

From Section 4: Alluring Idols

*"The sorrows of those who run after another god shall multiply;
their drink offerings of blood I will not pour out or take their names on my lips." Psalm 16:4*

Common Sin Struggles of Pastors and Their Wives: Seeking Prominence

"Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you." --James 4:10

A GOOD THING

Being a respected leader is a good thing. The two verses above show that godly men should live in such a way as to win the respect of non-Christians in the world, as well as believers in their churches. In the Garden, God gave Adam authority over all the earth as well as over Eve. He was to lead in carrying out God's plans in complete selflessness, love and wisdom. Then Satan came and tempted Adam and Eve to distrust God's authority and seize power for their own purposes.

One day, when King Jesus brings in the new heavens and earth, all rebellion will be gone. Whatever grand plans He has for His people will once more be carried out perfectly. A part of those plans is ruling with Him. "If we endure, we will also reign with him." 1 Timothy 2:12, ESV

A GOOD THING, GONE BAD

But now, in the "Now and Not Yet," there IS desire gone wrong. We follow in Adam and Eve's broken footsteps. The power, respect, and popularity we desire are all too often focused on us: to get what we want, when we want it, or to bring honor ourselves. Where will our ambitions take us? To God or elsewhere?

While all sin boils down to some sort of pride, perhaps this desire for power and recognition most closely mirrors the heart of God's great enemy, Satan.

When we commend ourselves, our focus not on God and His people as it should be

"Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding." --2 Corinthians 10:12

Pride leads us to rely upon ourselves and that leads to leadership failure

"The name of the LORD is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe. A rich man's wealth is his strong city, and like a high wall in his imagination. Before destruction a man's heart is haughty, but humility comes before honor." --Proverbs 18:10-12

It leads us to ignore wisdom from other men and from God

"The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. The fear of the LORD is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor." --Proverbs 25:32-33

God will oppose us

"But he gives us more grace. That is why Scripture says: "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." --James 4:6

It creates disunity

"Where there is strife, there is pride, but wisdom is found in those who take advice." --Proverbs 13:10

It turns our thoughts away from God

"In his pride the wicked man does not seek him; in all his thoughts there is no room for God."
--Psalm 10:4

It tempts us to use the callings of God for our own purposes, rather than God's

"Then Jesus said to the crowds and to his disciples: "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach..."

Everything they do is done for people to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; 6 they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.

But you are not to be called 'Rabbi,' for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth 'father,' for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called instructors, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."
-- Matthew 23:1-3,5-12

THE TEMPTATIONS FOR PASTORS/THEIR WIVES

What tempting circumstances fan sinful desires for prominence? Here are the ones I have noticed:

Meet Colonel Sanders and Wife

"Good sermon, pastor," are encouraging words every pastor hopes for as church members pass him on their way out the door. Our husbands poured hours of their time into that sermon, hoping that it would be helpful to those who listened. And if your husband hits a slump, with little positive feedback, little questions of "How are my ratings?" can easily creep in his mind. We, too, hear feedback, positive or negative, on our husband's sermons or other pastoral leadership. And while it is good to desire to consistently encourage the congregation, it is tempting to want everything to be "finger-lickin' good," as the Colonel calls his fried chicken, to keep those popularity polls riding high.

Rubbing Shoulders with the World

What does your husband do?" is a question I'm often asked when striking up a conversation with a new mother at the park or the person in line ahead of me at the grocery store. "He's a pastor," I reply. "Oh, what denomination?" they follow up. Gulp. Here it comes.... "Baptist." Then comes the polite, "oh, that's nice" response, when what they really mean is "There goes a conservative, religious freak." At least in D.C., that's how name dropping "Baptist" often goes, and with it, their respect. In situations like this, it is tempting to try cover up who I am and the (uncomfortable) truths of the gospel to hold a little longer onto the chance for respect. I don't like being considered a "fool."

Powerful People Who Attend Your Church

Sometimes the temptation to power is to be seen to be friends with people of influence. I suppose this is especially true here in DC, when at times, Congressmen, Senators and even Vice Presidents and their wives have attended our church. It can be tempting to be proud that someone so important heard about your church and wanted to hear you preach. And then, if they want to become members, well, that can seem like you must really be a person of prominence for them to choose you. This can be very tempting to think more highly of yourself (or your husband) at times like this. In all likelihood, your church is not in D.C. like ours, yet there are prominent people in every town. The temptation can be the same with them as it is here in D.C.

Powerful People in Your Church

There are also powerful people in your church. These are people who are respected or popular. They may have leadership positions on various committees or over various ministries. Or, maybe they have been long in attendance and their very longevity make their opinion powerful. Pastors and their wives can be tempted to what to “kiss up” to these people to gain their approval in hopes of making your leadership more popular and more readily accepted. This is especially tempting for a new pastor and family recently called to a “turn around” churches where there are many who are members but may only be culturally Christians, not true believers. And if you wind up on their bad side, as you make stands other than what they approve of, it can be very tempting to be fearful, to change your language or to harbor anger against them.

