

MINISTRY LESSONS

1. I am learning from the humbling hand of the Lord. When I took the pastorate of Emmanuel Bible Fellowship, a 50-year old church, I was told it would take seven-to-ten years to turn it around. However, I was confident that I would bring about health and growth in far less time. I was wrong...dead wrong. God has humbled me to dust through my ministry at Emmanuel. He has reminded me once again, “Unless the LORD builds the house, they labor in vain who build it” (Ps 127:1a).

Yet even in this humbling, I have experienced God’s grace. One summer afternoon in 2000 while serving as a staff pastor at a church in Corvallis, OR, I sensed the Lord asking me if I was willing to be obscure for Him. The Lord impressed me with the possibility that no one may ever know my name, my ministry may not amount to much from an earthly perspective, and my church may not explode numerically. In His gentle voice (1 Kgs 19:12), God seemed to tell me to prepare for obscurity. He then burdened me to begin praying John the Baptist’s words: “He must increase, but I must decrease” (John 3:30).

I now recognize more than ever that if anything noteworthy happens at Emmanuel Baptist, it is to be attributed to a gracious and sovereign God who works in spite of me. Through God’s work in my life I have become convinced that I am inadequate to perform the work of ministry. Whether preaching, teaching, or performing pastoral care, I must constantly abide in Christ (John 15:4-5). I cannot even do the mundane tasks of ministry (e.g., responding to emails, returning telephone calls, facilitating meetings, etc.) without the enabling power of Christ. Anything that I do in the flesh will result in wood, hay, and stubble when I stand before Him (1 Cor 3:12). Therefore, I am praying before I start my day, enter an appointment, or fulfill a routine task.

2. I am learning not to whine. Before entering the senior pastorate, I was an optimist. Recently, I have noticed a more subtle sin in my life—a tendency to be pessimistic and easily discouraged. Since I have been at my present church, I have struggled with frustration and discontentment. I have exhibited a lack of mental and emotional toughness. When things do not go the way I would like them to go, it is easy to grumble and feel sorry for myself. In fact, there have been numerous occasions when I have wanted to “throw in the towel” and seek “greener pastures.”

Reflecting on this propensity I have come to the inevitable conclusion that this is sin...serious sin! In 1 Cor 10:1-11, God eliminated 23,000 Israelites in one day (10:8) for three sins: idolatry, immorality, and grumbling. This last sin has especially plagued me. Therefore, I am striving to express gratitude before I become a recipient of God’s discipline (Heb 12:5-11). I am currently meditating on Phil 2:14-16 and 1 Thess 5:18 and just finished reading an excellent book on the doctrine of gratitude.¹ Furthermore, whenever I am tempted to complain, I am reminded that the following perspective is true: “When we complain, 90 percent of the people don’t care and don’t want to hear it; the other 10 percent probably feel a secret satisfaction that we are getting what we deserve.”² Therefore, I am choosing joy and gratitude over my fleshly tendency to gripe.³ My prayer is that I would daily recognize the privilege it is to be in pastoral ministry and to serve at Emmanuel Bible Fellowship.

¹ R. T. Kendall, *Just Say Thanks!: Cultivating Gratitude Deepens Intimacy with God* (Lake Mary: Charisma House, 2005).

² PreachingNow Vol. 4, No. 28 (8-16-05).

³ Burke’s reminder that leaders who exhibit genuine, authentic optimism are a priceless commodity to any organization has challenged me. See H. Dale Burke, *Less is More Leadership: 8 Secrets to How to Lead & Still Have a Life* (Eugene: Harvest House, 2004), 223.

3. *I am learning to be faithful in small responsibilities so that I can be trusted with greater responsibilities* (Luke 16:10). As a pastor this means being willing to speak to small congregations. If I am called upon to help another pastor or individual, I seek to do whatever I can to be a blessing. Recently, I accepted a request to volunteer my time to edit a book for a man. I did not have the time, but I wanted to honor God and help others succeed. While God does reward faithful service, *more* in God's economy does not necessarily mean greater numbers of people, more money, or enhanced prestige. It may mean that God entrusts me with a more difficult assignment, or greater suffering.⁴ As He prepares me through service and humility, I trust that I will be ready for whatever my future holds.

