible treasure* – the ministry of the gospel to those we have been called to serve. If the hand of God was not on us during this journey, we would not make it – the good news is, God Himself is accompanying us, going within us and alongside us, in front of and behind us, to deal with every enemy we confront along the way. Soon we’ll be at the heavenly temple and stand in the presence of our Great High Priest – the joy of that moment will make every burden here on earth seem as nothing (cf. Rom 8:18; 2 Cor 4:17; 1 Pet 4:13); and then to hear Him utter those long awaited words, “Well done, good and faithful slave... enter into the joy of your Master” (cf. Matt 25:21, 23). May God keep His hand on us and keep us faithful – all the way to the finish line.