Difficult Decisions in the Church

There is no time like leading a church through a major transition to both desire and feel a need for power and popularity. Your husband very likely see important changes needed (hopefully along with the other elders) and it will be against the way the church is used to doing things. It can be so tempting to fear, to smooze, to appease people in order to get their support for the changes. Or, to water down changes that need making. One of the most difficult circumstances is when a church member has continued in a pattern of sin for a long time, even after multiple conversations and warnings from the elders, and the elders recommend him to be removed from the church membership (in hopes he sees his sin, will repent, and will re-join). It is so tempting to want to hold onto your popularity and hold back on such a decision.

Sharing Leadership

Sometimes the temptation to power or for respect makes us not want to share leadership. If leadership is shared, then it isn't just us, but a group who is responsible for the admirable fruit. This is how little kingdoms of power rise up in the church. People are using ministry to collect worth and respect for themselves, rather than thinking about what would be best for the church. These church members are often some of the most reticent to change because they see their very self-worth at risk. This is one temptation that needs to be nipped in the bud early for the good of the leaders and the church. Term limits (even among elders). Shared leadership. An attitude of constantly training up someone to take your place can help.

But sometimes it is our husbands who struggle with sharing leadership. They want to make sure everything is done the best it can be and they are fairly certain (sometimes correctly) that they are the best ones to do everything that needs doing. Perhaps they struggle with perfectionism. It can be tempting for them to do it all rather than living within pastoring limits that are best for them and for your family. Other times, the problem is a desire to “self-brand,”—making what you do so unique that others admire and emulate you. Pastors are called to be examples, but the heart of self-branding is self-importance, not mentoring others.

Ministry Comparisons

It can be very tempting for our husbands to gauge their importance by comparing their ministry to that of another pastor, both in the church or at a different church. I've also found that pastors' wives have a huge temptation to compare themselves to other pastors' wives and families.

Blindspots

My husband has a saying about himself: "Always confident, sometimes right." He does have a way of always sounding like he knows what he's talking about. I've learned to press in when I'm pretty sure he's missing something. This has been of huge importance to the way he leads our family. He needs to know if he's missing something for him to care well for us. It can be tempting to not want to humbly but firmly raise questions of disagreement. There are certainly humble ways and prideful ways to do this. But it is such a gift to our husbands to winsomely help them see what they don't yet see. We need to pray for them not to be tempted to shut out our comments, but to hear them and be helped by them.

People Want to Be Associated with You

Another way prominence affects pastors and their wives is when church members want to be your friend because of who you are. Sometimes they truly admire you and long to learn from you and grow as friends. That is the blessing of prominence. But there are also many times when they really are only wanting to up their own importance by being able to say they are friends with the pastor, his wife or family. This name-dropping leads to jealousy among members who might feel like they aren't as important just because they don't know our husband or our family as well as someone else. This also can lead to gossip, when someone is tempted to tell your family's secrets just to show how well they know you. This is a big reason why it can be so hard for your husband and you to find good friends. (See section on finding and choosing friends for more help.)

RECOGNIZE THE ROOTS

Do you recognize your husband or your own temptations in any of these scenarios:

- A love to be thought of as important in the eyes of the world or your church?
- A stinginess with leadership because you want to be seen as important?
- Perfectionism?
- Longing for people's approval more than God's?
- Arrogance? Being the best thing since sliced bread?
- Self-sufficiency?
- Bitterness towards those who distrust and disrespect your husband?
- Comparing ourselves to others to make ourselves feel of more worth?

TACKLE LIES WITH TRUTH

However slick or legitimate our sin struggles look, we know that with sin, there is a good desire believing a bad lie. Look to God's Word for truth to replace the lies.

Cultivate Humility

"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves,"
-- Philippians 2:3

Be Slow to Recognize Elders

He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.” 1 Timothy 3:7, ESV

Encourage Plurality of Leaders

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.”— Titus 1:5, ESV

Seek Advisers

“A wise man has great power, and a man of knowledge increases strength; for waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisers.” --Proverbs 24:5-6

Be An Example of Godliness and Humility in Your Leadership

“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” --Hebrews 13:7, ESV

Look to God Rather than Comparing Your Work to Others’

“Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding.” --2 Corinthians 10:12

Remember Pastors Will Be Judged More Strictly, a Cause for Great Humility

“Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.” --James 3:1, ESV

Knowing the Lord is More Important than Any Skill Set We Have

“Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.” -- Jeremiah 9:23–24

Seek Love, Not Self-prominence

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.” --1 Corinthians 13:4

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” -- Romans 12:10

Seek Harmony by Turning Away from Pride

“Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited.” -- Romans 12:16

Consider the Weakness of Another in How You Act in Matters of Christian Freedom

“Be careful, however, that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak. For if someone with a weak conscience sees you, with all your knowledge, eating in an idol’s temple, won’t that person be emboldened to eat what is sacrificed to idols? So this weak brother or sister, for whom Christ died, is destroyed by your knowledge. When you sin against them in this way and wound

their weak conscience, you sin against Christ. Therefore, if what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall.” --1 Corinthians 8:9-13, ESV

Do Your Work and for Wait for God’s Reward

“To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder and a witness of Christ’s sufferings who also will share in the glory to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”— 1 Peter 5:1-4

RUN TO GOD

Ask God to teach you and your husband humility. Ask Him to help you see your need of both Him and His people. Ask Him to give you grace to seek out the opinions of others and to honor others better than yourselves. Ask Him to raise up elders to serve alongside your husband who can provide correction and prevent blindspots in leadership. Ask Him to help your husband be encouraged but not puffed up by the members of the church. Ask Him to give your husband greater humility, the greater the fruit of ministry.

