

The Attitude of a Minister
Northpoint Chapel
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Introduction

Good morning. I'm thankful to be able to be here with you and consider it an honor to be able to speak to those who are preparing for ministry. As Jerry said, I'm Stephen and I'm the pastor at Bethany Assembly of God in Agawam, MA. I attended Central Bible College for my undergrad degree and I was there when Dr. Arnett was a Dean, so I have some small connection to you at least. I think the larger connection is that we have been called into vocational ministry. Today, I want to speak to you specifically about the topic of ministry leadership.

I'm probably going to violate the homiletic rules and I don't suggest that you do this on a regular basis. I've built my preaching ministry on trying to be very clear and very structured in my messages. I would much rather hear a complaint that I was boring than that nobody could understand what I said or knew what it meant. So, while I follow the homiletical rule of having one big idea or central proposition or whatever the textbooks are calling that these days, today I'm going to speak to you more personally about things I've learned or am learning as a pastor. So the sort of loose big idea is that you need the right attitude toward ministry, and I'm going to share some leadership lessons I'm learning.

I'm going to save a few minutes at the end for Q&A. I'm not being presumptuous in thinking that I'm sooo interesting that you want to ask me questions but simply that I'm 12-15 years ahead of you in the ministry process and I only recently became a Lead Pastor, so there may be things that you have questions about relating to ministry that I've recently gone through or am going through and I would love to not only talk about what I think is important but try and address what you think is important. So as we go, think about any questions that you might want addressed. With that in mind, let's jump into some of the characteristics of the ministerial attitude that I've been learning.

1. Preparation is what you make of it.

I remember the first night of my tenure at Central Bible College. As I was growing up, I was always a rule follower. I was respectful, my parents trusted me, and I never got in any serious trouble beyond arguing with my little brother. I was called into the ministry when I was about 11 years old at a kids camp in Lexington, Nebraska and from that point on, I was pretty focused on the path that I thought I needed to take into ministry. I had a pretty serious mindset about the future and my studies. So, you can imagine my surprise when, on the first night at Bible college I had gone to bed at an early time so I could be well rested for classes the next day and I was awakened by shouting in the hall. There was a parade of guys dressed in suits and ties shouting about how they had come down from the floor above to preach the gospel to the heathens on the first floor. I was offended by this on multiple levels. First, I was grumpy because I had been awakened from sleep though I was not a heathen. Second, I thought they were being

sacreligious and making a mockery of preaching the gospel (I was wound a little tight in those days), and I was mad that they were compromising my ability to be well rested and prepared to study the Bible the next day. I opened the door and began rebuking them, but I don't think they heard me because they all started yelling when a mostly naked guy from down the hall started chasing them with a giant wooden paddle.

Throughout my time at Bible college, I encountered some really strange things. I went to the prayer room on my floor one night to pray, only to be turned away because a group of guys were conducting boxing matches in that room. I remember going in there on multiple mornings and finding that people had left trash or food in the prayer room. I remember the time the microwave on our hall had to be discarded because some hooligan thought it would be funny to microwave a roadkill squirrel in it. And with all these strange goings on in the dorms, and I'm leaving a lot out, I never blamed the school, and I learned something important early on: I was going to get what I wanted out of my preparation. In the end, none of those shenanigans dampened my desire to study hard. I decided not to participate, but also not to use that mischief as an excuse for not doing my best or growing how I needed to grow. So, I prayed through the leftover pizza and chinese take out smells in the prayer room. I walked away from the situations that I knew could get me in trouble. And I made friends with those who took their studies and their relationship with Jesus seriously.

I'm not telling you that I was some kind of saint. What I'm suggesting is that wherever you go and whatever you're doing, you will find people who don't take what they're doing seriously. You'll find people who want to skate by without working hard or who aren't urgent or serious about their studies or their work. You'll find distractions and distracting people wherever you go. You can do one of several things. You can let their antics drive you away from God's call. You can join them. Or you can decide that you're going to pursue what God has called you to do and press forward in the understanding that your time of preparation will be influenced mostly not by the people around you, but by what you decide to make of it.

Proverbs 27:18 says, "Whoever tends a fig tree will eat its fruit, and he who guards his master will be honored." You will get out what you put in. It's what you make of it. You reap what you sow. So as you prepare for ministry, sow toward what you hope to get out. If you want to have a serious preaching ministry, tend that tree. If you want to be a competent leader, tend that tree. If you want to reach people who have never heard the gospel, tend the tree that will lead to that fruit and don't let what's happening around you distract from God's purposes. Neither use them as an excuse for not tending the tree God has given you.

