

FALLING STARS 8-23-15

(I Peter 2) When I was in college I worked part-time as a disc-jockey at a local top 40 station, WTMC, in my hometown. One of the things we would do in the evenings at the station is take requests from listeners. They would call in and ask for certain songs like *Jive Talkin* by the Beegees or *Lean on Me* by Bill Withers. Sometimes we would play the song they requested – sometimes not. But on Friday and Saturday evenings we always played back the top five most requested songs at 10pm. What does that have to do with anything? Just this – Today’s study in the word of God is a “by request” study. Someone in our fellowship specifically asked me to address the question of why Christian leaders sometimes fall into serious, grievous sin, sin that wrecks their ministry and sometimes their families too. The phenomena of fallen Christian leaders is one that is sadly routine. Most recent in the news has been Tullian Tchividjian, the successor to D. James Kennedy in Ft. Lauderdale and the grandson of Billy Graham. Before him was Bob Coy of the super-large Calvary Chapel also in Ft. Lauderdale. Pastor Coy was probably the best-known pastor in the Calvary Chapel denomination. Before him was Mark Driscoll of the influential Mars Hill Church in Seattle. If you go back some years there was Ted Haggard, and before that Jimmy Swaggart and before that Jim Bakker and, of course, there are thousands of lesser-known pastors and ministry leaders, some of whom I have known personally, who fell into some grievous sin that tainted their ministry or disqualified them from continuing. So, the question for today is, “why?” Why does this keep happening? Why so many? Especially if the gospel is true and believers in Jesus are invaded by and indwelt by the Spirit of God who is the Spirit of Holiness. That is a completely understandable question and worthy of a response which I pray will be helpful in providing some guidance for how we view these occurrences and more importantly, how we can prevent them.

I begin with a distinction between spiritual leaders who fall into heresy or change their professed beliefs and those who violate their own moral code in some blatant and sustained way. Recently, some within the church have been troubled by Christian leaders like Tony Campolo who have changed their public teaching to offer support for same-sex marriage. That kind of thing is serious, important and troubling but is a different issue than the more common situation of a spiritual leader having an affair or becoming an alcoholic. It is the latter that I want to focus on today. And we begin by considering the causes for such an occurrence. As we do, I offer another distinction – that between causes that are common to all humans and those causes that are specific to Christian leaders.

We begin with those explanations of human sin that are common to all of us. The reality is that pastors, ministry leaders and missionaries are essentially the same as any other Christian. So, the answers I offer here apply to anyone whose lifestyle veers off course in a direction that conflicts with their own professed beliefs, spiritual leaders included. I Peter 2:**11** *Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.* What we see in this passage and throughout the New Testament is that believers living in this world are not living in a safe place but a place of terrific conflict and even spiritual danger. We can expect that in this war of which the apostle writes, some battles will be lost and some will be won. The enemies of your soul are named in the Bible as the flesh, the world and the devil. I Peter 2:1 makes mention of what is called *the flesh*, the sinful nature of each human being. Pride, lust, self-centered desires. When one becomes a believer in Jesus these things are dethroned, but they are not instantly eradicated and sometimes they do get the best of solid believers. In the Westminster Confession of Faith we read this: *The temptations of Satan, the world and their old carnal nature, along with neglect of the means of their preservation, may lead believers to commit serious sins and to continue in them for a time. They consequently displease God and grieve His Holy Spirit, have some of the fruit of God's grace and His comforts taken away from them, have their hearts hardened and their consciences wounded, hurt and offend others, and bring temporal judgments on themselves.* That is a brilliant description of what we are discussing. You will notice that it mentions, from the start, the world, the flesh and the devil as being at the root of the problem. We have mentioned the flesh, now let's note as well that we live in a world that is fraught with all kinds of temptation, that has the effect of dulling our spiritual senses and enticing us toward those baser motives and drives. This world is not conducive to a faithful spiritual life. I John 2:**16** *all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world.* But these things compete for our attention and our affections and have the power to draw our hearts away from the things of God. That is why we speak of a war going on. There is a war and the affection of your heart is the prize. Allied with the world and our old carnal nature we also note the devil, Satan, the deceiver. I Peter 5:**8** *Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.* Again, we read the language of war and danger here. We have a real, powerful enemy whom we know is destined to lose the great war, but clearly is achieving victories in significant battles along the way. Many are the fallen and the slain.

One other thing to note before we move on. The Westminster Confession noted as the causes of backsliding, not only the world, the flesh and the devil, but also the neglect by Christians of what the confession calls *the means of their preservation*. This has reference to those spiritual provisions meant to strengthen us for the battle – specifically the spiritual disciplines of Bible reading, prayer, and fellowship with believers. In almost every case I know of, Christian leaders who have fallen into grievous sin patterns had done exactly as the confession indicates. They had neglected the nurture of their souls. They had put down their spiritual armor and were left vulnerable to the attacks of the enemy.

