

CONFRONTING THE UNIQUE CHALLENGES OF  
PASTORAL MINISTRY



# DANGEROUS CALLING



PAUL DAVID TRIPP

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TRIPP

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# SELF-GLORY

Pastoral ministry is always shaped, formed, directed, and driven by worship. Your ministry will be shaped by worship of God or worship of you or, for most of us, a troubling mix of both. Perhaps there is no more powerful, seductive, and deceitful temptation in ministry than self-glory. Perhaps in ministry there is no more potent intoxicant than the praise of men, and there is no more dangerous form of drunkenness than to be drunk with your own glory. It has the power to reduce you to shocking self-righteousness and inapproachability. It will make you someone who is hard to work with, and it will make it nearly impossible for those around you to help you see that you've become hard to work with. It will make you look down on people who are more like you than unlike you. It will cause you to surround yourself with people who too often say yes and too frequently are ready to agree. It will leave you spiritually unwise and morally unprotected. And all of this will happen without your notice because you will remain convinced that you are perfectly okay. When confronted, you will remind yourself of your glory. When questioned, you will defend your glory. You will deny your complicity in problems and your participation in failure. You'll be far too skilled at assigning blame than shouldering blame. You'll be better at controlling than you are at serving. You'll resist work that you think is below you and take offense at those who would presume to tell you what to do. You'll constantly confuse being an ambassador with being a king.

He was a mess, but he didn't know it. His ministry was breaking under the burden, but he didn't see it. His marriage was in a state of constant dysfunction, but he didn't have a clue. He really did live and minister as if he had arrived. In ways to which he seemed blind, he

was all too filled with a sense of the glory of his abilities, gifts, insight, experience, and leadership.

When his wife would venture to make even the most mildly critical comment on one of his sermons, he would be highly offended and quickly let her know that she didn't know what she was talking about. When a fellow leader would question one of his proposed initiatives, he was quicker to defend his ideas than he was to listen to the way those ideas were being understood by others. His administrative assistant learned to avoid those areas where he was easily and quickly irritated. He had no time to participate in a small group. He would say to his wife, who longed for them to participate together, "With all that I have on my plate, I don't have time to spend listening to someone do a poor job of leading a Bible study." The guys he once met with he didn't meet with anymore. Yes, he told his congregation again and again that their walk with God was a community project, but he felt little need for that community himself. His sermons lacked pastoral tenderness. They failed to portray a winsome passion for the gospel. They were more self-assured biblical lectures than they were the practically applied exegesis of a man who himself was being broken and encouraged by the grand redemptive story.

He seemed more self-assured than filled with the courage of faith. He seemed more a local-church-advancement idea factory than someone who really did believe that the hope of the church is Christ. He kept calling meetings, but they weren't really formed by his being respectful of the gifts of others. These meetings weren't collaborative; no, they were more gatherings for the purpose of announcements and pronouncements. He would dominate the meeting with his talking and would quickly call his leaders to give support to ideas that were still very fresh in their thinking. He was good at shutting down questions and disarming criticisms, but I must say again, he wouldn't have seen himself this way at all.

He felt burdened by all that he was assigned to do, but he bore that burden because he had loaded too many things on his plate. And he did that because he found it harder and harder to delegate min-

istry to others. He was convinced that most of the strategic things that needed to be done would be best done by him. Fewer and fewer people were commissioned to do ministry tasks. No, fellow leaders were more and more tasked with support duties because the larger ministry duties were all done by him.

He saw himself as being way more essential to the health of his church than any human being ever is. Because of this, there were times when he cared too much about what people thought of him. Because he thought of himself as essential, he needed others to see him as essential as well, and when they didn't, it haunted him. He would then target those people as those he needed to win. Conversely, there were times when he cared too little about what people thought about him. He was so self-assured that he didn't feel the need to listen well to those whom God had put in his pathway to challenge him personally and to sharpen his ideas and goals. Self-glory will pull you both ways in your ministry relationships.

