

# THE RUIN OF MINISTERS

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## The Almost Inevitable Ruin Of Every Minister . .. And How To Avoid It

by Don Whitney

### 1 Timothy 4:15-16

15 Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. 16 Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.

Almost everyone knows someone who used to be in the ministry. Almost everyone knows someone who shouldn't be in the ministry. And every minister knows another minister—if not several—he does not want to be like.

But the sad news for ministers is, regardless of your age or education or experience, it is almost inevitable that you will become the kind of minister you do not want to be. So I think it's important to address the subject of: the almost inevitable ruin of every minister . . . and how to avoid it.

Once when a Southern Baptist denominational executive was on the Midwestern Seminary campus in the late 1990s, he asserted that statistics show that **for every twenty men who enter the ministry, by the time those men reach age sixty-five, only one will still be in the ministry.**

Despite all the commitment with which they began the race, despite all the investment of time and money to prepare, despite the years of spent in service, despite the cost of retooling and redirecting their lives, nearly all will leave the ministry. Some will opt out for health reasons. Some will wash out in their private lives. Some will bow out, realizing they had misread the call of God. Some will bail out because the stress is so great. Some will be forced out by their churches. Some will walk out from sheer frustration and a sense of failure. And if you haven't given serious thought to leaving the ministry, you haven't been in it very long.

Despite the fact that no one goes into the ministry to be a casualty, the ruin of almost every minister, it seems, is inevitable. For in addition to the high percentage of those who leave the ministry, sometimes it appears that of those who do stay in the ministry, many of them have been ruined in other ways. They may get ruined by **money**, either by the desire for it or the lack of it. They make far too many choices based upon getting more money, or else they smolder in their attitude toward the church because they don't get paid enough.

They may get ruined by **sex**. I have a Southern Baptist publication in my files which says that "25 to 35 percent of ministers [are] involved in inappropriate sexual behavior"[1] at some level. Even when it seems to be unknown to others, their preoccupation with sex or pornography so absorbs their attention that the true spiritual impact of their ministries is ruined.

They may get ruined by **power**. They become authoritarian. They may not have even started out that way; perhaps they got that way because they were so faithful in one place of ministry for so long and the sin came upon them gradually. Or maybe they discovered that they enjoyed denominational work, but after awhile they began serving their own political appetites more than Christ. To pull strings was more satisfying than to preach sermons. To get in the inner circle of the right people, to be able to place others in and keep others out of influential positions, to be among the first to get the inside information, became "the ministry" to them.

They may get ruined by **pride**. The greater the influence God gives them, the greater they become in their own sight, and the more they believe they deserve the influence. But pride may be the sin that both God and men hate most. Regardless of their knowledge or abilities, they aren't loved or admired. They may get the admiration of the ignorant, or the undiscerning, or those who want to piggy-back on the power of such men, but they will not get it from the Godly.

They may get ruined by **cynicism**. When they spend a great deal of time around ministers like these—ministers who have been ruined to some degree by money, sex, power, or pride—no wonder many get cynical. In addition, when you deal week in and week out with people who claim to be Christians but often don't act like it, when those who are supposed to be God's people talk about you and treat you worse than those in the world do, when you've ministered for years and you see little apparent fruit in the lives of those you've given your life for, it's easy to become cynical. No one's testimony thrills you anymore. No book motivates you. No sermon moves you.

They may get ruined by **success**. They become CEOs, not shepherds. They become managers, not ministers. Their model is business, with its emphasis on numbers, units, products, marketing, and customers, rather than a family with its emphasis on love, relationships, new births, and maturity, or a farm with its emphasis on sheep, fruit, and growing things.

In some cases, ruin results in men leaving the ministry, yet in many instances they remain. But even then they become something you don't want to become. You see them politicking their way through associational or denominational life, and you say, "I don't want to become like that." You overhear their cynicism in conversations and you say to yourself, "I don't want to become like that." You perceive their sense of self-importance when you meet them and they tell you where they serve, and in your mind you say, "I don't want to become like that." You bring up spiritual matters and get the clear impression that they're more interested in other things than the things of God, and you recoil and think, "I don't want to become like that." You hear them preach and their arrogant attitude, or their worldliness, or their lack of earnestness, or their professionalism, or their hypocrisy causes you silently to pray over and over, "Lord, please don't let me ever become like that."

The sad reality is, **you will become like that**. That's you in a few years. That's what younger ministers will think of you. It's almost inevitable for every minister—**or you will make progress**. There is no middle ground.

