

7 Ways to Avoid a Public Scandal in Your Life

Every week it seems there is another scandal breaking out with a high-profile person, whether in politics, sports, media or the church. A person could have done much good their whole life but with one act of passion destroy everything they have built.

Proverbs 22:1 teaches us that a good name is worth more than riches. One of the things I have found out through the years is that a person's name and reputation are their greatest capital in regard to opening doors and having influence in the world; this is a quality people look for even more than gifts, talents or leading a successful enterprise or ministry. This is because people know success built upon gifts and talents and not on the foundation of character and integrity will not last in the long run. All of us are tempted to fall and have the capacity to fail because of our sin nature.

My friend Steve Strang just wrote an article regarding a conversation with a young up-and-coming pastor, in which he told him the greatest temptations most leaders face can be summarized as money, power and sex, or the old adage "gold, glory and girls." (See the Strang Report's "How Does a Pastor Finish Well?")

The following are essentials to stay scandal-free.

1. Continually give God space to captivate your heart. By far the most important essential is to cultivate an intimate walk with the Lord. Many leaders I know are so busy in work and ministry they have very little time to pray and meditate on the Word of God. This is a train wreck waiting to happen! God promises success to the person who takes time to meditate on His Word day and night (Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1). The greatest

commandment is to love the Lord with all our heart, mind and soul (Matt. 22:37-40). When this is our first priority, then our love for God will be so strong we will not be as prone to desire to sin against Him. Jesus made it as clear as tar on snow when He told His disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, "Watch and pray, lest you enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak (Matt. 26:41).

Likewise, the driving force in the apostle Paul's life was to know Christ and count everything else as dung in comparison to Him (Phil. 3). Paul was not motivated by ministry success; it was the love of Christ that compelled him (2 Cor. 5:14). When we think of Paul, we don't picture a ministry celebrity or diva; we picture a man after God's heart who walked in brokenness and humility (Acts 20:19). Because of this attitude, it is no accident Paul was able to successfully finish the work the Lord gave him on the earth (2 Tim. 4:7-8).

2. Be self-aware and honest regarding your main temptations. The first step in avoiding temptation is to know what "rings your bell"! Every one of us has particular weaknesses that, if not kept in check, can cause our hearts to turn from God and fall into sin. What tempts one person may not be a temptation for another person. Thus, we need to be self-aware and not live in denial of our weaknesses.

If we have a big ego, then we need to be careful when people flatter or praise us. If we have a problem with lust, then we need to take steps not to be alone when we travel but bring our spouse or a mature friend. If we have a temptation with loving money, then we need to have checks and balances in financial systems. (Really, most of us have issues with the big three temptations just mentioned and need to take corrective steps.)

We have to be real with ourselves and not religious! Religious people hide behind titles, slogans, rituals and even the anointing. They live superficial lives, never admitting their

humanity and never getting beneath the surface of a self-righteous veneer. The more real we get with God, the more real we will get with ourselves.

It wasn't until the prophet Isaiah got a glimpse of his own sin that God was able to send him to minister (Is. 6). Knowing our strengths is not enough to be scandal-free; we need to fully admit our temptations to sin and do what it takes to avoid being in those vulnerable situations.

3. Cultivate a healthy relationship with your spouse. Many busy people are not intimate with their spouse, which makes them open to crave emotional and physical intimacy with someone else. Carving out adequate time to develop and keep emotional and physical intimacy with your spouse is so important, it cannot be overstated in regard to staying scandal-free.

Many ministers have sacrificed their marriages and children on the altar of ministry, even though our families are our first and most important ministry. Some ministers I know travel so much they are separated from their spouses half the year with no plan in place to carve out time to make up for it.

Busy married people should attempt to have at least one night out per week with their spouse and take a few days every three months for time away, as well as at least two weeks away per year with their children if their kids are still young. Quality family time is so important that even much prayer can't make up for a lack of physical and emotional intimacy.

4. Have your identity rooted in Jesus and not in accomplishments. The first temptation Satan threw at Jesus in the wilderness was to prove He was the Son of God by turning a stone into bread (Matt. 4). Proving who we are by what we accomplish is one of the most common and insidious temptations believers fall for today! Our identity has to be first and foremost in Jesus Christ, with whom we are hidden in God (Col.

