

Like a Preacher Needs Pain: Friends, Enemies, and Pastoral Ministry

Rich Lusk

I've never really found job descriptions for pastors of much use. Maybe it's because the pastorate is really more a way of life than a "job" in any conventional sense; it's more of a lifestyle than a career. Maybe it's because most pastors don't need a piece of paper to tell them what to do; the work practically forces itself upon the man, and he will quickly find himself with more to do than he could ever hope to accomplish anyway. A good pastor doesn't need a job description any more than a farmer needs a job description: You simply do the work in front of you. For a pastor, the church's membership roster is the job description. The surrounding community is the job description. The Bible is the job description. Or to put it another way, the convergence of Bible, people, and culture is the job description.

But if job descriptions aren't much help to the pastor, paradigms can be. After all, the pastor still needs models to help him understand how to approach the work in front of him. Traditionally, the pastoral office has been understood in familial terms, with the pastor viewed as father or husband. Those metaphors for the pastor's work are biblical and helpful, but I want to add another to the mix that is just as valuable, namely, pastor as friend. Just before Jesus goes to the cross, he says to his disciples,

Greater love has no one than this, then to lay down one's life for his friends. You are my friends if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things I have heard from My Father I have made known to you " (John 15:13-15).

If the pastor is to be an icon and representative of Jesus – which he most certainly is – then he must be a friend to fellow disciples. But what is entailed by this Jesus-like friendship? How does pastoral friendship work? How is pastoral friendship similar to and different from other kinds of friendship?

To be a friend is to be a servant. It is to show sacrificial love, even to the point of laying down your life for those you have befriended. It is to share your heart and life, seeking to make known to others all that the Father has made known to you. In short, friendship is a form of cruciform love. Faithful, pastoral friendships enable others to flourish. True, a pastor will never have enough bandwidth to be good friends with every member of the congregation, especially if the church grows to any significant size. Not all friendships are going to be equally close or deep, but the pastor cannot shepherd sheep he knows nothing about. (Perhaps when a pastor is no longer able to know the people in his congregation in any meaningful sense, it's time to add additional pastors, or do a church plant. There is not a hard and fast rule

here, but as a matter of wisdom, we should seek to keep ministry on a “human scale.”) It is also true that the pastor’s friendships will vary widely because the composition of any congregation is so diverse. Befriending the older ladies and younger children in the church will not be the same as befriending the men in the pastor’s natural peer group. But if the pastor’s calling is to represent Jesus to *every* member of the congregation, he needs to be as good of friends as possible with each member of the flock so they can know he cares for them. They need to have access to him and he needs to be willing to lay his down life in service to them. While these pastoral friendships will be as various as the members of his congregation, and his relation to each member will have to take into account their age, gender, station in life, and so forth, the pastor must recognize he has a calling to each soul entrusted to him. The pastor is friend to all – that’s just the nature of the ministry.

Through the years, I have encountered some pastors who balk at this notion of “pastor as friend.” Some shy away from close friendships with parishioners because of potential problems and complications (“What if they don’t like my preaching? What if they end up leaving the church? What if I have to oppose a buddy over some moral or theological issue? Could I ever excommunicate a friend?”). But, of course, if you want to avoid relational problems and complications, if you want to avoid getting criticized and stabbed in the back, you shouldn’t become a pastor in the first place. Any pastor who is afraid of getting hurt by others has missed his calling, or needs to reassess the work God has assigned him. Being a pastor is about “people work” just as much as it is about “book work.” And people cause pain because they are sinners. Study and sermonizing are only half the calling; the other half involves shepherding, which necessarily includes befriending the sheep, even (and maybe especially!) the ones who can make the shepherd’s life very difficult. Pastors who are even the least bit self-protective are guilty of loving themselves more than their flock. Pastoral friendships are difficult – just look at Jesus who went to the cross for his friends, felt the sting of their betrayal and abandonment, and kept on loving and befriending and forgiving them even after they had misunderstood him and let him down repeatedly. C. S Lewis reminds us love necessarily entails vulnerability and openness to pain:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable.

