

# When Your Relationship with Christ Is Entwined with Your Ministry

*5 steps to get back on track*

*By Seth Widner*

I love ministry! When my eyes open in the morning, I can't wait to help people follow Christ. As I labor throughout the day, I feel like I'm accomplishing significant tasks. Whether I'm studying for a sermon, visiting a church member in the hospital, coaching a small-group leader, or helping a new member find a small group, I feel alive when I'm serving others. After almost two decades of being a pastor, I still love my job. And I wouldn't trade it for the world.

Seven years ago, I helped launch our church in Northeast Florida. Because church planting was a new experience for me, I was learning new things daily. This was one of the most exciting seasons of ministry for me. Within the first six months, we were averaging 500 people in weekly attendance. It was important to help each person connect so they wouldn't fall through the cracks and leave. So I read and studied books about church growth and small-group dynamics to better help people connect. I read an average of one book per week. My regular ministry tasks didn't slow down, either. The only way I could accomplish everything was by replacing my breaks with reading and studying.

Then, when that still wasn't enough time, I replaced my morning and evening Bible reading with study time. My quiet times of prayer were replaced by making phone calls. Instead of spending time with my family in the evening, I sat at the computer and returned e-mails. Ministry consumed every area of my life. Even if I wasn't directly working on ministry tasks, I was thinking about them.

My work for Christ had replaced my relationship with him, even though it didn't feel that way. After all, the things I was doing felt a little devotional and prayerful. They were *about* Jesus. They just didn't involve him very much.

As this kept up, I became miserable. Due to fatigue, I wasn't at my best in ministry. I kept forgetting things, and I was disorganized. No matter how much I did, it seemed I couldn't keep up. And yet I couldn't stop thinking about ministry.

My wife, Melissa, wasn't happy with me, either. We rarely went on dates, and she felt like she took second place to church work. When she tried to share her feelings with me, I became cranky. It felt like I was losing at work and at home, and the passion I'd had for ministry began to fade.

When we lose our passion for our ministry, we're in a dangerous place. The people around us will pick up on this through our facial expressions, voice tone, and even how we carry ourselves. And our lack of passion will directly affect the success and health of our ministry.

Thankfully, Christ rescued me from my fatigue and confusion. Through rest and the support and advice from trusted friends, I was able to regain my passion for the Lord's work. And that can happen for you, too.

## **Christ's Example in Ministry**

I love the events recorded in Mark 1:21–39. Revival broke out in Capernaum. As Jesus preached the Good News, people were amazed at his teaching. He spoke with passion and authority like nobody they'd heard before. It was as if Jesus personally knew God. As he preached, the people soaked in every word.

Suddenly Christ's sermon came to an abrupt halt when a man stood up in their midst and began to shout toward Jesus. "What do you want with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God!" Jesus recognized that this man was possessed by a demon, so he commanded, "Be quiet!"

Come out of him!" Christ's bold words echoed off the synagogue walls as the demon fled. As the service concluded, the people were amazed.

News spread quickly and many gathered at Peter's home that evening. Every person suffering from a sickness, disease, or demon possession was brought to Jesus. And he healed each one of them, restoring broken hearts, souls, minds, and bodies. By the time every person had been healed, it was late.

As the sun rose early the next day, the disciples woke up to people looking for Jesus. They wanted more time with him. But he was nowhere to be found. So Peter, James, and John went to look for Jesus. Where could he be when their ministry was just starting to take off and the people were desperately asking for him? The disciples frantically searched for Jesus. Where was their leader?

Jesus was spending time with the One that he loved most. Earlier that morning, before the sun rose, he withdrew to a quiet place to pray and enjoy some quiet time with the Father. By getting away from the crowd, Jesus was able to connect with the Father and gain needed direction for his earthly ministry. His relationship with the Father was a higher priority than his ministry. His Father was always first.

### **Follow Christ's Example**

In the midst of a rapidly growing ministry, Jesus didn't allow his work for the Father to become entwined with his relationship with the Father. Jesus faced more pressure, temptation, opposition, time restraints, and persecution than we do, yet he remained connected to the Father and didn't show symptoms of ministry burnout. We have much to learn from Christ.

Our passion for small-group ministry is a powerful force. It drives us to work hard for Jesus' mission. Although our passion for ministry is a good thing, we must always be aware of its power. If we neglect our relationship with Christ, our passion for ministry can become an obsession or an idol that overtakes our lives. I recommend the following biblical steps that will help you break free from idolizing your ministry and regain your passion for Christ.

**Remember who you are.** Galatians 3:26 says, "So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith." It's so easy to define ourselves by what we do. When we place our identity in what we do, we quickly forget who we really are. But we are children of God. And he loves us dearly. His love is not based upon our performance and the earthly measures we use to gauge our success. God loves us all the time, no matter what.

**Place Christ first.** Our ministries must flow from our relationship with Jesus. Before making any plans or trying to invest in small-group leaders, we must hang out with the One who loves us most. After all, he tells us to "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). I recommend starting your day off by connecting with Christ. Read Scripture and pray before the pressures of the day unfold. Seek his guidance. If you don't currently have the time to connect with Christ first thing in the morning, get up just 15 minutes earlier. It's a practice worth your time! Depending on your schedule, a morning quiet time may not work. In that case, you'll need to set a consistent time during the day that you'll spend time with Christ. But make sure to guard it! Once the day has started, it's a lot harder to guard that quiet time.

**Keep Christ first.** Guard your quiet time with Christ. Don't allow anything to come between you and Jesus. Take time out and intentionally turn off your phone and your e-mail notifications and spend some undistracted time with him. Set aside time during your day and week when you won't do anything ministry related. Communicate your schedule to those in your ministry so that you can guard that time. Make sure that your passion for Jesus is greater than your passion for working for him, that you're loving God with all your heart, soul, and mind—not your ministry for him (Matthew 22:37).

**Acknowledge Christ's presence in the midst of ministry.** As you pursue your daily work for Christ, include him in everything you do. If you're coaching a small-group leader, be sure to include Scripture in your advice. If you're preparing to train or recruit small-group leaders, seek Christ's wisdom. Proverbs 2:6 says, "For the

Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." When you acknowledge Christ's presence as you work for him, it will ensure that you don't get lost in the work. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Then you'll be working with him, rather than simply for him.

**Rest from ministry.** If you're experiencing ongoing fatigue, you may be experiencing ministry burnout, which will make incorporating these steps difficult. If this is the case, plan an immediate sabbatical. Get away from the burdens and pressures of the day. Ideally, it's great to have two or three days away from work and ministry to rest and invest in your relationship with Christ. This allows you to ease out of ministry and work worries long enough to refocus. Setting aside even a day, though, can make a big difference. Alternatively, you may simply take a week or two break from your ministry responsibilities. For instance, you may have someone else lead your group for a week or two so you can rest, or you might take a week break from your coaching appointments. Although it may be difficult to slow down, force yourself to do so. At some point during your sabbatical, begin practicing the above steps. You'll find them much easier to accomplish once you have enjoyed some rest.

—SETH WIDNER served as the small-group pastor of The Journey church and is the founder of i58revolution, an organization that supports healthy families; copyright 2014 by Christianity Today.

### **Discuss**

1. How has your relationship with Christ become entwined with the ministry you're doing for him?
2. How might reflecting on your identity in Christ bring renewal to your relationship with him?
3. Are you in need of a break from ministry? Why or why not? If so, how will you accomplish this?