It's always been this way. When the Apostle Paul was inspired to write the letters we call the Pastoral Epistles—those letters written to instruct ministers—many who had entered the ministry were being ruined.

In 1 Timothy 1:6 there were ministers who had "turned aside to fruitless discussions."

1:19 some had "suffered shipwreck in regard to their faith."

4:2 he warned of ministers filled with ". . . the hypocrisy of liars seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron"

6:4 he told Timothy to watch out for the minister who ". . . is conceited and understands nothing; but he has a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words, out of which arise envy, strife, abusive language, evil suspicions,

6:5 Paul spoke of the hold money had on these ministers, for he says, they "suppose that godliness is a means of gain."

6:20-21 he warned Timothy to avoid ministers characterized by ". . . worldly and empty chatter and the opposing arguments of what is falsely called "knowledge"—which some have professed and thus gone astray from the faith."

In 2 Timothy 1:15 Paul names two ministers who "turned away from me."

2:16-18 he speaks of ministers whose "talk will spread like gangrene." Then he names two such ministers "who have gone astray from the truth."

3:5 he warns of ministers who are "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power."

3:8 these ministers are "men who oppose the truth."

4:3-4 Paul speaks of ministers who will teach in accordance to the desires of people who "will not endure sound doctrine."

In Titus 1:10-11 he described many ministers as "rebellious men, empty talkers and deceivers, . . . teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain."

1:16 he warned of ministers who ". . . profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him, being detestable and disobedient and worthless for any good deed."

Paul warned ministers about these things because they had happened to ministers and ruined them. And God inspired and preserved such words for ministers of every generation because these terrible things still happen to ministers and ruin them. ***There is an almost inevitable ruin of every minister, and it will happen to you unless you avoid ruin by making progress.*** How do we make progress in ministry instead of making shipwreck? Paul wrote to Timothy—and God to us—in 1 Timothy 4:15-16, "Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all."

What are "these things" which, if we "take pains" with them, our "progress will be evident to all?" In the larger context, "these things" are all the things Paul has written about in this first letter to Timothy, and ultimately in all three Pastoral Epistles. In the immediate context it is the discipline Paul commends to every minister in 4:6-16. And these are summarized in verse 16: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you."

In order to make progress in the ministry as opposed to making shipwreck of his ministry, a minister should pay close attention to himself and to his teaching.

First, "Pay close attention to yourself." If you are going to "pay close attention to yourself," then . . .

## DON'T LET THE MINISTRY KEEP YOU FROM JESUS

And that's just what will happen—the ministry will turn your attention from Jesus—unless you "Pay close attention to yourself."

But that sounds rather self-centered and narcissistic doesn't it? No, for when the Apostle Paul was inspired by God to write to the younger ministry Timothy and say, "Pay close attention to yourself," he was saying "Pay close attention to yourself" as a man of God, pay close attention to your relationship with Christ Jesus. In other words, make sure you stay close to Him, keep your eyes on Him, grow closer to Him, and grow more like Him. Watch to make sure you do not let anything—including the ministry—keep you from Jesus.

You might be thinking, "How could this happen? My whole life is built around Jesus. Not only am I living for Him in general, but I have given myself to study His Word and minister to His people and do the work of building up His kingdom every day. How could the ministry of Jesus keep me from Jesus?" Remember, that this command, "Pay close attention to yourself" was first written to a minister. And we refer to 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus as the Pastoral Epistles because they are God-given instructions to those in the ministry, and then applicable to every other Christian. So the Apostle Paul instructed Timothy, his younger protégé in the ministry to pay close attention to himself precisely because it is so easy for a minister not to pay close attention to himself and to be spiritually ruined by the ministry.

The ministry keeps you from Jesus when it keeps you from hearing from Jesus. But remember that "the ministry" is "the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:4). There is no real ministry apart from the Scriptures, for the Scriptures are the Lord speaking to us. And when you don't have time to sit at the Master's feet and hear what He says to you through His Word, something is keeping you from Jesus. And how can you regularly speak for Jesus with power without regularly hearing from Jesus?

The ministry also keeps you from Jesus when it keeps you from talking to Jesus. Are you still a person of prayer? If you don't have time for unhurried, long-lasting time with Jesus, your life is not only too busy and too complex, chances are you are being deceived. Paul wrote of this concern to the Corinthian Christians when he said, "But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ" (2 Corinthians 11:3).

Don't be deceived about the necessity of devotion to Christ, and the necessity of keeping close to Him. Devotion to Christ is a simple and pure thing, but we can be tempted to make it too complex. We tend to think that if we don't have just the right circumstances, or just the right place, or just the right time, or just enough time, or the right books that we can't spend time with Him as we should and love Him as we ought.