A pastor who does not seek to practice friendship in the midst of the congregation will inevitably come to treat the “problem people” in his congregation as “ministry projects” to be fixed rather than as fellow redeemed sinners to be loved and nurtured. The results are predictable. Further, a pastor who is not actively investing himself in his people is going to find he only gets called upon when his people have

major problems. A pastor who does not work to build friendships and show genuine love on a personal basis will find very few in his congregation are willing to bare their souls to someone they hardly know. They are not going to look to him as a spiritual guide unless he has first proven himself and won their trust. Apart from intentionally cultivated friendships, a pastor's attempts at shepherding are likely to feel forced, like a military inspector going through a required checklist rather than a friend taking a sincere interest. Pastors who want to exert their authority without investing themselves in friendships are likely to come off as paternalistic and condescending, and will probably find they do not as much influence or power as they thought they did.

Further, a pastor who does not seek out friendships with those in his congregation risks reducing his ministry to data transfer. A pastor who has not bothered to get to know his congregation is just dumping information on them when he preaches. A pastor's teaching ministry is much more effective when truth is communicated in a relational context. The people are as likely to learn from a pastor's example as from his pulpit ministry, but to benefit from that example and imitate it, they have to see it up close. Moreover, the pastor himself can likely learn as much on the streets with his people as in his study with his books. A pastor who knows his people well can make sharper, more pointed applications of Scripture to their lives, he can pray for them more effectively and specifically, and he can be more proactive in dealing with their problems before they have grown into full bore crises. In short, he can watch over their souls more faithfully when he is involved with them in a personal way. If the pastor represents the Great Shepherd who knows his sheep and calls each one by name (John 10:3), how could it be otherwise? If the pastor is to share not only the gospel but his life with the people (1 Thess. 2:8ff), how can he keep his distance from them?

I know some pastors who have questioned whether or not the "pastor as friend" paradigm undermines pastoral authority. Will the authority of the office be diminished if a pastor is too familiar with his congregation? Quite frankly, men who are really worried about maintaining their own authority forfeit their authority. Jesus-like authority comes not through keeping a certain detached aloofness and distance, but through sacrificial, cruciform love. He who serves leads, and he who wants to lead must be a servant. The best way to gain authority is to live in submission. Men who rely on the bare possession of an office, without a servant-oriented life as the ground of their authority, are more Pharisaical than Christ-like. Pastoral authority does not derive merely from a uniform (a clerical collar or an alb) but from a way of life. He who wants to be the greatest in the congregation must be the greatest servant in the congregation (cf. Mark 10:35-45). Anytime I hear a pastor complain about how his people do not "respect" or "obey" him enough, I always wonder to myself, "Well, how much have you bled for them? How much have you suffered for them? When you've been through enough, and have the scars to prove it, then they'll probably give you the respect and obedience you desire." A pastor who tries to get people to respect his office by keeping his distance from them, rather than by serving and befriending them, is likely to end up frustrating himself

as well as his congregation. An impersonal pastor runs the risk of leading his people to view God as cold and aloof. Much better for the pastor to use his symbolic position as the one who stands uniquely *in persona Christi* to help his parishioners feel the friendship of God through friendship with him as God's representative. Jesus did not believe familiarity would breed contempt; rather, deep familiarity and friendship were right at the heart of how he expressed authority. Friendship with Jesus is the very essence of the gospel. It must be the essence of gospel ministry as well.

There is no question that in our day, the pastoral office is greatly undervalued by most Christians. In general, church members do not respect the office the way they should, and certainly not the way Christians of past generations did, when the mere presence of a clergyman in uniform brought a show of honor. The way for pastors to win back respect for their office is not by making demands but by giving patient and loving service. Pastoral care is about befriending people, meeting them where they are, and loving them sacrificially so they experience the love and friendship of Jesus embodied in and through the pastor's words and deeds.

