

# Keep Your Passion for Christ Alive

## *How to avoid making your work for God an idol*

By John Wentz

It's very easy in the course of ministry to get so focused on what you do that you forget who you are. I've found myself going through the motions of ministry and losing contact with God more than once. We strategize, learn, write, meet, and before we know it, our prayer time (if present) consists of praying only for what needs to get done. Slowly we begin to serve a different lord than the One who longs to commune with us.

In *The Spiritual Danger of Doing Good*, Peter Greer quotes a study that says only one third of those who serve God in the Bible actually remain faithful to God in the end. That statistic is staggering and, unfortunately, might actually be accurate in today's world as well.

There are lots of sobering reminders throughout Scripture that remind us to remain faithful in the midst of our service to Christ. Revelation 2 points out the failure of leaving our first love, even if we've persevered hardships in Christ's name. And Jesus himself tells us that not everyone who calls him Lord will enter the kingdom in Matthew 7. Likewise, in John 15, Jesus says that unless we are abiding in him, we can accomplish nothing.

Despite the warnings of these passages, it still happens. We still end up making an idol out of ministry. We never intend to lose ourselves while serving God. We know we need to remain faithful. Yet we can easily slip into the trap of serving Christ without a passionate relationship with him.

Here are a few things we can do to make sure we don't make an idol out of ministry:

### **1. Watch your life and your doctrine closely.**

1 Timothy 4:16

There was a point in my ministry when I realized I cared more about being recognized as a spiritual leader than I did about being real before God. Vanity had crept in. The antibiotic for vanity is humble confession. When was the last time you confessed your sin to God? And more importantly, when was the last time you confessed your sin to someone else and received prayer? A wise mentor once told me that at all times we should have at least one friend who knows everything about us. When you're in ministry, this is critical. Find someone outside of your church context to whom you can safely confess your sins. He who is forgiven much loves much. When we go through the pain of confession we remember our need for the savior who died for us, and we experience the life-giving flow of grace. There is a sorrow that leads to life. It's the sorrow that leads to confessing and admitting our need for God.

### **2. Try a new or different discipline.**

1 Corinthians 9:24–27

Gary Thomas in his book *Sacred Pathways* explains several different ways that people are wired up to connect with God. The idea is this: If we try to treat a dry soul with a generic prescription of having quiet time without recognizing our unique spiritual personality, we might find ourselves doing a lot of spiritual activity but not experiencing the presence of God. So rather than simply spend time with God in the ways that others have told you about, find ways that help you connect with God. If you've never fasted or spent a day in silence, it can be an incredible experience. Or consider the discipline of simplicity and purge your closet or choose to only wear a few items of clothing for a season. Give generously to someone in secret. Spend time in the quiet of nature to experience God's presence. Experiment and find new ways to experience God.

### **3. Take time to clarify your sense of destiny.**

Philippians 1:21–26

Men and women with a growing sense of destiny tend to remain faithful to God throughout the entirety of their life. How do you develop a sense of destiny? People usually develop clarity throughout their life when they

take time to seek God in creative ways. A sense of destiny develops through multiple experiences when a leader realizes that God has created and called them for special purposes.

The ancient spiritual practice of pilgrimage is one way that has served to develop a sense of destiny because it created an intentional, extended time of solitude, fasting, and retreat from regular activity. Going on pilgrimage with others provided the perspective needed to reflect on life and realign what was most important.

In an effort to develop a sense of destiny for our family, my wife, 10-year-old son, and I recently took a trip with Vision Trust International to Guatemala. I will never forget when my son and I told Fredy (another 10-year-old boy) that we had agreed to be his sponsors. Fredy jumped into my arms and then pulled back to look me in the eyes. Those five seconds of Fredy's grateful soul gaze solidified a sense of destiny that we'll never forget. In our week-long pilgrimage to learn what God was doing in Guatemala, we had made a lifelong friend and deepened our own sense of destiny. In another two-week pilgrimage to Venezuela with my wife and 12-year-old son, my son developed a sense of destiny to help plant a church when he gets older. This sense of purpose even at a young age helps shape his decisions and clarify his life mission.

#### **4. Connect with someone outside of your tribe.**

Philippians 2:19–30

It can be incredibly refreshing to hear someone who celebrates God in a completely different way than you talk about his or her relationship with God. Taking time to connect with a monk, priest, or someone from a different denomination can provide variety to your spiritual diet. Attending a church from a different background, or attending a conference from a different Christian stream can introduce unique insights into your relationship with Christ. Consider reading some of the ancient church fathers and mothers (such as John Cassian, Julian of Norwich, or any of the desert fathers or mothers). You may not agree theologically 100 percent of the time with those outside your tribe, but it may introduce angles and perspectives that you have never considered, and that can result in spiritual growth. You may just find a new mentor in a seventh century monk who seems to be speaking to your soul!

#### **5. Don't confuse your spiritual gas tank with your physical gas tank.**

Exodus 20:8

Perhaps you've heard the advice that there are times when the most spiritual activity we can do is take a nap. It's amazing how refreshing it can be to take a break and simply relax. Times of rest, exercise, and nutritional renewal can be the catalyst to a sense of personal revival. We can easily confuse being exhausted physically with feeling overwhelmed spiritually. Getting permission to take a nap or take an extra day off to refresh is part of how God wired us. Unfortunately, we've lost track of a sense of Sabbath in many arenas of the church. We have to relearn how to rest.

At COMMUNITY, we encourage all of our staff to practice three rhythms of rest: devote daily, withdraw weekly, and retreat regularly. We aren't perfect at practicing these rhythms, and it can be difficult when you have a weekend full of church activity. However, we have to find the space we need each week to release our ministry activity into God's hands. Letting go is a reminder that it's God's work after all. For added accountability, find someone who will check in with you regularly to make sure that you are resting.

#### **6. Do what you know is true.**

Philippians 3:16

Spiritual renewal isn't always found in something *new*, but in what we know to be *true*. Paul says to "Live up to the truth we have already attained." Take a moment to evaluate your passion for Christ and ask yourself, "What are all the areas of my life that I can think of where I know I should be thinking or acting differently?" Make a full list. These unattended loose strings in our soul can burn in the background of our mind like a low-grade fever. This sense of discontent might not be a raging fever that shuts us down, but rather a nagging sense that something isn't quite right. Making a list can clarify the things in our life that need to be addressed. There might be relationship grudges, unfulfilled generosity, or a postponed conversation that needs to be attended to before you can fully serve God in ministry.

Remember that God cares as much about *who* you are as *what* you do for him. Live this out and you will set a great example for those who you serve.

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**Discuss**

1. Do you truly believe that God cares as much about who you are as what you do for him? Why or why not?
2. Which of these six steps stand out to you as something you should do? Why?
3. What one or two things will you do this week to ensure your ministry is not an idol?