Because of all this, trust in his ministry began to flag in the hearts of those who worked alongside him. It's hard to trust someone who is too self-assured, too self-aware, too self-congratulatory, too self-important, and too domineering. It's hard to trust someone who speaks much but doesn't listen well. It's hard to trust someone who is quick to critique but does not receive criticism very well. It's hard to trust someone who is confrontational and unapproachable at the same time. It's hard to trust someone who seems to be more comfortable with taking away ministry than delegating it. It's hard to trust someone who preaches what he appears to think that he doesn't need. It's hard to trust someone who leads by fiat and pronouncement rather than by a biblically informed, gift-recognizing consensus. It's hard to trust someone who has assigned to himself way too much glory. But he did. And the sad thing is, he is not alone. There are way too many pastors who do not understand that their ministries are more shaped by self-glory than by the glory of the risen, ever-present, all-sufficient Christ.

By God's rescuing grace, his wife came to the end of herself. She

had watched it all happen. She had watched the humble young pastor whom she had married become the proud man whom she now lived with. She had experienced how his being domineering, unapproachable, and self-assured at home had changed their marriage. She knew that people at their church were struggling with his style of leadership. She had lived with the pain of dear friends leaving the church. So one evening in desperation she sat down next to him in the den and told him she just couldn't do it anymore. She told him of the daily pain she felt as she watched what was happening to him and to the church. She told him she didn't know if it was the right thing to do, but she had come to the point where she was unwilling to stand by and let it continue to happen. She had made an appointment with a well-known local pastor and was going to spill her guts. She said, "Dear, if you don't recognize your need for help, I'll recognize it for you and get the help we both need."

At first he was very angry and felt betrayed, but he eventually said he was willing to go with her for help and counsel. It was at this moment that a process of radical rescue and restoration began.

Pastor, what about you? Where in your ministry is there evidence of self-glory? Where are you more dominant than you should be? Where do you fail to listen when you should? Where do you attempt to control things that you don't need to control? Where do you find it hard to delegate ministry to others? Where are you tempted to speak more than you should? Where do you fail to recognize and esteem the gifts of others? Where are you unwilling to examine your weaknesses and admit your failures? Where are you tempted to think of yourself as more essential than you actually are? Where do you care too much about people's respect, esteem, and appreciation? Where do you find it easier to confront than to receive confrontation? Where are you less than thankful for the ministry partners that God has connected you to? Where are you too confident of your own strength and wisdom? Where does self-trust inhibit ministry-forming trust of Christ? Are there ways in which the health of your ministry is being weakened by self-glory?

### **HUMILITY IN MINISTRY: A CHRISTOLOGICAL MODEL**

There is a startling moment in the life of Jesus and the disciples that devastates self-glory and defines the kind of humility that, by grace, should grip the heart of every pastor and form the lifestyle of his ministry.

Now before the Feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end. During supper, when the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him, Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper. He laid aside his outer garments, and taking a towel, tied it around his waist. Then he poured water into a basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel that was wrapped around him. He came to Simon Peter, who said to him, "Lord, do you wash my feet?" Jesus answered him, "What I am doing you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." Peter said to him, "You shall never wash my feet." Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no share with me." Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" Jesus said to him, "The one who has bathed does not need to wash, except for his feet, but is completely clean. And you are clean, but not every one of you." For he knew who was to betray him; that was why he said, "Not all of you are clean." When he had washed their feet and put on his outer garments and resumed his place, he said to them, "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." (John 13:1-17)

It is one of those moments in the life of Jesus that is so amazing, so counterintuitive, that it is almost impossible to wrap your brain around it, let alone capture it in words. Jesus is in that final moment

with his disciples in that rented upper room. It is a holy moment when he declares himself to be the Passover Lamb. Because the room is rented, there is no servant standing by with the requisite pitcher, basin, and towel to wash Jesus's and the disciples' feet. Of course, the disciples, being full of themselves, all too concerned with their power and position in the kingdom, were too proud to do the dirty deed.

Now, this debasing but culturally essential task was not assigned to just any servant. It is clear that in New Testament times there were many levels of authority and responsibility in the culture of servanthood. There were servants who managed whole households, and there were servants who lived the menial life of a slave. The job of washing people's dirty feet before they reclined to eat was reserved for the lowest, most junior, no-account slave. There is no way that the disciples would lower themselves to such a position in front of one another, at least not while they were vying for kingdom greatness.