3:3). We were created by Jesus and for Jesus (Col. 1:16)!

When our primary identity comes from what we accomplish, then we will fall into the trap of performing in order to please God and others to feel good about ourselves. This is a trap, because when we are performance-based, we will start comparing ourselves with other people's accomplishments and be in competition with others since we believe God loves and accepts us based on accomplishment. But there will always be another person who accomplishes more than you, which can result in you dealing with jealousy, anger, envy and internal rage.

Many pastors have presumptuously begun a huge building project to satisfy their ego or their need to accomplish more than the other pastors in their region. (Many have even said "the Lord told me to do it"!) The result is putting their churches in huge debt and creating unnecessary pressure upon church leadership and their families.

Yes, I believe God created us to have dominion in the created order (Gen. 1:28), which has to do with accomplishment and commission. But God told Adam this in the context of having unbroken fellowship with Him in the Garden of Eden. Thus, God can only trust us with accomplishment if we are rooted and grounded in Him as our life. When we receive our primary affirmation from God as His child even before we minister or perform (like Jesus received from His Father before He ever preached or performed one miracle; read Luke 3:23), then that affirmation will protect us from the sin of presumption and being driven to succeed instead of being led by the Lord.

5. Have key mentors and friends that keep you down to earth. There are "men worshippers" in the church world as much as there are in the secular world. There are celebrity pastors, evangelists and rock stars in the church as much as there are in the world. We have our American idols on Sunday as much as we have them on television. We have created a weird church culture in which people now attend Sunday church to

hear great-anointed rhetoric and oratory (in some cases a performance) and hear incredible musicians and singers instead of coming to meet Jesus. If you ask someone what they thought of the service, most answers will center on the quality of the sermon or the worship.

Furthermore, many churches are known more by the name of the pastor than the name of the church (for example, "I go to Joel Osteen's church" instead of "I attend Lakewood Church"). We have created a personality-driven church culture based on entertainment and performance more than on meeting Jesus.

In this kind of culture, it is very easy for a pastor to live and die based on the accolades he or she receives from week to week based on the Sunday "experience" of church attendees. It is also very easy for a pastor or leader to believe the hype and think more of themselves than they ought to think. All public leaders need staff, overseers, close friends and/or a spouse who will be honest with them regarding their foibles and keep them down to earth. If they see the public leader behaving like a rock star or a celebrity diva, they need to push back at the leader and not "drink the Kool-Aid."

6. Have systems in place that make it impossible to commit financial fraud. There are leaders of business and ministry that have total control, access and power over the finances of their enterprises with little or no accountability. Once I heard a minister say "I am the board"! I believe in having strong apostolic executive leaders in the church, but when it comes to finances there needs to be a process in place that ensures all expenditures are based on a pre-approved budget and/or procedures in place that make it necessary for a leader to obtain permission from a financial board when they want to spend a certain amount of money not already allotted in the budget.

Furthermore, a qualified CPA should officially audit the books at least once per year and, if it is a church, there should be

at least one annual financial report given to the congregation to show transparency.

7. Avoid the usual fleshly traps of the enemy based on your past history. I believe there are demonic entities assigned to each person that study their history for the purpose of knowing their weaknesses. Most likely the greatest satanic or fleshly temptation you will face in the future is something God has already warned you about based on past failure. Hebrews 12:1 teaches us to throw off the sin that so easily besets us. There is “the sin” that is the biggest stumbling block in our lives. This is something our spouse, overseers and mentors should know. This is the thing these key people in your life should continually ask you about. Many a leader has lived a double life that shocks a spouse when scandal breaks out. It can be based on insecurity, jealousy, pride, lust, ambition, presumption or self-righteousness, to name a few.

Most importantly, each of us must be honest with ourselves about this “one thing” that can easily become the “main thing” in our lives if we do not take preventive measures to guard against it. Whether it is going back to the first point and cultivating a consistent devotional life that allows our hearts to be captivated by God, or having strong accountability and humility in our lives (1 John 1:7), we need to always be mindful of this one thing (the sin) and crucify it under the power of the blood of the cross (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20).

As we allow the life of the Spirit to operate both in our own body (Rom. 8:13) and through those assigned to us in the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16), we will go a long way in regard to taking the steps necessary to avoid scandal in our lives.