Now all of what I mention so far is as relevant for you as it is for me or any other public Christian or spiritual leader. But, there are also a few things peculiar to those in ministry roles that merit a mention. I will limit myself to three. First, is the peculiar danger of pride. Pride is something all of us have. It is the essential core of our depravity. But, when one is elevated to a place of leadership, when one is lifted up above others and called an *elder, pastor, reverend, doctor* that pride is fed in a way that others may not experience. Then, when people start praising you for your brilliant sermons or your sage counsel or your powerful prayers – well you enter a place of new dangers. Proverbs 27:21 *Fire tests the purity of silver and gold, but a person is tested by being praised.* Every sports fan is familiar with the phenomena of successful young athletes who make the most mind-boggling destructive choices. We wonder how that can happen when so much for them seems to be going so well? Part of it is having people tell you how great you are, and back it up with millions of dollars they send your way when you turn twenty. These young men are tested by being praised and they often fail the test. So too – spiritual leaders are tested both by criticism and commendation. Some fall prey to one and become discouraged; some fall prey to the other and become arrogant. I Timothy 3 speaks of qualifications to be a church leader and it says that such a leader ought not to be a new believer. Look at why. In a list of what to look for in a church leader, the apostle Paul writes: I Timothy 3:6 *not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.* The devil came to think of himself as deserving the same status as God. He became arrogant, was too full of himself, and the same danger exists for spiritual leaders.

A second danger peculiar to Christian leadership is that of an entitlement mentality. All of us face this in certain ways. For people in Christian ministry the temptation is to think, *I have sacrificed so much to follow God's call; it is only right that I should be able to---* Fill in the blank.

Indulge myself with women, use a little alcohol to relax, fudge on my expense report. This is the line of thought the devil whispers in your ear. *Look at all you do, you deserve this indulgence.* And many step right into that trap. I know I have often heard the enemy's voice saying these very things.

A third danger for spiritual leaders is the tension between career and honesty. Once you become a "professional" Christian you start to realize that your reputation is linked to your financial well-being. As a result, there are new temptations to be less than honest about what you believe, about how you spend your time, about what is going on inside your soul. If a pastor confesses to having marital problems he might find himself out of a job. If he opens up with other men about his struggles with lust the word may get out and it could cost him. You see the problem here? Guys like me, we get paid to be good. You people are good for nothing. I love that line – but I think you get the point, that linking my career with my reputation for godliness presents unusual stresses.

Alright, to shift our focus a bit now. We have looked at the forces that lead to moral breakdowns in spiritual leaders. Let's consider now how to view those breakdowns and how to react when they occur. OK? And we begin with a call to grieve. To grieve. Any time a believer falls into sin it is a grievous thing. When someone in leadership does so it is extra grievous --- why? Because the impact of their sin on others is greater. Leaders are people of influence pretty much by definition. As a result, when they fall, they drag so many others down with them. It is a horrible, horrible thing. What's more, when a public Christian falls the more widely known it is likely to be and the more fuel is provided for the skeptics and scoffers. II Peter 2 speaks of false teachers in the church and it goes on 2:2 *many will follow their sensuality, and because of them the way of truth will be maligned.* You understand exactly how this happens. Some prominent Christian forsakes the way of God and those who hate the gospel take opportunity to lampoon and sneer. I hate that and I never want to be the cause of such a thing. Indeed, God calls us to let others see our good works and thus glorify God. I Peter 2:15 *Such is the will of God that by doing right you may silence the ignorance of foolish men.* Yea! Don't feed the cynics. Starve them with godly conduct. But, when our leaders fail in this way, it is time for us to grieve.

Secondly, when leaders fail we do well to respond with grief, but also with faith. We respond with faith because the Lord told us this kind of thing would happen. It is something we should expect. We read in the Old Testament of the great men of God telling great lies, displaying terrible anger, committing adultery and even murder. In the New Testament we read about Judas Iscariot

who permanently betrayed Jesus. We read of Peter who denied the Lord. We read of Demas whom Paul said had forsaken him for this world. We read the parable of the sower in which Jesus warned us that many, if not most of those who profess faith in God's word will fail to bring forth fruit to eternal life. Some will fall away. Others will get choked by the worries, riches and pleasures of this life. We read the warning about false prophets, about wolves that will come in to the church. There is nothing in this book that would make us think that all of our spiritual leaders will always make us proud. They will not. So, when you hear of their failures, thank the Lord for the warnings He gave you and drill your faith deeper into him.

