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# WHAT THEY DIDN'T TEACH YOU IN SEMINARY

25 LESSONS FOR SUCCESSFUL  
MINISTRY IN YOUR CHURCH

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Dedicated to the family of faith  
known as Mecklenburg Community Church

# 1

## Emotional Survival

Qualifications of a pastor: the mind of a scholar, the heart of a child, and the hide of a rhinoceros.

Stuart Briscoe

I was having coffee with a fellow pastor who needed more than caffeine to pick himself up. Summer attendance was down. Key people were leaving because of disagreements about the direction of the church. And money was very, very tight.

I felt nothing but empathy. *Yep, been there, felt that.*

"Jim," he said, "I knew seasons like this would come. I just didn't know how stressful they would be."

Neither did I. To this day, the disappointments can still blindside me. Nothing prepares you for how ministry can drain you emotionally, leaving you in pain or, even worse, feeling numb or in despair or with seething anger. This is why so many good men and women in ministry have careened into moral ditches and many more still soldier on with plastic smiles and burned-out souls.

A few years ago, my wife Susan and I were part of a mentoring retreat with about a dozen couples, all well-known leaders of large and thriving churches. We started off with an open-ended question: "What are your key issues right now?"

As we went around the room, the recurring answer in each of their lives was "emotional survival." We shared our stories about the hits and hurts that come our way in ministry as occupational hazards and how they tear away at our souls, sapping our enthusiasm, our creativity, and our missional stamina. They leave us dreaming of finding ourselves on a beach with a parasol in our drink—permanently.

What makes ministry so emotionally hazardous? That's easy. It all starts with overbuilt expectations. When you enter ministry, you can't help but dream. Many of us dream big. That's one of the marks of a leader—a compelling vision for the future. But for almost everyone, it's not long before the dream collides with reality.

When I planted Mecklenburg Community Church in the fall of 1992, I just knew (though I wouldn't have said so) that we would be a church in the hundreds, if not approaching a thousand, in a matter of weeks. Willow Creek, eat our dust.

The reality was starting in a rainstorm with 112 people, and by the third Sunday, through the strength of my preaching, looking out at 56 folks. Actually, 15 or 20 of those were kids in another room, so maybe 40 were actually in worship. Yes, our numbers did eventually increase, but I don't care what kind of growth you have—you usually had hoped for more.

Then there are the day-in, day-out realities of serving in a church that is very real, very flawed, and very challenging. No matter how well it goes, you have problems, issues, hassles, struggles, defections, setbacks, barriers, and defeats. You have to live with a level of quality about ten miles below what ignited your dream. Coupled with this is the work—hard

work—and you realize that it could take years for even a glimpse of your dream to become reality.

And those are just the emotional hits from your expectations. Then there are the hits that come from the people you are working so hard to serve. This is the heart of the emotional drain. We are shepherds, and sheep are messy. Unruly. Cantankerous. Smelly. They are a chore to care for. And they can hurt you more than you could imagine—in particular, through the relational defections of those you trusted and the crushing crises from those who throw you into disaster mode.

You'll understand if I change a few details in what follows. In fact, most of the stories I'll tell throughout this book will be altered a bit to protect the guilty.

It was a Friday night in July. We were getting ready to leave for a vacation the next morning, and the phone rang. It was one of our staff. For him to call me at home on a Friday, much less the night before I was leaving for a vacation, was not a good sign.

"Jim," he said, "I have a roomful of people here at my house. There's a crisis. They thought you had already left, so they came to me."

"What is it?" was all I could manage to say.

He gave me the name of another staff member and said, "Jim, they're here because they've discovered she's been having an affair." And then he named the man she was involved with, who happened to be on our worship team. Let's just call them Jane and Bob.

I collapsed on the side of the bed as I held the phone in my hands. Thus began one of the worst experiences of my life and of the life of our church. After a night of no sleep, the next morning I met first with Jane. Then I met with Bob.

So much for vacation.

It turned out to all be true, and it had been going on for several weeks. Jane ended up resigning, and Bob and his wife

left the church. It rocked our church's world. And mine. The ripple effects were incredible.

On a purely organizational level, it tore the guts out of our then fledgling music ministry. She was the leader of our band, our main musician, and our lead female vocalist. Her husband was our tech person. Bob was our lead male vocalist, and his wife was our only keyboardist. Our band no longer existed. Suddenly we found ourselves using recorded tracks for our weekend services.

But that was nothing compared to the emotional hit. There was the pain of the two families with a husband and a wife who felt utterly betrayed. Then there was the pain I felt as a pastor. When something like this happens, you feel violated, sick to your soul. You feel sick as a leader to see this church that you'd lay down your life for suddenly ripped apart. And you are supposed to sew things back together.

