

The Habits of Healthy Ministry Leaders

In his classic book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey tells the story of a woodsman who is laboring intensely to fell a tree. A passerby, noticing the woodsman's obvious exhaustion, asks him how long he has been at it. "Over five hours and I'm beat," says the woodsman. "This is hard work." The passerby suggests that it would be a good idea to stop and sharpen the saw so that the work would be more effective. "I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the woodsman exclaims. "I'm too busy sawing!"

The Bible has some advice for the woodsman: "If the iron is blunt, and one does not sharpen the edge, he must use more strength, but wisdom helps one to succeed" (Ecclesiastes 10:10 ESV).

How much sense does it make to kill yourself with more and more work that is less and less effective? It makes no sense, yet this mentality can be found in the ministry vocation. "I'm too busy sawing" appears to be the motto of some ministry leaders. I know this because I see in their lives the effects of all that frantic sawing without taking the necessary breaks to sharpen the saw.

Here is the lesson: *It is foolish to cite the demands of ministry as your reason for not taking care of yourself.* If the woodsman became a ministry leader he would say something like, "I don't have time to develop healthy habits. There's too much church work to be done!" That kind of thinking leads to bad outcomes. It is not spiritual to persist in unhealthy habits in the name of serving the Lord. The Lord is not impressed and you shouldn't be either.

(Side note: Church members sometimes *are* impressed by workaholic ministry leaders, which is one of the reasons we tend to do it. It reminds me of something I learned long ago: *If you don't set your boundaries, someone else will do it for you, and it will be according to their interests, not yours.* He who has ears to hear, let him hear.)

In speaking with long-tenured pastors, the subject of healthy habits comes up often. Many have learned the hard way that cutting with a dull saw is a bad plan. They have learned to prioritize practices that sustain their long-term ministry and enhance their quality of life. They have become happier people and more fruitful, resilient ministry leaders.

So ask yourself this question: *Do I have the sort of saw-sharpening habits that will enhance my life and ministry over the long haul?* It is important to think holistically about this because God created you as an integrated system. Each part of you affects the other parts. So consider these parts of your human system and how each impacts your life and ministry.

- Spiritual – Is my relationship *with* the Lord reflective of practices and priorities that are distinct from my work *for* the Lord?
- Physical – Does the way I look after my health and fitness speak well of the God who gave me this body and enhance my use of it?

- Relational – Based on what I actually do, who would an outside observer say are the most important people in my life?
- Emotional – Are feelings being experienced and expressed in a healthy way in my life, or do I find myself bottling up things that bother me or experiencing outbursts?
- Intellectual – Is my mind staying fresh and growing and is my life reflective of teachability and active learning?
- Creative – Am I discovering and trying new things in my ministry, or am I in a rut?

Ministry leader, I encourage you to do a *healthy habits assessment* of your own life. First, be brutally honest with yourself about the six areas above. Identify strengths and weaknesses. This will take some time and focused prayer. Second, get feedback from those who know you well and from those who have expertise in one or more of these areas, such as a ministry coach, your doctor, or a professional counselor. Third, identify changes you need to make to avoid long-term negative consequences. Fourth, set realistic goals and share them with others for accountability. Fifth, get started! Maintain reasonable expectations and take the long view. You will not fix the problems in a month, but you will be surprised what can happen in six-to-twelve months if you steadily practice healthy habits.

Finally, as part of your healthy habits lifestyle, take some time once a year to evaluate where you are and set new goals. Circumstances change. You need to make periodic adjustments or you will find yourself again cutting with a dull saw. Get that annual physical. Talk with your coach. Listen to your spouse and close friends. Learn from peers. Actually *use* your gym membership. Make the adjustments. Healthy habits don't happen by accident. Be intentional about it.

Take to heart the words of Ecclesiastes: "Wisdom helps one to succeed." Be wise and develop habits that will help you be faithful to God's call over the long haul. I know it's a challenge to stay healthy, but it sure beats the alternative.

Just a reminder about BBA's "Invest in Yourself" offer. The association will give a \$500 grant to BBA pastors or church ministry staff members who submit a written plan for personal growth in these six areas: 1) Physical health; 2) emotional health; 3) spiritual health; 4) key relationships; 5) learning; and 6) trying new things in your area of ministry. The plan should include at least one growth goal in each of the six areas to be accomplished in the next twelve months, plus a brief but clear action plan for accomplishing that goal. The \$500 can be used for anything related to your personal growth plan (books, conferences, gym membership, health check-ups, counseling, coaching, ministry resources, retreats, meetings with peers, etc.). In return, I ask that you share a progress report with me at the six-month point and a final report at the twelve-month point.

There are four of these grants left for 2018. If you want one of them, send your plan to me at robby@bluebonnetbaptist.org. I look forward to hearing from you!