I know that this is a ministry training school and that the goal of the school is to prepare pastors, missionaries, and other ministers of the gospel to bring in a harvest. I have also seen human nature and know that regardless of intent, there will be distracting people. I don't call them that judgmentally and will readily admit that one of my faults in college was that I sometimes misjudged people and the seriousness of their call. Nevertheless, there were people around who didn't take their preparation very seriously. If you're one of those people, listen to the words of Paul to Timothy, "Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by

prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.” (1 Timothy 4:14–15)

Immerse yourself in the serious business of preparation for ministry. If you are already serious about that preparation but you’re discouraged by what you perceive as a lack of seriousness in others, I want to encourage you to stay the course and that your preparation will be what you make of it. “Whoever tends the fig tree will eat its fruit.” If you tend the tree of serious preparation, disregarding the distractions, you will eat its fruit.

2. Be unassuming.

All the way back in 2016, my wife and I began to feel a stirring, like maybe change was coming for us and change would be a good thing. We prayed about it and waited on God. A couple of years went by and we were feeling that stirring more and more strongly. We wrestled with what to do. We considered looking for other places of ministry, but decided that God wanted us to remain at the church we were serving and see what would happen. At the end 2018, our Lead Pastor announced his retirement for the following July. We decided that this was what God had been stirring in our hearts and I submitted my resume to be considered for the position.

As that process began in January of 2019, God spoke to me through His word about the attitude I was to have toward the situation. I felt like this was what God would want. I couldn’t say I’d had a dramatic moment, but the stirring in our hearts and some other circumstances in my life led me to believe that God was orchestrating this and leading in that direction. But I felt a caution from the Holy Spirit, not regarding the position, but regarding my attitude toward it and toward the process.

I was prompted to read the stories of David and the transition in Israel from Saul to David and see what I could learn. The most obvious thing was that, while God had anointed David for this position, no one around him recognized that for a long time, certainly not Saul. Saul tried to murder him and chased him around the wilderness. Yet, David was not embittered toward God nor, astonishingly, toward Saul.

I’m sure you’re familiar with the stories of David’s opportunities to kill Saul, whether while he was asleep at night after David snuck into his tent, or when Saul was relieving himself in the cave where David was hiding. On both occasions, not only did David refrain, but his conscience was struck when he cut off a piece of Saul’s robe, an act many commentators think was intended as symbolism for cutting away the kingdom. The question is, why would David react this way? Was Saul really worthy of this kind of respect? The answer to that question is obvious: no, he wasn’t. Hadn’t God anointed David and given him the kingdom? Yes. But David respected the fact that Saul too had been anointed by God. And when David revealed himself to Saul, look what he says at **1 Samuel 24:1**, “Behold, this day your eyes have seen how the Lord gave you today into my hand in the cave. And some told me to kill you, but I spared you. I said, ‘I will not put out my hand against my lord, for he is the Lord’s anointed.’”

If David recognized that the Lord had given Saul into his hand, and we should take that phrase seriously and not just as a play on words, then we must also ask why David would not have killed Saul. The answer would seem to be that David recognized this was a test from the Lord. Under pressure, would he react with the same selfish ambition as Saul had? In order to save his life and take the kingdom, would David do to Saul what Saul was trying to do to him? Like Saul, would David do whatever he could to get the Kingdom, or would He trust God to give it to him? The answer was, “No.” David would not stretch out his hand and try to take the kingdom. He was unassuming; he did not take for granted what only God could give and he did not allow ambition or self-protection to overtake him.

As I began the process of seeking the lead pastor position, that is what I felt the Lord saying to me; I needed to be unassuming. I believed that this was the Lord’s direction, but I couldn’t be selfishly ambitious about it and I also couldn’t allow myself to become bitter or angry if I did not get the position. I believed that this was God’s direction for my life; I also recognized that there would be others who submitted their resumes who would believe the same thing. In fact, I wasn’t even the only one on staff who submitted a resume, so I was even more aware that I had to hold my hopes and ambitions loosely and allow the Lord to work. Whatever happened, I had to trust that this was His church and His plan and not allow myself to be embittered because I thought someone owed me something or insist that God told me that I was the guy. I don’t know how I would have responded if I had not been chosen, but I do know I had resolved to respond with grace and trust in the Lord’s purposes for my life.

I bring this up because it can be very easy to grow enraptured with your dreams and plans of what you think ministry should be like. You can pour yourself out in the expectation that something will come of it and you can feel like the church owes you something or even that God owes you something. Listen to this bit of wisdom: be unassuming.