But the greater emotional hit is how you can quickly become the enemy, the bad guy, the adversary. In these situations and so many others like it, no matter how you handle the folks involved, some people will think you went too far on the side of grace, and others will think you went too far on the side of discipline. Change the story, change the people, and it's often the same. Pastors get caught in the crossfire of people's messes and often become the scapegoat. It's like the first person to rush to the side of a dog that has been hit by a car. In the midst of the dog's pain and frenzy, the person can often count on being bit—even though they are only trying to help.

We got through it as best we could, and with as much truth and grace toward both parties as possible, but Bob and his wife left very upset with us. They felt Bob should have been allowed to return to the platform after just a couple of months of counseling, and they accused us of showing partiality to Jane because she was on staff. So in the end, after we had poured

ourselves into them for their reinstatement and loved them as best we knew how, they rejected us and left angry, taking with them four or five families who were their close friends.

I felt like I had been kicked by a horse.

There are so many other emotional hits in ministry: the stress of finances (both personal and in the church); the unexpected departure of staff; the pain of letters that criticize your ministry; the pressure of people who want to redefine the vision, mission, or orientation of the church; the relentless torrent of expectations; and the agony of making mistakes. And then there's this little thing called your marriage and family.

So how do you manage your emotional survival?

First, the bad news: there's not a quick fix. Ministry is just flat-out tough and often emotionally draining. You won't ever escape the hits and the hurts. They come with the territory.

Now, the good news: you can develop a way of life that protects, strengthens, and replenishes you emotionally. You can cultivate a set of activities and choices that allow God to restore your soul. Some things are obvious, like regular days off and annual study breaks if you can get them. And you'll need to get a lot more savvy about people and how to deal with them, which we'll talk about later.

But for now, here are two choices I wish I had made much earlier in my life. They may seem far removed from what caused the emotional hit in the first place, but they are key to ensuring you have a full emotional tank and can keep putting gas into it for the long haul.

### Clear Boundaries Regarding Giftedness

First, *how* you serve is critical. Ministry is tough enough. But if you consistently serve outside of your primary areas of giftedness, you won't last very long under the stress and

strain that comes with the territory. I really don't hear this talked about very much, if at all. But there's something about large amounts of time spent serving against the grain of your natural gifting that saps your emotional and spiritual energy.

I do not rank very high with the spiritual gift of mercy, not to mention how that plays itself out in, say, extended pastoral counseling. If I had to invest in that area with ongoing, regular blocks of time, it would wipe me out. I've had to learn to be very up front with folks about my areas of giftedness and how those gifts are supposed to operate in the mix with other people's gifts in the body. That's because what happens in a church, even one where spiritual gifts are taught and celebrated, is that the pastor is still expected to have them all—and to operate in them all. The danger is that you'll let yourself try, and soon you'll be wiped out with little or no reserves for the daily toil.

Related to this is operating outside of your personality type. A surprising number of pastors are, ironically, introverts. It's not that they don't love people or aren't good with people—most are even charismatic in terms of their leadership and speaking ability—but they are, in fact, introverts in terms of emotional makeup. As a result, many pastors get their emotional energy from being alone. If such realities are not acknowledged and managed, you will find yourself emotionally spent and soon burned out.

Yes, even as a pastor, you need to guard how you serve.

### Emotionally Replenishing Experiences

Second, I've had to learn to intentionally pursue emotionally replenishing experiences. When you hurt, if you don't find something God-honoring to fill your tank with, you'll find something that isn't God-honoring. Or at the very least,

you'll be vulnerable to something that isn't. I am convinced this is why so many pastors struggle with pornography—it offers a quick emotional hit.

To prevent that, I've had to learn to do things that channel deep emotional joy into my life. For some folks it's boating, or golf, or gardening. For me it's travel, reading, time alone with family, and enjoying anything outdoors—particularly the mountains.

Several years ago, a man I had invited into my life in a mentoring relationship asked, "Jim, what do you do that really puts gas back into your tank? If you could do one thing that would rejuvenate you spiritually and emotionally, what would it be?"

I didn't have to think very long or hard. I knew the answer: "I would go to the mountains and be alone." For as long as I can remember, the mountains have held significance for my spirit and emotions that I cannot explain. Being there alone is particularly rich, as I gain my deepest emotional energies apart from others.

He said, "Good. You should do that once a month."

I laughed. "You've got to be kidding. Once a month? The mountains? I don't have the time! My life is too busy, too full, to put something like that into my schedule."