Our third response should be that of discernment. We respond with grief, with faith, with discernment. Discernment means that we look carefully at the situation to see how the fallen leader responds to being found out. Do they blame others? Do they object to being disciplined? Do they make excuses? Or do they humbly confess, own their fault, grieve the damage they have done and run to the grace of Christ? You see, sometimes true servants of Christ fall into sin. Like David did. Like Peter did. The response of the true-hearted is to repent and patiently seek restoration. Others, like Saul or like Judas accuse, attack, excuse, or they despair. Here is where we recognize that many times spiritual leaders fall into grievous sin because they were never true servants of God. They were never born-again. They never knew the Lord. They were always phonies. Don't ask me to explain this. I really can't. But I do know that humans are complicated psychological beings. We get pulled into ministry for any number of reasons and they are not all good. In Matthew 7 Jesus makes this incredible statement: *Matthew 7:21-23 Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven will enter. 22 Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'* That is an amazing passage. Jesus is saying that there are some who apparently did great things in His name – even performing miracles, but they were never His friends, they never truly walked in love with Him. They were phonies – gifted phonies maybe, convincing phonies for sure, but phonies. I John 2 says of these who were in the church and then left that *2:19 (NIV) They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.* Oh, but we thought they did. I have a long list of men

and a few women I once considered dear Christian friends – but no more. Did they lose their salvation? John says they never had it; they were phonies and eventually they were exposed.

You see, the reality is that we can't see each others' hearts. We don't know, we can't comprehend, the mixture of motivations that provoke others to do what they do. Jesus told us that we know other persons by their fruit. By their fruit, or their outward behaviors. We are fruit inspectors, but we are flawed inspectors and sometimes we get very surprised, very disappointed - - probably more so than we should. It is possible to become jaded and suspect everyone's motives. That is a terrible place to be, but it is also not good to be naïve and assume that every so-called shepherd is really looking out for the sheep. Paul warned that wolves will come in among us. Discernment is needed.

Alright, let's wrap up our consideration of this important subject with a few applications. I think I have four to give you here. #1 is to place your trust in God, not in man. Isaiah 2:22 (NIV) *Stop trusting in mere humans, who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem?* Jeremiah 17:5 *This is what the Lord says: "Cursed are those who put their trust in mere humans, who rely on human strength and turn their hearts away from the Lord. Jeremiah 17:7 But blessed are those who trust in the Lord and have made the Lord their hope and confidence.* Now – does this mean that you should distrust people? That you should be cynical and assume everyone has nefarious motives and a shady private life? Of course not. I Thessalonians 5:12 *we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.* Thankfully, most of the Christian leaders I have known have been wonderful, godly folks, worthy of such esteem. Sadly, there is a terrible problem in some churches of an unwarranted suspicion toward the leadership. That is something the devil loves to spread. Beware of that trap. But also, it is never wise to lean too heavily on human leaders. They come, they go, they disappoint. Some of them are phony. All of them are weak. So, in terms of your ultimate trust – that belongs to the Lord alone.

Second application is to pray for your spiritual leaders. Just a month ago I requested special prayer for me and I was so blessed that dozens of you committed to praying for me on Saturdays and Sundays. That is awesome! Thank you! Keep it up – the prayers for me, the prayers for the elders of our church, the prayers for our staff, the prayers for those who represent the broader

church and the way of Jesus in the public eye. As we have seen there are singular temptations for these brothers and sisters and they become special targets of the great enemy of the gospel.

Our third application is to value spiritual fruit over spiritual gifts. Value spiritual fruit over spiritual gifts. By the term *fruit* I am referring to character and by *gifts* I refer to abilities. When you pick a surgeon you may focus more on ability than character, but in the choice of spiritual leaders character is the primary value. Ability still matters, but we can be easily impressed by a person's eloquence, charisma, vision or confidence, to the point where we ignore serious character flaws or perhaps warning signs which should tell us that things are not well in the leader's soul. When we go to hire an assistant pastor, which I hope to do very soon, the three things we are looking for are competence, chemistry and character. Right? You would love to have all three in great quantities -- Competence, chemistry and character – but, by far, the most important of those is character. When we read the qualifications for church leaders in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, we see the focus to be on spiritual maturity and godly character. Let's put our focus there too, in our evaluations, in our hiring, in our prayers.

Our fourth application is to cling to Jesus and don't let go. *Cling to Jesus* is sort of my phrase of the decade. I now have a new verse to go with it from Psalm 63:**8a** *My soul clings to You.* ® Deuteronomy also says 10:**20** *You shall fear the Lord your God; you shall serve Him and cling to Him.* Have you come to know Jesus as heaven's greatest treasure? Have you grasped how rich you are with Him, and how broke you are without Him? Have you seen how Jesus supplies precisely what you need for the challenges of life and of death? Then, my friend, as you behold other people, as you behold church leaders letting go of Jesus to grab after the paltry pleasures of this world, let that stiffen your resolve to lose anything and everything, but never let go of Christ. As tragic and grievous as it is to see a representative of Jesus pulled under by the floodwaters of a sinful world, at least let that tragedy teach you, let it instruct your soul, to cling by a tenacious faith to your Lord.

Ultimately, I know this is my heart's deepest desire – that my tenacious and joyful grip on Jesus would convey to others just how wonderful, how satisfying He is. I am certainly not immune to temptation. I have some understanding of why so many are deceived into going the devil's way. I go there myself from time to time – but my deepest fear is losing the treasure that I have found in Jesus. So, my soul clings to Him and I urge you to do the same. Cling to Jesus, not your favorite preacher, cling to Jesus, not any mortal. For, with Christ you have everything and without him you have nothing at all.