

4 Vital Takeaways From the James MacDonald Scandal

When does a saint become a swindler? James MacDonald, founding and senior pastor of Harvest Bible Chapel, was fired on Tuesday “for engaging in conduct that the Elders believe is contrary and harmful to the best interests of the church” – and for racking up \$42 million of church debt. Amazingly, many of the church elders overseeing the 12,000-member church with 9 campuses, say they were unaware of the church’s debt.

The debacle reached its pinnacle when radio host Eric “Mancow” Muller, a former Harvest Bible Chapel member, aired recordings that he says capture MacDonald making lewd, derogatory comments. MacDonald’s fall from grace is likely to have an impact that eclipses his preaching, radio and writing ministry that reached thousands every day. Whether we are a homemaker, CEO or average Joe, the lessons from MacDonald’s demise are legion, but here are a few that any sober saint can glean:

1. Don’t just lie on your bed; crawl under it. The scandal makes me want to do what Billy Graham allegedly did after hearing of Jimmy Swaggart’s infamous improprieties with a prostitute in the ’80s: crawl under a bed for several days, in complete seclusion, reflection and prayer. Anyone can get off to a good start, but any saint can become a swindler if deep thinking and reflection are foreign to us. Each of us should take regular time, at least monthly, to thoroughly examine whether or not we are running the right race or have taken a turn that could lead us –and others–down a dark alley with unimaginable consequences.

But we must do more than think deeply and examine ourselves. We must make adjustments in the minutia to prevent what could become a large-scale catastrophe. Big sins don’t develop overnight. They are an accumulation of small sins that can

eventually create a tsunami of wickedness. If you don't take time to deal with small sins, when will you have time to tackle a tidal wave?

2. Don't confuse spiritual gifting for character: Spiritual gifts are up to God to give, but our character is up to us. MacDonald was a charismatic leader and communicatory, but there were cracks in his character that widened as time passed. Developing our spiritual gifts is one of the most naturally supernatural things we can do. But it takes dogged determination to develop godly character in a culture where power, prestige and politics (especially in Christian organizations) abound.

Just because someone has obvious spiritual gifting that impacts people does not mean he or she is immune from developing a character flaw that could derail people far more if left unchecked. Make sure you actively recruit people to help you address any character flaws before they become monstrous, possibly causing people to run away from Christ rather than toward Him.

3. Don't fly solo when handling someone else's money. How MacDonald was able to accumulate \$42 million in debt without many of his elders knowing is incomprehensible. It seems that MacDonald isn't the only leader in his church guilty of sin. Families, businesses, trusts and churches, should have systems of financial accountability that make it absolutely impossible for one person to single-handedly incur much debt. And debt isn't the only temptation. Every leader needs to be aware of the temptation to use other people's money (God's money) in ways that detract from God's glory rather than amplifying it. If you're in any kind of position where it is possible to handle all the money by yourself, it's a wise thing to recuse yourself from doing so without expert input and accountability from others. Insist on it. Don't trust yourself.

It's fair to presume that 30 years ago, when James MacDonald

started Harvest Bible Chapel, he never dreamt of getting the church into \$42 million of debt. But that's exactly what he did because he trusted himself, distrusted others and handled the finances himself. If you do the same, the same could happen to you. Even if on a smaller scale, the sin is still serious.

4. Remember that your reputation is inseparable from Christ's.

You don't have to be a pastor to cause people to run toward or away from Jesus. The truth is that each of us is either maximizing or minimizing our influence for Christ every day. If you are a Christ-follower, you are a temple of the Holy Spirit. It's simply a matter of whether people see dirt or deity when they interact with. Be careful you don't belittle your influence, thinking your place in business or ministry is too insignificant to matter.

In the end—and all along the way—your attitude and conduct matter to God and to everyone who observes you in action. Look for ways to positively impact people in the small arenas of life, and if God ever gives you a more public arena, you'll already be prepared to handle that platform well, too.

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