Then he said something I will never forget. "If you don't, you will end up in a ditch. You will burn out, lose your ministry, perhaps even your family, and become a casualty of the cause."

I knew he was right. I was already seeing the edges of my life fraying and knew how easily my world could unravel.

I went to the mountains.

My first trip found me staying in a budget hotel, just overnight, in the heart of the Blue Ridge Mountains. I remember it to this day. It was like water on a dry desert. I felt energy

and emotional renewal flowing into the deepest recesses of my inner being. I came home walking on air. I entered our foyer, hugged my kids, and kissed my wife. She thought I had been drinking. I had—from the well of emotional renewal from which God intends for all of us to take deep draughts of living water.

Now I escape to the mountains to a little bed-and-breakfast monthly. Every month I leave on a Thursday afternoon, and as I drive toward the cool air and clear skies, I feel the weight of the world fall off my shoulders. I feast off of it for weeks. Four, to be exact, until I venture to my precious emotional retreat once again.

On the front end I would have told you that it was impossible to put this into my life. Looking back, I will tell you that it is unthinkable not to have it.

So here's my question for you: If you could do one thing that would rejuvenate you emotionally, what would it be?

Now here's my challenge: for your sake, and your ministry's, do it.

# 6

## Sexual Fences

Can a man scoop fire into his lap without his clothes being burned? Can a man walk on hot coals without his feet being scorched?

Proverbs 6:27-28

Few people have maintained the moral integrity necessary for a lasting and influential public ministry better than Billy Graham. Without a doubt, he finished well. For that, you can thank the Modesto Manifesto.

In November of 1948, as his public ministry began to take hold, Billy called his cohorts George Beverly Shea, Grady Wilson, and Cliff Barrows to his hotel room during an evangelistic campaign they were holding in Modesto, California. "God has brought us to this point," he said. "Maybe he is preparing us for something that we don't know. Let's try to recall all the things that have been a stumbling block and a hindrance to evangelists in years past, and let's come back

together in an hour and talk about it and pray about it and ask God to guard us from them."

When they gathered back together in Billy's room later that afternoon, they had all made essentially the same list. From it they made pledges, which came to be known among them as the "Modesto Manifesto," to guard themselves, among other things, against the two things most damaging to the cause: the inappropriate use and allure of money and, perhaps even more damaging than money entanglements, sexual immorality. For the latter, the rules were simple: they avoided situations that would put them alone with a woman. On the road, they roomed in close proximity to each other as an added margin of social control. And always, they prayed for supernatural assistance in keeping themselves "clean."<sup>1</sup>

Translation: Billy Graham built sexual fences around his life. And we need them every bit as much as, if not more than, Billy. Here are three such fences to consider.

### Thought Life

First, monitor and control your thought life. That's where sexual sin begins. Things like adultery, in all its forms, don't just happen—they *begin*. We're in bed with someone mentally and emotionally *long* before we are in bed with them physically.

Ready to get real?

One of the most damaging fantasy worlds we can allow ourselves to enter doesn't even involve someone we may work with or minister to. It's an image on a computer.

When it comes to pornography, the question facing many men is simple: Is it really wrong? Is it really that big of a deal? I mean, it's just an image on a screen. It's not someone

I know (so it's not lust, right?) or someone I'm having an actual affair with, so I'm still faithful to my wife. It's just sexual release, like masturbation, and we all know that masturbation is not condemned in the Bible. It's not even mentioned. And isn't sex a good thing—so what's wrong with watching it happen? I'm just admiring beauty. And besides, I'm single, so what do you expect me to do with all this pent-up sexual energy? It seems like a safe release until I *am* married.

I've heard all of this and more. So is it really that big of a deal? Yes, and here's why.

*It is sexual sin.* Jesus made it clear that when we give in to lust, it is akin to the act itself. It makes no difference whether you know the person or not; lust is not tied to relationship.

*It is addictive.* The ubiquitous nature of porn is new to our culture and to human sexuality, but it is becoming increasingly clear that it is highly addictive in nature. As a result, it not only can begin to dominate a life but also can demand ever-increasing levels of exposure and ever-increasing degrees of experience to continue to stimulate.

*It is degrading to women.* In pornography, women are treated as objects. They are not fulfilling God's dream for their life as his precious daughter, nor are they fulfilling his design for sexual expression and fulfillment. You are watching a woman who is being sinned against by being treated in a way that is contemptible to her heavenly Father (whether she sees it that way or not—and the fact that many may not only adds to the tragic nature of porn).

