

Surviving Private Hurts in a Public Ministry

Everyone has private hurts. Bodies get sick, children take destructive paths, and relationships deteriorate. Elderly parents need care, bills must be paid, and jobs are threatened. Tragedy strikes, stresses mount, and temptations lead us astray. Some combination of these take a toll on all of us.

Ministry leaders are not exempt. They are subject to the full spectrum of private hurts, but with the added burdens of *ministering in public* through the hurts and *dealing with the expectations* of their church members. Ministry leaders often grow fearful about their jobs when they experience a private hurt, especially if it involves trouble with a marriage or child. They feel like the church will judge rather than support them.

Think about it this way. If your auto mechanic has a son who gets in trouble with the law, you probably will feel sympathy for him but you won't take your car repairs elsewhere. If your insurance agent is having marriage difficulties, you'll pray for her but you won't cancel your homeowner's policy. However, if your pastor experiences such a hurt and word gets out (it will eventually), you know there will be people in the church who question his fitness for ministry. Some will even use these hurts to attack or discredit a pastor. Other church members will sit on their hands, not attacking but not doing much to help, either. Ministry leaders know this, yet they must stand up in public and minister anyway. They must survive private hurts in a public ministry.

I understand that we ministry leaders are held to a higher standard according to Scripture. Some actions disqualify a person from ministry leadership. These matters are not in question. What I am addressing are the many private hurts your shepherds face that are not disqualifiers, but that leave them under a load of stress and feeling uneasy in their ministries. To ministry leaders and church members, I offer these recommendations related to surviving private hurts in a public ministry.

Ministry leaders, please consider doing these things.

1. *Ground your self-worth and security in the Lord.* You are a child of God by his grace and you are secure in his hands for all eternity. Success in ministry equals faithfulness – doing what God has called you to do in a way that honors him all the way to the finish line, all by his strength. Beware the trap of finding your self-esteem in the size of your ministry or how people are responding to you at any given moment. Such idols will amplify the burden of fear over private hurts.

2. *If it is a personal moral or ethical issue, deal with it sooner rather than later.* Remember the lesson of Watergate: The deed was bad, but the cover-up was disastrous. Be honest, do what is right and necessary to deal with the issue, and trust yourself to the Good Father who loves you. Later is never better.

3. *Talk to someone you trust.* You need some folks in your life with whom you can unpack your burdens. Isolation is one of the biggest temptations in ministry and it will eat your lunch. Develop your network of trusted friends, confidants, and mentors. We all need such listening ears.

4. *Get professional help if needed.* Some private hurts require a professional Christian counselor or other expertise. Get the help. It's worth the money (and BBA will be glad to help through our Minister Care fund).

5. *Tend to your own well-being.* Have a holistic plan for your own wellness – spiritual, physical, relational, emotional, and intellectual. Healthy habits will enhance your ability to weather private hurts and the stresses of public ministry. Sharpen the saw regularly so the cutting is more efficient.

Church members, please consider doing these things.

1. *Pray regularly for your ministry leaders and their families.* It is hard to understand the stresses of ministry leadership if you have never been in that position. The enemy will do everything he can to multiply those stresses and trip-up your shepherds. Be a sustaining prayer partner for them. Make sure the Lord hears from you regularly in support of your ministry leaders and their households.

2. *Hold them in high regard, but don't hold them to unreasonable standards.* Show appropriate honor to your ministry leaders (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). Remember, too, that they struggle with life's hurts and are not perfect (2 Corinthians 4:7). Sometimes they just need you to give them a break and an encouraging word.

3. *Do the best you can for your ministers in terms of pay and benefits.* The more you take financial stresses off your shepherds, the more you bless your church. Ministry leaders do not respond to God's calling with an expectation of getting wealthy. However, it is reasonable for them to expect the church will provide for them appropriately. Do not let ministers' compensation become a low priority.

4. *Do not reward unhealthy, workaholic behaviors.* You should provide your ministry leaders appropriate time off weekly, annually (i.e., vacation), and at periodic points in their tenure (i.e., sabbaticals, another item BBA can help with). You should also expect them to use this time off.

5. *Speak up when your ministry leaders are unfairly criticized.* Do it in love and with grace, but do it! Do not allow someone to take potshots at your shepherds without being rebuked. Do not let gossip occur without stepping up to stop it. This is a critical role for lay leaders in the church.

Brothers and sisters, every ministry leader who has made it to the finish line has done so by surviving private hurts in a public ministry. Let's do whatever we can to tip the scales in our shepherds' favor.