Ask Him to help your husband do what is best for the church members, even if it will be unpopular. Ask Him to help you not find your worth by comparing yourself to others, especially other pastors’ wives. Ask Him to help everyone in your church increasingly honor others better than themselves and treat each other with love. Ask God to help your husband see his limits and be willing to choose what he should do and train up others to do what else needs to be done. Ask Him to help your husband trust God’s sovereignty and care over your local church.

Pray for your husband and the other elders to stick to what they know is the most loving thing for the church and its members. Ask God to help them focus on doing what please Him and what He knows is caring for His sheep. But also pray for the congregation that they would trust their leaders and recognize their recommendations are from the Lord. Pray for your own heart that you will show forbearance and kindness towards those who respond with distrust to your husband’s leadership.

REACH OUT TO OTHERS

Ask others to join you in prayer for a growing honor of one another and desire to put the needs of others’ first. Ask them to pray for both you and your husband to not find your worth in ministry work, but look to God for His approval.

Cultivate friends that you and your husband can go to with your struggles and as honest sounding boards for your lives.

ARMED AND READY

In the Moment:

If you are tempted to water down the gospel to win (or not lose) the respect of a non-Christian, take time to write down ahead of time something you might say. Learn it and pray over it. Ask God to help you to stick to the truth (it doesn’t have to be the exact words) when you do get into a conversation.

If you are feeling the pressure of being Colonel Sanders’ wife as your husband preaches or leads a meeting, ask God to help you. Ask Him to turn your thoughts away from how finger lickin’ good you

hope your husband is coming across, and pray for him to speak in love, wisdom and humility. Pray for the good of those listening rather than being consumed with wondering how good they think he is doing. Social media can also be a place where Christians can easily flaunt their successes in a way that encourages pride and comparison. Consider carefully what you read and what you post.

In Your Church:

Our husbands need people to help them with their blindspots even more at church. There are so many more people to care for and so many more issues to decide upon. When pride tempts our husbands that they have everything they need on their own, trouble is rarely far off. An abundance of advisers, such as an elder board, or other godly men whose opinion our husband seeks and listens to is so helpful to them avoiding mistakes that will hurt the church. They can also be a great help to our husbands regarding pride. They can help him avoid blindspots; share the leadership and avoid the “one-man-show” mentality. They can make and weather difficult decisions together, helping each other not be swayed from what is best for the church by pressures to be popular.

Whatever leadership role you have in the church, encourage working yourself out of job. Look for someone you can train up and replace you. Encourage others to do the same. Not only does this help us from putting our worth in what we do, but it will build healthy depth into the church.

In Your Strategy:

Ask the advice of other pastors how they have struggled with desiring power or popularity. Fight the temptation to compare your ministry to others by reminding ourselves to look to God and our husbands for our very custom calling. And, that God will encouragement the congregation even more by our different families to have different gifts being used—just like each of them will have different gifts God has given them to better equip the church as a whole. And, we can actively pray for and thank God for what we see Him using others to do. It’s sort of ignoring the static of our heart and listening more carefully for the broadcast of God’s work instead.

Read

Humility by C.J. Mahaney

Repent and Repeat Pleases God

With so much pride still living in our hearts, it is no wonder that we are so tempted to wield power and seek prominence for ourselves. We will have to fight the desires of our heart over and over. But this pleases God! He will be faithful to help us.

YOUR MERCIFUL HIGH PRIEST

Jesus is deserving of all honor and power, yet He chose to be our servant to save us.

Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross! --Philippians 2:6-8, ESV

Satan tempted Jesus with all the power and prestige in the world:

“Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” Jesus said to him, “Away from me, Satan! For it is written: ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.’”
--Matthew 4:8-10, NIV

Jesus saw what Satan offered as a way to get the world to honor Him (Jesus), was really only a trick to worship Satan. That is what pride always is. Jesus knows how tempting power and prestige are for us. He experienced it Himself. He knows how to pray for our husbands and for us to fight against pride and to turn to worship the Lord.

Questions for You

1. How do you/have you desired prominence for your husband or yourself in the church?
2. Has this led to any sin struggles for you or your husband? Are there any aspects of church life where these are a particularly big struggle for you or for your husband?
3. What has helped you/your husband in these struggles?
4. Do you have any other words of wisdom for people with this struggle?