And these temptations of complexity are especially deceptive for those actively involved in ministry. As life and ministry gets increasingly complex, the simplicity and purity of devotion to Jesus may not seem as essential for someone with our ministry skills, or our theological education, or our years of experience, or simply not as important as the other things we have to do. After all, we're being called upon to serve Him in ways that require a lot of time. After all, ministry is a 24/7 responsibility. There are more and more needs to meet, more and more meetings to attend, e-mails to answer, phone calls to return, visits to make. Why do I need to watch my life to make sure I stay close to Jesus when everything I do is for Jesus?

One of the leading Baptists in South Africa, Martin Holdt told me a story I asked him to repeat to me in an e-mail. He wrote,

The story I told you was about a friend of mine who was a principal of a Bible college who after his fall came to see me and told me that on the basis of two things he fell: he had become so busy in the Lord's work that he simply neglected to read the Scriptures and pray. The long-term effects of this neglect, he believes, led to his adultery. When I shared this with Bob Sheehan [a minister from England] earlier this year when he was in South Africa, his words to me were, "I almost interrupted you before you told me the two things because I wanted to say that I knew exactly what they were in light of discovering this to be true of every known case of ministerial adultery in the UK!" Bob went on to tell me that a leading theologian in England whose once widely accepted ministry had fallen into disfavour admitted to him that he felt that he had outgrown the reading of the Scriptures!

It may be **sexual adultery**, or it may be a **spiritual adultery** to hunting, or fishing, or golfing, or exercising, or surfing the net, or activism, or denominational politics, or a hobby, or a thousand other things that leads you astray from seeking Jesus and His kingdom first and foremost. But **it's almost inevitable that in one way or another every minister will be ruined**. It's either progress in the ministry or shipwreck in the ministry.

Pay close attention to yourself. Don't let the ministry keep you from Jesus.

But paying close attention to your spiritual life is only half the warning of this verse. There are some who maintain a devotional life of great piety whose effectiveness can be ruined in a different way. You will also be ruined by the ministry if you don't, as verse 16 also says, "Pay close attention to . . . your teaching." And so I plead with you . . .

## **DON'T LET THE MINISTRY KEEP YOU FROM LEARNING**

When the text says, "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching," the Greek word is *didaskalia*, which means "teaching, instruction, or doctrine." That's why some translations render it as "Pay close attention to your doctrine." If you're going to do that, you have to keep learning doctrine and learning the things of God. So my second appeal is: don't let the ministry keep you from learning.

When a man is in his formal training for the ministry, he is immersed in learning, almost forced learning. If he's taking very many hours in seminary he sometimes feels like he is trying to take a drink out of a fire hydrant. He goes to one class and is flooded with information, and he goes right out of that one into another where he is deluged with more information. Then he goes home and studies for hours more. The information overload is so great that he is like a man standing on the beach attempting to hold back the waves.

But the day he walks out of the classroom and into a church ministry full-time it's just the opposite. Now he is like a well and everyone in the world is a bucket. Everyone has needs and demands, and every few days they come back expecting another sermon, another lesson, another discipleship class. And if he doesn't keep learning, they will drain him dry. It's inevitable. That's the nature of the ministry. So a minister must keep making progress, and one of the ways he makes progress is by continuing to learn the things of God.

In the last of his inspired letters, the Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy, "You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them" (2 Timothy 3:14). You have learned doctrine. Good! Continue living it and continue learning it. You have learned the Bible. Good! Continue learning it. You have

learned how to preach. Continue studying and learning how to preach all your life. This is the way of the ministry. For if you don't continue learning the things you have learned already, you'll be ruined as a minister; either ruined in your personal life or ruined in your effectiveness.

For a truly God-called man, one of his greatest fears is of his life not counting for Christ, all his efforts making little difference for the sake of the kingdom. But that's exactly what will happen, your effectiveness will be ruined—it's almost inevitable—if you let the ministry keep you from learning.

Men who make progress in the ministry are the like the men in Proverbs 10:14 where we're told, "Wise men store up knowledge." They store up Biblical knowledge, they store up theological knowledge, they store up pastoral knowledge, they seek out and store up any knowledge that will draw them closer to Christ, that will help them know God better, that will make them more effective in the ministry. Do you want to be wise? Sure you do! Then don't let the ministry keep you from learning.

