

***Question: When a preacher, a pastor or another church leader is found guilty of dishonesty or immorality, I find it very distressing. 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 Christian morality to a higher standard. We naturally expect them to practice what they preach, and it is very discouraging when they fail us. But we need to remember that these men and women are no more “super saints” than any of the rest of us. They face the same temptations and struggle with the same weaknesses that all of us do. This is no excuse for any wrong they may do, but it should remind us that we all have feet of clay. The Bible speaks to all of us when it says: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8-10). Lest any of us feel justified in judging anyone who has sinned, we need to remember what Jesus once said: “Let him that is without sin cast the first stone” (John 8:7).

When any Christian leader sins, he may become the object of public disgrace. To deal with this situation, this person must be willing to humble himself, openly acknowledge his failure and demonstrate the fruit of repentance in a changed life. With such an attitude of humility, faith and repentance, he can be assured God is willing to forgive him. We, too, should forgive him and do all we can to help save him from the guilt and power of his sin. This does not mean that we should condone anyone’s sin but that we are willing to help and encourage all efforts to renew a life of righteousness.

We also need to understand that a Christian leader’s failure does not need to be final. As disappointing as it may be, the experience of failure can help temper any self-righteous tendencies he may harbor and aid in developing compassion for other sinners struggling through this life. A person can then have a better understanding of his own weaknesses and those of others. This understanding should better prepare him to deal with temptation and sin in the future and to teach others of these dangers. The Bible tells us about many great spiritual leaders who failed but overcame serious mistakes in their past to become very effective witnesses for God’s goodness.

For example, King David was chosen by God to lead his people even though he committed adultery with another man's wife and had her husband 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). But after Jesus was resurrected, he forgave Peter and used him in powerful ways to teach the gospel in the years that followed (John 21:15ff). Saul of Tarsus opposed Christianity by persecuting the church and placing many Christians in prison. He even gave his consent when some were put to death. But God forgave him and turned him into Paul, the great apostle and missionary. Read 1 Timothy 1:12-16 to see what Paul later wrote of his own sins and God's undeserved but abundant grace.

Not every leader who sins is willing to accept God's forgiving grace. Anyone who defiantly refuses to repent of sin after attempts of his fellow-Christians to appeal to him can only be treated as one who is no longer a child of God (Matthew 18:15-17). However, we must first do all we can to rescue any sinner and return him or her to forgiveness and a renewed life in the grace of God.

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