4. *I am choosing the long, slow road to leadership development and ministry fruitfulness.* Research indicates that it takes a new pastor at least five years in most established churches to build the kind of credibility that it takes for people to follow.⁵ In fact, a study of pastoral tenure suggests that the most effective years of ministry do not occur until the sixth to tenth years in a given ministry setting. Moving to a new ministry environment every four-to-six years will pretty much guarantee personal as well as ministry failure.⁶

Leith Anderson states, "In a culture that seeks a quick fix to problems and a fast return on investment, building for the long term is often the road less taken. However, most contributions that make great differences and outlast the leader take a lifetime to build. Rarely do churches or other organizations flourish with repeated changes of leadership. Whenever you study an organization that has had lasting impact, you will almost always find that it has also had long-term stable leadership. One of the reasons is that strength and endurance are forged in the fire of failure more often than in the glow of success. Those who flee when problems arise miss out on the greatest opportunities to lead effectively."⁷ These realizations are convicting to me. I desire to be a man of perseverance and discipline because "God develops leaders over a lifetime."⁸

5. *I am learning the importance of integrity.* I believe that successful ministry flows out of being a person of integrity.⁹ Clinton writes, "Integrity is foundation for effective leadership; it must be instilled in the leader's character."¹⁰ Or as many have proclaimed: "Character trumps credentials." This is leadership 101. If I ever think that my gifts, personality, or history with God are so impressive that I can bypass the most important element of leadership, I will find myself in a pile of wreckage, disqualified from my ministry race (1 Cor 9:24-27). Hence, my prayer must be that I will be above reproach (1 Tim 3:2a) so that not even a "hint" (NIV) of accusation can be brought against me (Eph 5:3-4).¹¹

⁴ Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 110.

⁵ Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 52.

⁶ Henry Klopp, *The Leadership Playbook: A Game Plan for Becoming an Effective Christian Leader* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 176.

⁷ Leith Anderson, *Leadership that Works* (Minneapolis, Bethany House, 1999), 204.

⁸ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1988), 25.

⁹ Apparently, more than twenty-five years ago, one of the first Army leadership-training manuals coined the expression: "Be, know, do." Aubrey Malphurs and Will Mancini, *Building Leaders: Blueprints for Developing Leadership at Every Level of Your Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), 147.

¹⁰ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 63.

6. *I am learning to handle stress, crises, and criticism.* In the midst of pastoral ministry, I recognize that there will be challenges. In the past five years, individuals leaving our church have slandered my name within our church and throughout our community. I have been labeled all kinds of things, including “anti-Semitic” and “pro-Palestinian” by a group of Messianic Jews that left our church. It is easy to get bitter and angry. But this only creates a “root of bitterness” that can cause trouble and defile many (Heb 12:15). Gene Wood refers to a sign hung in his office that reads: “People are not against you, they are for themselves.”¹² Knowing this truth has enabled me to further develop a thick skin (Prov 15:5, 10; 19:20).¹³

Now whenever I am personally attacked, I try to step back and realize that I am not at war with another person. Paul explains, “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). This Scripture has helped me to realize that my battles are not interpersonal; they are spiritual. I am able to take a deep breath and ask myself what the Lord is trying to teach me through this rebuke or correction (see 2 Sam 16:5-13). Obviously, these responses are easier said than done; yet this is my aim.¹⁴

But I have learned that the best leadership lessons come from negative circumstances. In the midst of personal suffering and unjust treatment I have learned my most valuable and lasting lessons. I now recognize that those people God wants to use mightily will experience an unusual amount of suffering (1 Pet 1:6-9; 4:12-19). This eternal perspective is enabling me to trust God when seemingly negative circumstances disrupt my life.

7. *I am learning to break my people-pleasing tendency.* Over the course of my ministry, I have pushed myself and set unrealistic expectations for my family and me. For example, I feel obligated to attend birthday parties and anniversary celebrations that we are invited to. Of course, we cannot attend them all and then I feel guilty and fear disappointing others. This can lead to personal guilt and marital tension. But this is a failure on my part to set appropriate boundaries. Gary McIntosh and Samuel Rima attack this issue head on: “Codependents take personal responsibility for the actions and emotions of others, often blaming themselves for others’ inappropriate behavior, and they generally have a high tolerance for bizarre behavior in others. They will go to just about any length to avoid hurting a person’s feelings even if it means they hurt themselves in the process.”¹⁵

¹¹ Kouzes and Posner have articulated what they refer to as the first law of leadership: “If you don’t believe in the messenger, you won’t believe the message.” James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, “Seven Lessons for Leading the Voyage of the Future,” in *Leader of the Future*, eds. Frances Hesselbein, Marshall Goldsmith, and Richard Beckart (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 103.