Listen to another of King Solomon's inspired observations in Proverbs 15:14: "The mind of the intelligent seeks knowledge." According to Scripture, the way to determine whether you are intelligent and discerning is not so much by your GPA or degrees, but by whether you seek knowledge. A man may struggle to get through seminary, or have no seminary training at all, and yet make progress in the ministry and be fruitful for Christ partly because he pays attention to his doctrine and he continues learning the things of God. And another man may be the most gifted and accomplished man in his denomination, but if he begins to coast in his pursuit of the things of God, he is a fool.

Samuel Hopkins, one of the early biographers of Jonathan Edwards, said that when he met Edwards he was impressed by the fact that a man already twenty years in the ministry had still "an uncommon thirst for knowledge . . . he read all the books, especially books of divinity, that he could come at." [2] Edwards is chosen by the Encyclopaedia Britannica as the greatest mind America ever produced, and yet he never stopped using it for God's glory and his people's good. He didn't let the ministry keep him from learning.

Edwards reminds me again of the Apostle Paul, near the end of his life and writing one of the final sentences we have from his pen, pleading with Timothy, "When you come bring the cloak which I left at Troas with Carpus, and the books, especially the parchments" (2 Timothy 4:16). Here's a man with distractions and persecutions and responsibilities we can hardly imagine, and yet he didn't let the ministry keep him from learning. Even as an old and skilled minister, he didn't rely on his age or experience, but he kept pursuing the things of God with both his head and his heart. That's how he "fought the good fight," that's how he "finished the course," that's how he "kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Without this kind of **intentionality**, this **perseverance** to pay attention to life and doctrine, a minister will be ruined. It's almost inevitable. But it's also virtually imperceptible, at least for awhile. You hardly notice as time goes by that you are becoming the kind of minister you once despised. Year after year in ministry can be like driving from the Rockies toward the Mississippi—it seems to be a level road for mile after mile, but you don't even realize when you've descended a thousand feet. "Pay attention," says the text, "Pay attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things."

And don't think that somehow things will improve on their own and in the future the ministry won't keep you from learning as it tends to do now. Seminarians sometimes tell me that

once they no longer have to read the books required for their classes and don't have to study for exams that they'll have great new blocks of time both for ministry and for learning. And they are either stunned, grieved, or angry when I tell them that isn't so.

"But," they protest, "once I graduate I won't be spending every Tuesday night, away from my family and studying all evening for exams or writing papers."

"True," I reply, "but now you'll be spending all evening at a deacon's meeting, or at the hospital, or in a committee meeting, or out visiting—what's the difference?"

The issue is time, and because of the exponential increase in the pace and complexity of life, you will always become more busy, not less; you will always have more to do, not less. Richard A. Swenson documents this in his insightful book, *Margin*, where he observes that if you're typical, life is busier and more complex for you today than it was a year ago. And unless something changes, your life will be busier and more complex a year from now than it is today. Worst of all, this trend will continue every year for the rest of your life. But the driving forces of the complexities of life are not likely to change and slow down. In other words, things are not likely to change on their own so that you get fewer e-mails, fewer phone calls, or fewer responsibilities. You'll get more and more the rest of your life.

For ministers, you also have to factor in that if your church grows, or if you move to a larger church, that means you have more people's needs to meet, more visits to make, more weddings and funerals to conduct, and more meetings to attend than you do now. Sure, you might eventually get to the place where the church realizes the crisis and provides another staff member, but while that helps out in some ways, it increases the responsibilities you have in other areas, as in the number of people you have to supervise. And the additional members that new staff member's work might bring in will also increase the number of folks you are responsible for, and the spiral continues.

Suppose you eventually get to the place where you have enough staff and volunteers to take most of the administrative load from you. By this time your ministry will have been recognized to the point where you will have a growing number of responsibilities placed upon you from outside your local church. You'll be sought out for more associational, state, and denominational service, and I hope you feel some sense of stewardship for that. Your influence will be sought on boards and committees.

On top of this, your family will be growing—in age if not also in size—and you'll have more of their ballgames and events you will want to attend, just as you should. As your days and years accumulate, so do your privileges and responsibilities. But before long, if you are not paying attention, they build into a tidal wave that overwhelms you and dominates you so that it becomes almost inevitable that in one way or another, you will be ruined.

And you wake up one day to realize that you are busier than you've ever been, but no deeper in the things of God than you were years ago. You wake up—or at least I hope you do—to discover that you've become a religious professional, a minister with more style than substance, a minister who knows more about denominational politics than doctrine, who knows more about church growth pragmatism than prayer, and that you have become the kind of minister you once prayed you would never become.

