

# Your Pastor Is Only Human! Here's What He Wants You to Know

Being a pastor is a fulfilling privilege—but it can be demanding, too. Here's what every pastor wishes his sheep knew about their shepherd.

"I just want to go to a place where nobody knows us!" my wife, Kelly, lamented. As I looked into her tender eyes, I identified with her frustration. A myriad of interruptions had sidetracked us from the date we had planned.

First we had to extinguish a rumor that our marriage was in trouble. Then we discovered that the new Igloo cooler we had loaned to a friend from church the week before would not be coming back. Next we had to explain to our two boys why they had gotten in trouble for playing on the church platform when other children hadn't.

And just when we were about to leave on our night out, the phone rang. Expecting a family member, I picked it up—only to find a talkative saint instead. Not just any saint, but a needy one who could not be put off.

After all these distractions I found myself struggling to get back into a romantic mood. Though I was eager to spend time with my wife, I felt drained by the demands of ministry. For the most part, life as a pastor is very rewarding. But there are some things we pastors wish our sheep knew about their shepherds.

Living life in a "fishbowl" puts tremendous pressure on a pastor and his family. Pastors and their families live under a massive cloud of intrusiveness. They feel as if they are constantly being watched, evaluated and scrutinized. Though

integrity may guard their footsteps, it cannot protect their emotions from the pressure of constant surveillance.

Some church folk seem to have an endless curiosity about the pastor and his family. Known as Christian paparazzi, these people doggedly pursue sensational stories about them.

“Do you know that the pastor lets his children watch Power Rangers on TV?”

“Do you know that his wife bought a two-piece swimsuit from Victoria’s Secret?”

“I hadn’t heard that, but I did overhear their 6-year-old talking about the horrible argument her parents had!”

This lack of privacy is oppressive. It makes ministry heavy, and if imposed long enough, can lead to burnout.

Small-town pastors have absolutely no anonymity. Pastors who live in a church parsonage suffer even more because their home is not theirs, but public domain.

Most Christians can empathize with celebrities or those who hold public office. They criticize the paparazzi for meddling in the private lives of public people. But they do not understand that their pastors often experience the same pressure.

As a pastor, I can handle it. I signed up for this job. On the other hand, my family didn’t, and they do not always know how to handle the pressure of life in a fishbowl.

As one goldfish said: “Living in the fishbowl is fine. It’s all those cats watching that make me nervous!”

Pastors have to say no to some of the activity in their lives. Saying “no” does not mean we don’t care. It simply means we care about our families and our health also. Pastors love their families and need to spend time with them.

My wife is the joy of my life, and my boys are the apple of my eye. When I have time away from work I can think of no place I would rather be than with them. My greatest joy and fulfillment is being refreshed by their presence and being able to add value to their lives.

Most sheep do not understand the incredible demands or expectations that are upon ministers to perform, provide and produce. We normally speak at least two times a week, and we want our messages to be inspiring and life-giving. But it takes quality time alone with God and periods of study to make them that way.

In addition, we are expected to counsel; lead a corporation; heal family relationships; build marriages; attend prayer meetings, fellowship groups, graduations, parties and baby dedications; raise money; build buildings; be involved in community events; oversee ministries; do hospital visitation; provide a 24-hour hot line service at home; and be model spouses and parents.

These are just a sample of the "expectations" placed on ministers! And all of them are important, all of them require time, and all of them take the minister away from his or her family.

Recently I was invited to address the graduating class of a school in another nation. The date of the event conflicted with my son's sixth-grade graduation. I told my son, "You know how much I love the nations, preaching and encouraging others, and you know how much I love you. I want you to know I am willing to skip this trip to be at your graduation. Would you like that?"

With tears filling his eyes he said, "I'd like that, Dad." In this case, it was easy to decide what to say no to!

It hurts pastors to see their children suffer at the hands of the sheep. In addition to feeling as if they are constantly

being watched, pastors' kids (PKs) suffer from the pressure of the expectations that are placed on them by members of the pastors' congregations. This is one reason they often go bad. It's an easy way to avoid having to fulfill the expectations—or having to face the failure of falling short.

Part of the frustration of PKs is that they are constantly confronted by people who think they know them because they know who their parents are. "Are you going to preach like your daddy or teach like your mama?" the people ask. The kids are treated like property of the local church that is boxed, tagged and filed away in a closet!

The end result is that no one takes time to get to know them. They are not seen as individuals having worth on their own but as extensions of their parents. This creates a tremendous identity crisis as well as much confusion and loneliness.