¹² Gene Wood, *Leading Turnaround Churches* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart, 2001), 53.

¹³ Malphurs correctly points out, “Emerging leaders must understand that there will always be people who oppose their leadership, and some who oppose any leadership. Established leaders don’t need a reminder; they live with these people... If you’re a leader and you aren’t experiencing some opposition to your leadership, you must be a brand-new leader, you aren’t accomplishing anything of spiritual significance, or something is seriously wrong.” Aubrey Malphurs, *Being Leaders: The Nature of Authentic Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 126.

¹⁴ Clinton writes, “Conflict processing is important, not so much for learning problem solving, but for its value in revealing character. What we are in the conflict is much more critical than what we do.” Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 107.

¹⁵ Gary L. McIntosh & Samuel D. Rima, Sr., *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership: The Paradox of Personal Dysfunction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 121-122.

In Gal 1:10, Paul said, “For am I now seeking the favor of men, or of God? Or am I striving to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a bond-servant of Christ.” Paul recognized the impossibility of pleasing others. Bill Cosby’s words ring in my ear, “I don’t know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody.”¹⁶ McIntosh and Rima make the following observation, “Some leaders experience a profound need to be approved by those they lead and to know that they are accepted and appreciated. This is not just the ordinary, normal desire we all possess to be liked by others, but rather a desperate, almost life-sustaining need to gain approval.”¹⁷ It is easy to see how Christian leaders can arrive at this place.

Fortunately, I am breaking out of this unhealthy behavior and am seeking the proper balance between caring for others and caring for my own family and self. Yet, I refuse to please people at God’s expense or at the expense of my own convictions. For that reason, I am growing in my courage and others are learning to accept that they will not always be able to have it their way. This will help ensure my longevity in ministry.

8. I am learning to rebuke or correct. One of the hardest things for me in pastoral ministry is pointing out sin or weakness in another brother or sister’s life. Church discipline is easier for me because it is usually scandalous and cut-and-dry. But the annoyances, quirks, and seemingly slight sins in others, I often want to overlook and not deal with. However, when I choose the path of least resistance things usually get worse. Therefore, I am learning to speak the truth in love (Prov 28:23; Eph 4:15). The words of Oscar Wilde apply here: “A friend always stabs you in the front.”¹⁸ With this in mind, I seek to address concerns I have with others in a timely and sensitive manner treating others, as I would want to be treated.

9. I am learning restraint. One of the most difficult tasks of leadership is the art of “picking and choosing battles.” There are times when I want to pour out righteous wrath on another person, yet I quickly realize that God may be calling me to deal with someone else or something else or to overlook an offense (Prov 19:11). Knowing what to do and when to do it in ministry requires spiritual maturity and wisdom. Two perspectives have helped me grow in wisdom in this area. Anderson observes, “Leaders have only so many fights in them. They can’t fight every battle. They can’t right every wrong. They can’t carry every offense. The realities of life and health require that leaders simply ‘let go’ of a lot of situations. Just forgive and forget. Move on.”¹⁹ Or as Henry Ward Beecher said, “Hold yourself responsible for a higher standard than anybody else expects of you. Never excuse yourself. Never pity yourself. Be a hard master to yourself—and be lenient to everybody else.”²⁰ My hope is that I will be able to balance this tension.

10. I am learning from my failures. When I make ministry mistakes, I am trying to bounce back quickly and evaluate what I did wrong. Winston Churchill said, “Success is going from failure to failure without losing enthusiasm.”

¹⁶ ESD Morning News, Wednesday, August 17, 2005

¹⁷ McIntosh & Rima, *Overcoming the Dark Side of Leadership*, 51.