Don't let the ministry keep you from learning.

## **MORE APPLICATION**

While there are many ways to further apply this passage, I will suggest two.

**Beware the barrenness of busyness.** The increasing rise in *the influence of technology* allows us to be ever more efficient. We can talk on the phone as we eat fast food while using the ATM. But not only are we better at multitasking and becoming more productive and efficient, along with that increased pace more is required of us. And so we hurtle through life faster and faster, becoming busier and busier. Notice how you never speak with another minister or with anyone from the church for more than sixty seconds without one of you talking about how busy you are. The result is that in our busyness and productivity **we are becoming increasingly efficient at leading meaningless lives.**

Resist the temptation to believe in microwave spirituality or shortcut Christlikeness. I recently read James Gleick's popular book, *Faster*[3]. The subtitle describes not only the contents of the book, but the contents of our lives. *Faster's* subtitle is: "The acceleration of just about everything." But ministers need to remember that one thing that will always be an exception to acceleration is the rate of growth in godliness. The increasing speed of our machines cannot stimulate a corresponding rate in the growth of our souls. Faster Internet connections do not make us or our people like Jesus more quickly. The growth of a soul-your soul and the souls of your people-takes time.

Fruitfulness, whether in terms of evangelistic fruitfulness or the growth of souls into Christlikeness, comes as the result of paying close attention to your life and doctrine. Listen to it in 1 Timothy 4:16 again: "Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you."

There is a difference between activity and progress. You can drive five hundred miles at two hundred miles per hour on a NASCAR track and get nowhere. In the same way, you can be busy in the ministry and yet barren in the ministry. So beware.

**Take pains with the Pastoral Epistles.** I return to the exhortation we started with, the words of the older preacher to the younger one in 1 Timothy 4:15, "Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them, so that your progress will be evident to all."

Nothing is more common for a seminary professor to hear from alumni than, "They never taught me that in seminary." A seminary prof is well aware of the limitations of a seminary education. Believe me, we would love to have our students stay longer-for a number of reasons. And while three or four years of seminary education sounds like a long time, when you start looking at how much time can be devoted to specific subjects and issues when there are so many to deal with, it really isn't that much. For instance, I think it is very important for ministers to study the Pastoral Epistles. The "seminary" in the Bible is the Pastoral Epistles, those two letters of Paul to Timothy and the one to Titus. And yet in three or four years' time, it would be very unusual for a student to spend more than one or two classes at most on, say, the letter to Titus.

That's why you mustn't let the ministry keep you from learning. A seminary can't give students everything they need for a lifetime of ministry, there isn't time. We professors give our students tools and valuable experiences; we give them a Biblical compass and set them on a ministry course. But thereafter on their own they must pay close attention to themselves and to their doctrine, they must persevere in these things. Or as Paul puts it in verse 15, they must "Take pains with these things; be absorbed in them."

One practical way to be absorbed in them would be to read a chapter of the Pastoral Epistles every day. For the rest of your life, keep cycling through them, one chapter at a

time.

Christian author Os Guinness quotes a Japanese businessman who said, "Whenever I meet a Buddhist leader, I meet a holy man. Whenever I meet a Christian leader, I meet a manager." [4] The ruin of every Christian minister into a mere religious manager or worse is almost inevitable. Don't be a manager, be a minister of Jesus Christ. Be a holy man. And to be a holy man of God you must be absorbed with the holy things of God.

Whenever I see a group of graduates at our commencement exercises each May, clustered together for the final time before leaving the seminary, I feel somewhat as I imagine General Pickett must have felt when he sent his troops from Seminary Ridge up toward Cemetery Ridge in what he knew would be a bloody charge at Gettysburg. I can almost see one taking a bullet to the heart, a second decimated by grapeshot, a third torn in two by a cannonball. And I see nearly all, in one way or another, though they started well and were well-intentioned, being ruined and falling in the field. It's inevitable.

The world, the flesh, and the devil outnumber you, and they have you in their sights. Whether you are fresh out of seminary or a veteran in the ministry, unless you make the kind of spiritual progress that's spoken of in the Pastoral Epistles, you will be hit by enemy fire. Take pains with the things of God. Be absorbed in the Pastoral Epistles. Pay close attention to your life and to your doctrine. Don't let the ministry keep you from Jesus or keep you from learning.

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[1] Facts & Trends, April. 1995.

[2] Quoted in Iain Murray, Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987) page 184.

[3] James Gleick, *Faster* (New York: Pantheon, 1999).

[4] Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker, 1993), p. 49.

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Categoría: **Ministry**