PKs also suffer when people try to use them to get to the pastors. Some sheep will slide a piece of candy into a PK's hand and then begin to ask probing questions, seeking information about their idol—or their target—like a stalker.

Children and teens do not have the social skills to deal with this kind of pressure from adults. They should not be put into the position of being either a spokesperson for, or a defender of, their parents.

It is hard for PKs to be themselves. Because they are children of pastors, they are expected to behave properly, be spiritual and correctly answer all the Bible questions that are asked of them. Yet when they excel in these areas, people attribute their success to their parents!

"You got all that from your parents," they say, or, "You're the pastor's kid." Rather than recognizing that the children worked hard to do well, sheep, with such comments, strip away the personal identity that PKs have tried to develop.

The end result is that PKs begin to feel like actors on a stage. They aren't real people, just characters trying to please a demanding audience. And inside, they begin to rebel against the hypocrisy and religiosity of those around them.

It hurts pastors to see their children lose their sense of identity and begin to "perform." It hurts to watch them, when they finally tire of this game, turn away from all their parents hold dear—because they believe the church is responsible for their unhappiness.

Like most kids, PKs don't want to be actors. They don't want to hide behind masks that are not them. They want to be "real." You can help them—and your pastor—by loving and accepting them as they are and encouraging them to become all God intends for them to be.

Unrealistic expectations on the pastor's spouse hinder the church from advancing. Contrary to popular belief, not every pastor's spouse is called to co-pastor, play piano, sing in the choir, teach Sunday school, counsel and organize church dinners. Some spouses have their own careers that they enjoy. Others are content to be at home with the kids. Still others enjoy being actively involved in ministry.

But we must realize that each person has his own unique spiritual gift, and to force our expectations of what a pastor's spouse—male or female—should do or be upon him is wrong. Confusion results when spouses try to be something they are not. They take on false guilt when they do not perform to the standards of others. And often they burn out when they are unable to minister out of their gifts and are forced to perform something that is not in their hearts to do.

A pastor's spouse has a life, just like every other member of the congregation, and many times it involves juggling a career, home and church—a difficult feat. Yet often the

pastor's sheep have such high expectations that a spouse cannot miss church for any reason without creating an uproar in the congregation.

These kinds of expectations are unreasonable and can lead to depression and burnout. Many pastors have been forced to step out of ministry altogether because of the stress it places on their spouses.

Not every pastor is a gifted leader. Recently I was talking with a pastor who was ready to throw in the towel. With each word he spoke, I could feel his pain. "I can't do this anymore. I am not gifted to lead. I can't be what they need."

Most pastors are not trained to lead churches. They are not taught how to assess their weaknesses and how to accommodate for them. They are trained to preach and accurately interpret the Scriptures.

If they are not born leaders, their weakness shines brightly for all to see when they come out of Bible school or seminary and take on the responsibility of heading up a church. They begin to feel like failures and see themselves as an embarrassment to the kingdom of God. Pastors need help in learning to lead, and they need faithful sheep to support them in the areas in which they are weak.

Some pastors who are genuinely called by God have a great mercy gift. Others are gifted evangelists, teachers, healers and so on. Not every senior pastor is gifted to lead.

In fact, leadership may not be his strength at all. If this is the case, he must be allowed to lead by letting others help determine vision, lead meetings and manage ministries. In God's kingdom, we must allow others' strengths to shine brightly where we are weak. This is how living stones fit together and how we become one body.

Pastors sometimes get lonely, and they enjoy fellowship with

no expectations and sheep who express sincere appreciation. The Scriptures are full of illustrations of leaders who found themselves in this lonely place. Under the weight of incredible responsibility, Solomon cried out to God, "Give me wisdom to lead this people" (see 1 Kin. 3:9). Under the weight of physical stress, beatings, hunger and thirst Paul said, "Besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:28, NKJV). Under the weight of the cross, Jesus cried out, "'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?'" (Matt. 27:46).

Leadership can be lonely because of the responsibility it entails. Pastors know that the "buck stops with the man at the helm of the ship" and that they must give an account to God for the souls they have pastored. They also know that the church's success or failure will ultimately fall back on them.

This is all the more reason for sheep to be aware of the things that are important to pastors and to become powerful supporters and encouragers of the grace that is at work in them and defenders of the values they hold dear.

What do pastors want most from their sheep? The writer of the book of Hebrews says it best: "But do not forget to do good and to share, for with such sacrifices God is well pleased. Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:16-17).

We all want to "watch out for your joy." Remembering that we are only human and doing your part to reduce the pressure will help a lot.

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