¹⁸ “The Difference Between True and False Friendships”: Reflections from Introduction to the Devout Life, St Francis de Sales: <http://www.livingstones-online.org/Talks/Friendship1.html>.

¹⁹ Anderson, *Leadership that Works*, 158.

²⁰ PreachingNow Vol. 4, No. 14 (4-12-05).

11. *I am learning to give ministry away* (Exod 18:21-22; Eph 4:12). Instead of doing the ministry myself, I am fulfilling my responsibility to equip the body. Burke writes, “Your team is much more likely to be excited about ‘doing the work’ if you let them ‘dream the dream’”²¹

12. *I am learning to develop the core, not the crowd.* Jesus committed His life to the Twelve because He knew that they, not the crowd, could make an eternal difference. Likewise, I must invest well in those that will have ministry fruitfulness that will far outlive my own (2 Tim 2:2). This means investing in children and teenagers. They are the emerging church that will transform the culture in the 21st century.

13. *I am learning to choose leaders wisely.* Before Jesus selected His twelve disciples He spent an entire night in prayer (Luke 6:12-13). Effective leaders recognize leadership selection and development as a priority function.²² In the past I have been quick to verbally affirm people and prematurely grant ministry positions. Now I am becoming more selective and patient in my encouragement. I am also seeking to become more cautious before I allow someone to enter into leadership (1 Tim 5:22). I acknowledge I still have a long ways to go. I still continue to choose leaders without fasting and prayer but at least now, both disciplines are on my radar screen.

14. *I am learning to serve and honor those under my direct care above myself.* Jesus told His disciples, “...but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave” (Matt 20:26-27). David Bennett notes, “Jesus did not call the disciples to be servants in a general sense. No, he exhorts them specifically to be servants of one another.”²³ As I model servant-hood with my pastoral staff, support staff, and elders and deacons, I grow myself as a disciple and I exemplify Jesus’ design for leadership. Therefore, I am attempting to regard others as “more important” than myself (Phil 2:3). Jim Collins states that effective leaders always look out the window when things go well (acknowledging someone else’s authority and good decision making) but look in the mirror when things go badly (taking responsibility for the situation).²⁴ Thus, whenever there is a success I look to affirm others that have served either publicly or behind-the-scenes. By increasing my level of appreciation for our volunteers, I am seeing greater passion and ownership in the ministries of our church. Presently, I am seeking to publicly affirm leaders, write thank you cards, remember special dates, take leaders out for meals or have them into our home, and be affectionate with them.²⁵ It is significant that even well paid, educated professionals will perform better when they believe their leader cares about them.

15. *I am learning to manage my time* (Eph 5:15-17). If I do not manage my time well, others will manage it for me. And often they will not have the focus and perspective God wants for my life. In order to accomplish all that God has in store for me, I will have to be a wise steward of my life and ministry. This entails remembering that I am ultimately responsible to God (1 Cor 4:1-5).

²¹ Burke, *Less is More Leadership*, 127.

²² Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 22.

²³ David W. Bennett, *Metaphors of Ministry: Biblical Images for Leaders and Followers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), 28.

²⁴ Jim Collins, *Good to Great* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2001), 35.

²⁵ When Kouzes and Posner studied the leadership traits of top CEO’s they found only one characteristic that was common to all of them: affection. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *Encouraging the Heart: A Leader’s Guide to Rewarding and Recognizing Others* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), 9.

16. *I am learning from others.* I find the following statement from the Blackaby's significant: "If there is any quality common to all effective spiritual leaders, it is a teachable spirit."²⁶ While this is a natural God-given strength of my leadership style, nevertheless, I must cultivate the discipline of soliciting input from a multitude of counselors (Prov 15:22). The most challenging aspect of this for me is involving members of our congregation in decisions. However, I am intentionally seeking to grow in this. Thus far, I have been writing a weekly congregational email, soliciting input and feedback from key leaders, and hosting congregational meetings so our leadership can update the body and answer questions.

17. *I am exercising self-control in my influence.* God has given me an ability to positively influence people for the common good.²⁷ Unfortunately, I often use my power of persuasion to influence others toward goals that may not be in keeping with God's purposes.²⁸ Now that I have become aware of this tendency, I am guarding myself against moving ahead in major decisions before receiving a certain word of guidance.²⁹ For as Henry Klopp points out, "A study of the Old and New Testament would show the majority of people were wrong far more times than they were right."³⁰ No doubt, this is true of my leadership when I make hasty decisions without waiting on the Lord (Ps 25:5; 130:5; Lam 3:25). As I learn more what it means to fast, pray, listen to God and wise counsel, I will make decisions in keeping with God's purposes.