But friendship only represents one side of the pastor's relationships. Every faithful pastor I know not only seeks to build friendships – he also makes a lot of enemies along the way. A pastor with no enemies at all might very well be a false pastor (cf. Luke 6:26). Think of the apostle Paul. On the one hand, he shared his life with the young churches he helped form (e.g., 1 Thess. 2:8). On the other hand, he found many he had blessed cursed him in return. He poured his life out (1 Tim. 4:6), only to find that many were filled not with a reciprocating love for him but with bitter rage and hostility.

Pastors can make enemies for many reasons (in addition to the pastor's own obvious sins and shortcomings). Sometimes the enemies come from outside the congregation and oppose the pastor because they oppose the gospel. Their attacks on the pastor are just a way of discrediting his message and attempting to stop the growth of God's kingdom. The book of Acts provides several examples, such as Jewish leaders trying to stop the apostles from preaching the gospel, or those who rioted when Paul preached. While persecution from outside is a brutal reality for many pastors, I want to focus on a different kind of enmity here. Sometimes a pastor's enemies will come from within the church. Those he seeks to befriend turn on him and seek to subvert his ministry. Again, this was the experience of Jesus: In his moment of greatest need, as he was being taken to the cross, those he had befriended were nowhere to be found – or if they were, they were found denying that they ever knew him! Jesus was the best friend anyone could ever have but he also had the worst enemies anyone could ever have. Paul followed in the footsteps of his master. Many whom he led to the Lord and befriended turned against him and sought to discredit his ministry as bitter enemies. The Corinthians turned against Paul despite all he had done for them. The Galatians chose to listen to false teachers who contradicted Paul, even though he had served and sacrificed for them in order to preach and portray the gospel to them. Paul was betrayed, abandoned, and

opposed by the likes of Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Philetus (1 Tim. 2:20, 2 Tim. 2:17). Another Alexander, identified as a coppersmith, turned against Paul and did him great harm (2 Tim. 4:14).

Sometimes when people are mad at God, they take out their anger on God's earthly representative, the pastor (and even the pastor's wife or family), who is the easiest available target to attack. The pastor may not have done anything directly to create enmity, but he bears the brunt of discontentment and frustration. Sometimes people simply do not want the pastor involved in their "personal business"; they want to live highly privatized, individualistic lives with a dash of "spirituality" sprinkled on top. While a pastor should preach and teach against this unbiblical distortion of the Christian life, there is often not much he can do to change it and any attempt to do so can bring resentment and accusations of meddling. Pastors can create enemies because they have to speak the truth and the truth is often unwelcome. Part of being a pastor is being willing to deliver bad news. It's telling people things they don't want to hear. It's saying hard things, things that take courage and conviction to communicate. The pastorate is masculine work, requiring a mix of toughness and tenderness, kindness and courage. If a pastor's messages (whether in his pulpit ministry or counseling ministry) don't regularly require guts to deliver, he's probably doing it all wrong. No matter how much a pastor seeks to speak the truth in love, he is liable to be misunderstood or rejected outright. Because he is exposing and challenging sin and idolatry, he often stirs up hostility. Martin Luther put it well: "Always preach in such a way that if the people listening do not come to hate their sin, they will instead hate you." That sums it up well.

Cliches are often cliches precisely because they're true, and so it is here: The pastor must be thick skinned and tender hearted. As one who is tender hearted, he seeks to befriend those the Lord has called him to shepherd. As one who is thick skinned, he is undeterred from his work even in the face of enmity, criticism, opposition, and betrayal. Faithful pastors know that both their friends and enemies can bring them great pain, and they know they are not sufficient to fully carry out the task entrusted to them (2 Cor. 2:16). But by God's all-sufficient grace, they know they can and must love friends and enemies alike with the love of Christ.