Jesus gave this insightful analogy for those who serve the Lord. It’s offensive to how our culture thinks and every time I read it, my flesh is offended, but my spirit is fed, “Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, ‘Come at once and recline at table’? Will he not rather say to him, ‘Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink’? Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, ‘We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.’” **(Luke 17:7–10)**

This is the attitude of an unassuming minister of the gospel: I have only done what was my duty. God does not owe me and I will not be bitter toward Him or His church or His people. I’m not saying that churches are never guilty of mistreating a minister or that people won’t do things that are wrong and hurt or that you won’t ever be wronged by a fellow minister; I’m simply saying that if you will have the unassuming attitude of a servant in God’s Kingdom who is in it for Jesus and not for the fulfillment of your ambitions, you will guard your heart from the pain of bitterness and you will find greater delight in serving your Lord.

You should adopt this unassuming attitude now, before you get to the point of pain. Pain will come. You'll be disappointed. You'll be betrayed. But don't be bitter. You've got big dreams. Good! You should be filled with faithful passion and believe God for great things! But those dreams will be tested and sometimes you will be disappointed. You have to know beforehand whether you are in it for the fulfillment of your dreams or for the fulfillment of the Master's will. Even if God should grant you your wildest ministry dreams, and may He do it, for His glory, even after that you must still have a heart that is able to say, "I have only done what was my duty." Have you adopted that unassuming attitude, or do you think God owes you something because you responded to His call? Do you think you'll do something great in the ministry because you're so talented and it's a good thing God has you on His team? "What do you have that you did not receive from God? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Cor. 4:7).

Do you believe you're doing God a favor by joining His team? The opposite is true. He has done you a favor by inviting you to come. Be unassuming.

3. Maintain moral authority.

The third piece of ministry wisdom that I want to share with you is: maintain moral authority. This may sound like a strange one to some people's ears because for some reason, moral authority has come to be equated with self-righteousness, but it's not the same thing. Moral authority is not only commanded in the Bible but is the only way you can effectively lead in the church.

After I found out that I would become the Lead Pastor, I began to study the period in David's life leading up to and after the Kingdom was transferred to his son, Solomon. I began in 2 Samuel 13 with the story of Amnon and Tamar. To jog your memory, this was the story of how Amnon lusted after his half-sister, Tamar, and then tricked David into sending her to his house so that he could rape her. David didn't really do anything about it and Tamar's brother, Absalom was angry. He ended up killing Amnon and leading a rebellion against David which saw David and those loyal to him fleeing Jerusalem to escape until finally, Absalom was killed in battle.

If you read the whole story, what stands out is David's inability and hesitancy to act decisively and punish the evil that was done. I believe it's because he gave up moral authority when he took Bathsheba and murdered her husband Uriah. You know that story, right? Well, listen to what the Bible says David did when he heard about what Amnon did to Tamar. "When King David heard of all these things, he was very angry. But Absalom spoke to Amnon neither good nor bad, for Absalom hated Amnon, because he had violated his sister Tamar." (2 Samuel 13:21–22)

He was angry, but he did nothing. He let it fester. How could he do anything? Can you imagine what that conversation between David and Amnon would have been like? Amnon could have looked David square in the eye and said, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, does it

dad?” Where once David had maintained his moral authority through refusing to kill Saul and even honoring him in death, and even through stories like the one with Abigail and Nabal, now David’s high ground is gone and it begins the disintegration of his influence and his kingdom.

If someone tells you that moral authority is like self-righteousness or that it is overrated for a leader, don’t listen to them. If you give up moral authority, you give up the ability to lead in God’s church. The New Testament tells us that the overseer must be “above reproach.” (1 Tim. 3:2). Moral authority is one of the primary reasons why leaders in God’s church must be above reproach. If we give up moral authority, we give up our ability to lead effectively. When someone brings a complaint against me, I want to have such a reputation that people write it off as unbelievable. I want my example to inspire confidence and discipleship. If I give that up, I can no longer lead effectively.

In fact, as I made the transition to lead pastor, this was one of the primary points the pastoral search team brought up. They said, “You’ve been serving here for almost ten years and we are not aware of any complaints that anyone has made against your character.” That’s not to say that people didn’t have complaints about me or that everybody likes me, but if you will live above reproach, that will give you a lot of leadership clout, even when people disagree with you.

Have you made it your aim to live above reproach? I know that in recent years the idea of living above reproach has become the butt of jokes in our society and even among some pastors. There’s a guideline for living above reproach called “The Billy Graham Rule.” It’s basically that Billy Graham refused to be alone with a woman other than his wife. He didn’t go out to eat with them alone, didn’t travel with them, didn’t ride in a car with them alone. Some have criticized leaders who implement versions of this principle in their own lives. They say it’s sexist and doesn’t give women access to male leaders. Here’s what I would say about this. Principles like this don’t just apply to men but to women. No, there are not as many women ministry leaders, but they exist and where they do, they too should implement this principle. It goes both ways. Second, surely you can be creative enough to find ways to develop women leaders or connect with male leaders without placing yourself and them in personally compromising positions. And third, I can’t lead any woman if no one trusts me because I’ve given up my moral authority by refusing to live above reproach.