18. *I am learning to build trust.* Leadership requires credibility, and credibility comes from integrity and trust. Without these elements, all the education, experience, gifting, and charisma add up to nothing. Fortunately, Scripture identifies a number of general character qualities that specifically build trust. The following are a few examples: Keep your word and any promises you make (Num 30:1-2; Prov 20:25); tell the truth (Prov 24:26; Eph 4:15, 25); be authentic (Matt 6:1-18); keep confidence (Prov 11:13; 25:9-10); be faithful and available to help people in their time of need (Prov 27:10); and accept responsibility for failure (Prov 28:13).³¹ My goal is to model excellence in each of these areas so that I can be a man of character who can be trusted. Seeking leadership is not the goal. Rather, seeking to be a man who is trustworthy is the ultimate aim. If I achieve this, leadership influence will follow.

19. *I understand the importance of the right ministry staff.* Peter Drucker has well said, "People determine the performance capacity of an organization. No organization can do better than the people it has."³² Collins also notes, "The executives who ignited transformations from good to great did not first figure out where to drive the bus and then get people to take it there. No, they *first* got the right people on the bus (and the wrong people off the bus) and *then* figured out where to drive it."³³

²⁶ Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 234.

²⁷ Clinton remarks, "Because the very nature of leadership is influence, God endows leaders with the capacity to influence." Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 52.

²⁸ The Blackaby's define leadership this way: "Spiritual leadership is moving people on to God's agenda." Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 20. Clinton states, "The central task of leadership is influencing God's people toward God's purposes." (Author's emphasis. Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 52.

²⁹ Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 146.

³⁰ Klopp, *The Leadership Playbook*, 43.

³¹ Malphurs, *Being Leaders*, 57.

³² Peter F. Drucker, *Managing the Non-Profit Organization* (New York: Harper-Collins, 1990), 145.

³³ Collins, *Good to Great*, 41.

20. *I am learning the importance of team building relationships.* Klopp writes, “Once you have recruited the right people, they have to learn to work tighter. Too many leaders assume this happens automatically. It doesn’t, particularly in our culture.”³⁴ Thus, I am creating an environment of grace that upholds and empowers our staff. I encourage risk-taking while promoting the security of grace in the midst of failure. I love my staff unconditionally. I show them that favor and love do not have to be earned.

21. *I recognize the need to be a life-long learner.*³⁵ Thus, I am willing to pay the price. While I am not the most gifted or intelligent, I will seek to learn to the best of my ability how to serve the Lord most effectively in those areas He has called me to.³⁶ As Oswald Sanders observed, “If he is not willing to raise earlier and stay up later than others, to work harder and study more diligently than his contemporaries, he will not greatly impress his generation.”³⁷ This drive also entails pursuing excellence. Tony Gwynn was the first baseball player since Stan Musial to win three consecutive batting titles. And Tony once said, “I really don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied. Once you think you’re where you want to be, you’re not there anymore.”³⁸ One example of striving for excellence in my life is a discipline to read, read, and read some more. Howard Hendricks once said, “Readers are leaders; leaders are readers.”³⁹ This has become one of my primary goals in life.

³⁴ Klopp, *The Leadership Playbook*, 134.

³⁵ Clinton warns, “Leaders have a tendency to cease developing once they have some skills and ministry experience.” Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*, 114.

³⁶ The Blackaby’s insist, “Leadership development is synonymous with personal development. As leaders grow personal, they increase their capacity to lead. As they increase their capacity to lead, they enlarge the capacity of their organization to grow. Therefore, the best thing leaders can do for their organization is to grow personally.” Henry & Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership*, 31.

³⁷ Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago: Moody, 1967; reprint ed., 1994), 180.

³⁸ Burke, *Less is More Leadership*, 80-81.

³⁹ This quote came from Dr. Howard Hendricks during a “Creativity in Ministry” class lecture given at Multnomah Bible College in June of 1994.