

Question: I was horrified to hear of a young minister who was caught stealing from unlocked cars.

Should he not be put out of his church? What would Jesus do?

We ordinary sinners tend to hold those who are public teachers of morality to a higher standard and expect them to behave in ways consistent with their words. However, Jesus did not make this kind of distinction between sinners. He demanded repentance from all of sinners (Luke 13:3). We all struggle with temptation and sin. Therefore, the Bible speaks to all Christians when it says: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:8-10 NIV). As he once said to some others, I believe Jesus would say to us, "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone" (John 8:7).

In dealing with this young minister, Jesus would first attempt to save him from the guilt and power of his sin. If the young man is truly penitent, he will bring forth the fruit of repentance in a changed life. I would expect to see a humbled spirit with less self-righteous arrogance toward the sins of others because the simple truth is that we are all dependent on the grace of God. This young minister should now have a better understanding of his own weaknesses and those of others. Such an understanding can prepare him better to deal with temptation and sin in the future and to teach others of these dangers.

Jesus saw people not for what they have been but for what they could become. Consider the life of Saul of Tarsus. He opposed Christianity by persecuting the church and placing many Christians in prison. He even gave his consent when some were put to death. But Jesus forgave him and turned him into Paul, the great apostle and missionary. Later Paul wrote: "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief. The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners-- of whom I am the worst. But for

that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life” (1 Timothy 1:12-16 NIV).

In addition, the Bible tells us about many great spiritual leaders who made serious mistakes. King David was chosen by God to lead his people even though he committed adultery with another man’s wife and had the man killed to cover his sin (2 Samuel 11-12; Psalm 51). The apostle Peter lied and denied that he even knew Jesus (Luke 22:54-62). After his resurrection Jesus forgave Peter, and he used him in powerful ways to teach the gospel in the years that followed.

Forgiveness depends on an attitude of humility, faith and repentance. The young minister’s failure does not have to be final. All of God’s servants have sinned: some in ways that are more public than others. Despite such weaknesses, God is willing to forgive and still use them in his service. Pray that this young man will manifest the right spirit, learn from his experience and serve our gracious God even more powerfully in the future. With God’s help, he can. If he does not show the right attitude, he will face the just judgment of God and man.

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