*It leads to other sins.* Studies are beginning to show that the effect of porn on men is more than temporary sexual stimulation: as they see women treated as objects, they begin to treat women that way. They become more sexually aggressive, leading to date rapes and the expectation

of "hookups." All that to say, what we *view* can quickly become what we *do*.

*It harms your relationship with your current or future spouse.* It is absolutely bogus to say that watching porn enhances a sexual life. Instead, it cheapens it. Porn quickly becomes a substitute for sexual intimacy with your spouse. It is a dose of novocaine into your sexual system, not a dose of Viagra.

*It desensitizes your soul.* Let's stay with this idea of novocaine. Sin of any kind desensitizes your spiritual life. Continued exposure to a sin such as pornography deadens you and grieves the Holy Spirit in your life, forcing him to withdraw his utmost filling in a way that diminishes his power and presence in your life.

Your body is a conduit of the Holy Spirit, which is why sexual sins matter so much—they can diminish the Holy Spirit's filling of your life. As the apostle Paul noted, "There is a sense in which sexual sins are different from all others. In sexual sins we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modeled love, for 'becoming one' with another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Cor. 6:18–19 Message).

*It distorts sex.* As C. S. Lewis says in *Mere Christianity*:

You can get a large audience together for a strip-tease act, that is, to watch a girl undress on the stage. Now suppose you came to a country where you could fill a theatre by simply bringing a covered plate on to the stage and then slowly lifting the cover so as to let every one see, just before the lights went out, that it contained a mutton chop or a bit of bacon, would you not think that in that country something had gone wrong with the appetite for food? And would not anyone who had grown up in a different world think there

was something equally queer about the state of the sex instinct among us?<sup>22</sup>

There's not much I can add to that.

## Vulnerable Situations

A second fence to erect is to be sure to avoid vulnerable or compromising situations. Again, let me get real nuts and bolts here, because it's important:

- Watch how and when you are alone with someone of the opposite sex.
- Watch how you touch people—be careful with your hugs and lingering touches.
- Watch how you interact with people—don't visit someone of the opposite sex at home alone.
- Watch out for that long lunch alone together or staying late and working together on the project.

This is just common sense, isn't it?

I think some people in ministry go further with this than may be necessary. They won't close doors in public office space; they won't have lunch in public areas with someone; they won't get in a car with someone of the opposite sex. I'm not about to argue over how high the fence should be; the greater danger is not having any fences at all. The point is being aware of situations that you know put you in a compromising position.

And let's state the *really* obvious: erect particularly high fences when you know you are already attracted to someone, because the temptation will be to take the fence down. If there is someone you think about a lot or someone you catch yourself comparing your spouse to in an uncomplimentary

way, or if you are finding excuses to be with them (or be alone with them), or if you catch yourself having sexual fantasies about them, be *extraordinarily* careful.

### Think Long Term

Finally, use your God-given brain to think long term, which is where we started this discussion. Left to themselves, your sexual urges will press you to seek immediate gratification, as if there are no long-term repercussions. If you don't engage your brain, you will endanger your marriage, undermine your values, risk your health, and trade away long-term happiness for short-term satisfaction.

In short, you will lose the life you now have. Your family, your ministry, your reputation. Everything. That's a sex drive without a driver.

Have you ever heard of the idea known as 10-10-10? It's not particularly original with anyone, though some have written formally about it.<sup>3</sup> It stands for ten minutes, ten months, and ten years, and it speaks to using your brain to address your life in a simple but life-changing way: What are the consequences of my decision in ten minutes, in ten months, and in ten years?

That kind of thinking is what your sexual impulses need. Left to themselves, they will only engage the first ten minutes. But it's the ten months and the ten years that matter most.

### It'll Never Happen to Me

One of my favorite shows on ESPN is *Mike and Mike in the Morning*, featuring Mike Greenberg and Mike Golic. It's a joint radio and television broadcast about sports. "Greenie," as he is affectionately known, was formerly a sports reporter,

and Golic played college football for Notre Dame and in the NFL for Detroit.

One morning, as they discussed one more celebrity athlete's misconduct off the field—after a season of stories ranging from Michael Vick's dogfighting to Tiger Woods's infidelity—Greenie asked Golic what athletes say to each other in the locker room when such news breaks about a fellow player. Golic said, "They say the same thing every time. They say, 'It'll never happen to me.'"

But it can.

Including you.

*Every* person can be tempted. *Every* person can succumb to that temptation. It is in our character. In fact, if you think you can't be tempted in this area, you are the most vulnerable of all.

Why? Because you are not humble enough to put up your guard.