

How Should We Respond to the Ravi Zacharias Scandal?

In the aftermath of the shocking and tragic news about Ravi Zacharias's private life, one of our ministry school grads, herself a longtime missionary with her husband, wrote to me, asking, "Would you consider writing something in regards to the Ravi scandal? I know this is sending believers into a whirlwind of confusion."

She continued, "I guess what people are saying is how could a man who sounds so spiritual, lead so many to Jesus, be so deeply involved in willful sinning? When things like this happen to someone with such influence, it sends people into a whirlwind of doubt."

How, then, should we respond after it was discovered that the late Zacharias was guilty of multiple instances of sexual misconduct and abuse? Over the weekend, it was revealed that HarperCollins, his long-time publisher, will no longer offer his resources following the results of RZIM's investigation.

Many others are asking the same questions as the missionary who wrote me.

1. Anyone can lead a double life. For many years, I have told ministry leaders and ministry school students that it is all too easy to learn to lead a double life. And, on a certain level, all of us learn how to compartmentalize.

Let's say that you're an elementary school teacher dealing with a difficult financial situation that has you on the verge of bankruptcy. This has your attention during every waking moment of your life, except when you're teaching the children. Then, you put on your smiling face, teach your lessons and act as if you didn't have a care in the world.

Even parents learn to do it in the home, not wanting their children to see fear or anger or some other, negative emotion. We all learn to play-act on some level or another.

Sadly, it's the exact same thing with ministers of the gospel. We learn to play-act too, even in ways that are noble at first.

You're pastoring a church, and right before your Sunday sermon, you get terrible news about an old friend who committed suicide. But the cameras are on, and you're about to start your live feed. Your people need some encouragement, so you ask God for help, and you preach with passion. Then, afterward, you break down and cry.

Or you're flying overseas for a major series of meetings, and your flights are delayed, meaning that you get off the plane and have to go straight to the first service. You are jet lagged; your body has no idea what time it is, and your brain is fogged. Yet you ask God for grace, and to your amazement, the message hits home.

There was no time to pray, no time to prepare your thoughts, no time even to rest and recover. Yet the Spirit worked through you. Soon enough, this becomes a habit. No prayer. No preparation. Just ministry. You have become a professional—and I mean that in the worst sense of the word. It can happen to anyone.

It's the same with entertaining secret sin in our lives. It may take years, even decades, before that sin catches up to us in a public, outward way. But all the while it is destroying us on the inside. All the while, we are becoming performers, having compartmentalized our lives. There is the public, ministry self and there is the private, hidden self.

The longer this goes on, the harder our hearts become. We become more hypocritical, more polished, more deviant. We not only compartmentalize our sin, but we rationalize it. We might

even justify it. "I'm a man of God who sacrifices much for the ministry. Surely, I'm allowed some perks along the way!"

In New Testament times, Jesus had severe rebukes for many of the Pharisees. But from what we understand from other, contemporary sources, these men were highly respected religious leaders. Yet to some of them Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You cleanse the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of extortion and greed. You blind Pharisee, first cleanse the inside of the cup and dish, that the outside of them may also be clean.

"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are full of dead men's bones and of all uncleanness" (Matt. 23:25-27).

To repeat: this can happen to any of us. That's why all of us should stop for a moment and ask ourselves, "Am I leading a double life?"

The problem is that, for a Christian leader in particular, it is very hard to come clean and ask for help. Even if you are a loving husband who is a blue-collar worker and not a pastor or preacher, would you find it easy to tell your wife you were struggling with porn? Or you were getting pulled into an emotional relationship with a female co-worker?

How much harder is it for a Christian leader to come clean and ask for help? Yet that is what each of us need to do should we find ourselves struggling. Accountability, as painful as it is in the short term, is a God-send in the long term. (We'll return to the subject of accountability later in this article.)

The tragedy is that if we do not stop and get help, we can lead two very distinct lives, to the point of completely deceiving ourselves. This alone should jar us into reality in

the here and now.

2. God's gifts and calling are irrevocable. When Paul wrote these words in Romans 11:29, he was speaking specifically of the nation of Israel. But we can see elsewhere in Scripture that the same principle can apply to individuals.

Sometimes, while reading Judges 16, I have been shaken to the core. There we are told that Samson, whom God gifted with supernatural strength and who had been raised up to deliver Israel from her enemies, slept with a Philistine prostitute. This was an especially heinous act, not only because it was a sexual sin but because it was a sexual sin with Israel's arch enemy.

The text states that when the Philistines came to attack Samson in the middle of the night, "he got up. He grabbed the doors of the city gate and the two gateposts and pulled them out along with the bar. He put them on his shoulder and brought them to the top of the mountain near Hebron" (Judg. 16:3b).

Can you imagine that? He just had sex with a Philistine prostitute. He is guilty, and he is unclean. Yet he still has his supernatural strength. The gift still operates. How sobering, and how terrifying.

Just because someone is anointed doesn't mean they are right with God. Just because someone is gifted by the Spirit doesn't mean they are living holy lives.

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