This is just one example of many. In some ministerial circles it has been *en vogue* to mock guidelines and restraints that some perceive as prudish. I would encourage you to consider whether it is worth compromising the ministry God has given you to be seen as progressive or to uphold cultural norms that should not dictate what happens in God’s church or how His servants minister. Don’t give up your moral authority. If you do, you give everything up.

4. Keep your hands off the ark.

There is a member of my board who has a lot of ideas and input. Sometimes, when he gets done sharing his ideas, he will say, “If I’m going too far, just tell me to keep my hands off the ark.” He’s referencing 2 Samuel 6, where God killed Uzzah for trying to steady the ark of the covenant while it was being transported. You’ll remember that David wanted to move the ark to

Jerusalem but was apparently unfamiliar with how the law of Moses said it must be transported. Instead of having the priests carry it, he put it on a cart and had it pulled by oxen. On the way, there was a crowd of people celebrating, but one of the oxen stumbled. When it did, the ark looked like it would fall off the cart. A man named Uzzah did what he must have thought was a noble thing and reached out his hand to steady the ark. When he did, God immediately killed him. **2 Samuel 6:7-9** says, “And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God. And David was angry because the LORD had broken out against Uzzah. And that place is called Perez-uzzah to this day. And David was afraid of the LORD that day, and he said, “How can the ark of the LORD come to me?”

Who hasn't been troubled by this story? In his devotional entitled, “A Table in the Wilderness,” Watchman Nee writes about this incident: “The oxen stumbled, the ark shook, and Uzzah touched it to steady it. He did it warmheartedly, for the glory of God— and he died instantly. No wonder David was troubled! The ark protected Israel, not Israel the ark. Who ever heard of a forest ranger protecting tigers? No, God is well able to take care of himself.”

I suppose we could put it this way, “God holds you up; you don't hold Him up.” You've heard the saying that you should pray like it all depends on God and work like it all depends on you. That seems like a fine thing, but you must not confuse the two or do the latter without the former. If you start ministering as if it all depends on you and you don't pray as if it all depends on Him, you will inevitably begin to believe that it does all depend on you. You will stretch out your hand to steady the ark, and you will be struck down. It may not happen in the way that it did to Uzzah, but when ministers begin to believe it all depends on them and they forget that God is the one upholding them, not vice versa, they fall.

Make sure that as ministers of the gospel you keep your hands off the ark. Never assume that God needs you to uphold His glory. Yes, you are supposed to glorify God, but you don't prop Him up. Modern methods are wonderful. I enjoy them. Being relevant is necessary. But never suppose that your cool factor is going to win people to the Lord or gain God any glory. I love modern stage design, but there is no light that will add glory to the God who made the sun and the stars. You can't be cool enough to glorify the God who speaks with thunder.

One of the core values that I've instituted with my staff and that we are still working into our ministry methods is that we want to be “always improving for the sake of the Gospel.” We want to forget what lies behind and lean forward into the high call of God in Christ Jesus. But we've emphasized that this doesn't mean we charge ahead thinking that our methods are automatically correct or that we do it without depending on God. And that's the point, you depend on God; God does not depend on you.

To put this in theological terms, this is the doctrine of God's aseity. God is absolutely independent and self-existent. He needs nothing and no one. The apostle Paul emphasized this when he preached in Athens, “The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as

though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything.” (Acts 17:24–25)

As you prepare for ministry and minister even now and in the future, do not begin to think that God needs you or that there is something special about you that God cannot do without. If you do, you will begin to make decisions out of the pride of human wisdom rather than for the glory of God. You will excuse sin in your heart, your motivations, and your actions because you have convinced yourself that you offer something so good, so unique to God that can't be found anywhere else, that God will excuse your sin. You'll start to depend on methods rather than on the God who Created you and saved you at the cost of His Son.

One way that I tried to remind myself of my dependence on God from early in my ministry was that I set aside the first 30 minutes of time in the office each morning. I would spend about 15-20 minutes reading and taking notes on spiritual leadership material, and then I would take 10-15 minutes to pray and offer the day to God as an explicit reminder that what I was doing was through Him and for Him. These times are not my personal devotions but office time devoted to reminding me that I depend on God, not vice versa at the beginning of the work day.

Keep your hands off the ark. God doesn't need you; you need Him. He does call you and He does want to use you, but you are not His Savior; He is yours. You will do well to keep that order.

Conclusion

Preparation is what you make of it. Be unassuming. Maintain moral authority, and keep your hands off the ark. These attitudes will serve you well as you move forward into vocational ministry.