

Stepping Into Ministry? Be Aware of the Risks

This week I did a video call with a gifted young man named Billy who serves on the staff of a growing church in South Africa. He has a big heart of compassion for people. He knows how to make disciples. And he's a great communicator. I told him I would love it if he were my pastor—even though he's only 32.

But as I encouraged him—and many young leaders like him—I'm aware that ministry is not an easy assignment. Like everything else in life, it's full of risks. And I want to make sure anyone out there who is praying about stepping into ministry knows what they will face.

When you answer God's call, you put your life on the line. Just ask the apostle Paul, who told the Galatians, "From now on let no one trouble me, for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). The Greek word for "marks" is *stigma*, and it refers to the marks that were burned into the flesh of a slave to show who owned him. Paul was saying, "I have the scars to prove I serve Jesus."

Ministry has a long list of occupational hazards, and I do an injustice to any young leader today if I don't warn him or her of what might happen on the job. I'm not sharing this to scare anybody. But if the Occupational Safety and Health Administration can require businesses to display a poster to encourage workplace safety, we should at least read this list of ministerial hazards when leaders are ordained.

To all my young friends who are considering a ministry career, I offer these warnings:

1. **The devil will attack you and your loved ones.** I don't focus on the devil or his demons, but it is foolish to

be ignorant of hell's schemes. Satan hates ministers. You are in a war, and your enemy plays dirty. You must learn to fight both defensively and offensively if you expect to win.

2. Religious people will hate you. Jesus and Paul both proved that persecution comes not just from worldly unbelievers but from self-righteous saints who think they are doing God a favor by discrediting you. Religious people hate change. Many pastors I know have been chewed up and spit out by mean-spirited people who love their sacred cows more than they love Jesus. God's leaders must have the guts to challenge lifeless, status quo tradition.

3. You will face discouragement often. Preaching is a unique effort that requires you to lean wholly on God for a word from heaven. No wonder it is emotionally draining! Charles Spurgeon told his students that he often got depressed after intense ministry.

He wrote, "How often, on Lord's-day evenings, do we feel as if life were completely washed out of us! After pouring out our souls over our congregations, we feel like empty earthen pitchers which a child might break." Don't be shocked when heavy feelings come.

4. Your pride will be wounded. You may think your sermon was awesome, but some people will yawn, some will sleep and others will remind you of the points you missed. Don't let the criticism make you bitter; allow it to nail your flesh to the cross so you can remember that ministry is not about you anyway.

5. Your heart will be broken. You may invest your time and energy into people who eventually walk away without even thanking you. Sometimes a close disciple may prove to be a Judas. Don't let disappointment cause you to close your heart to people. Keep on loving and giving, despite

the heartache.

6. **Your knees will become calloused.** Any good leader knows that prayer is the fuel that keeps them going. As long as hands are raised to heaven and hearts are bowed low, heaven's oil will not run out. Never let the flame of prayer go out in your personal life.
7. **Your priorities will be turned upside down.** For me, God's call included traveling—which meant spending lots of time away from home. I would personally rather sleep in my own bed than in a strange bed in Nigeria or India, but when you pray, "Here I am, Lord, send me," you do not have the luxury of running your own schedule. Your life is not your own.
8. **Your dreams and ambitions will be misunderstood.** Joseph was thrown in a pit after he shared his dream. David's brothers questioned his motives when he came to the battle to challenge Goliath. Anyone who attempts great things for God will be maligned. If you are worried about your reputation, or you want everyone to say nice things about you, don't pursue a ministry career.
9. **Your faith will be stretched to the breaking point.** God gave Moses a stick and told him to split the Red Sea. He told Gideon to win a battle with 300 ill-equipped soldiers. Leaders who are following the Spirit will be constantly challenged to look beyond natural circumstances and believe in God's supernatural ability. This is never comfortable. Jesus calls us out of the boat and onto the water. Get used to it.
10. **Your character will be tested in the heat of God's furnace.** The work of the refiner is never finished. You are engaged in a heavenly process, and you go from one level of glory to the next. The Spirit will regularly turn up the heat to test your motives, adjust your attitude and chisel your character until you look like

Christ.

Don't run from the flames of testing, even when delays make it seem like you will be stuck in the furnace of preparation forever. The best leaders have learned to live in the fire so they can be examples to the flock. {eo}