At the end of the meal, Jesus arises, takes off his outer garments, ties the towel around his waist, and fills the basin with water. He couldn't be about to do what you think he's going to do! This is Lord God Almighty. This is the Son of God, the promised king, the creator of all that is. This One is the fulfillment of all the covenant promises. This is the Savior Lamb. He can't be thinking of doing something so unseemly, so undignified, and so slave-like. But that was exactly his intention. And it is vital to understand that he knew exactly who he was and how this connected to his true identity and mission. John says that Jesus went at this low and dirty task knowing exactly who he was, where he'd come from, and what he was sent to do: "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose." This stunning act of humble love resulted not from Jesus's forgetting who he was but from remembering who he was. This was the holy mission of the Son Savior. He had to be willing to enter the lowest human condition, to do the most debased thing, and to let go of his rights of position in order that we might be redeemed. It was a high and holy calling, and it was the only way. His identity, as the Son of God, didn't lead him to

be arrogant and entitled, unwilling to do what needed to be done to accomplish redemption. His identity didn't cause him to assess that he was too good for the task. No, his identity motivated and propelled him to do what the disciples were convinced was below them.

When the dirty task had been completed, Jesus looked at his disciples and said, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." Christ is saying, "The attitude I have had toward you, you must have toward one another. My sense of calling must become your sense of calling. The willingness that I have exhibited, you must live out in your ministries." What is that attitude? What is the commitment that must shape the ministry of every pastor?

You and I must not become pastors who are all too aware of our positions. We must not give way to protecting and polishing our power and prominence. We must resist feeling privileged, special, or in a different category. We must not think of ourselves as deserving or entitled. We must not demand to be treated differently or put on some ministry pedestal. We must not minister from above but from alongside.

What is the grand lesson, the grand calling, of this startling moment? Here it is: Jesus says, "If you're not greater than your master, and he has been willing to do this disgusting thing, you must also be willing. If you are my ambassadors, called to represent my will and way, called to be tools of my redeeming grace, then you must not think that any ministry task is beneath you. You must be willing to do the lowest, most debased thing so that my work and my will be done. You must not refuse. You must not think of yourself as too good. You must be willing to be the lowest of slaves in order that my kingdom may come and my will may be done. You must be willing to do whatever is necessary to position yourself as a tool of redeeming grace. You must not be too proud. You must not be unwilling."

Let's be honest, pastors: we are tempted to think of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. At times, we do chafe against things that we think are beneath our pay grade. We are not always

willing to do the dirty work of the ministry. I know I'm not always ready and willing. We are too oriented to reputation, position, and power. We do desire to be recognized as prominent. I know I struggle with this. We are not attracted to redemptive servitude. We do want our ministries to be clean and comfortable. I know I do. We do tend to think of ourselves more as movers and shakers than as servants. And all of this is because we don't get our identity as an ambassador. No, if you and I think there is kingdom work that is beneath us, we think that because we are identity amnesiacs. And there is a short step between forgetting our assigned position and inserting ourselves into God's position.

The amazing example and commission of Christ should produce grief that leads to confession in all of us. We do lose our way. We do become more masters than servants. And in our heart of hearts we know that we will never become what we have been called to become unless we are rescued by the very same grace we have come to proclaim and live before others. And we don't have to fear that our silly, delusional, and unearned pride will cause the Father to turn his back on us.

He knows who you are. He knows that you don't measure up. He knows that you still fall short of his righteous requirement; that's why he has given you the gift of his Son. You can run to him and admit to embarrassing self-glory and know that he won't mock you or slap you away, because your standing before him is not based on your performance but on the spotless performance of his Son. Why don't you right here, right now, make the confession that you need to make? Cry for the help you need. Your Savior is near, and he is both willing and able.

#### **THE MINISTRY-DAMAGING FRUIT OF SELF-GLORY**

It is important to recognize the harvest of self-glory in you and in your ministry. May God use the following list to give you diagnostic wisdom. May he use it to expose your heart and to redirect your ministry. Here is the ministry-shaping power of self-glory.

#### 1) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO PARADE IN PUBLIC WHAT SHOULD BE KEPT IN PRIVATE.

The Pharisees live for us as a primary example. Because they saw their lives as glorious, they were quick to parade that glory before the watching eyes of those around them. The more you think you've arrived and the less you see yourself as daily needing rescuing grace, the more you will tend to be self-referencing and self-congratulating. Because you are attentive to self-glory, you will work to get greater glory, even when you aren't aware that you're doing it. You will tend to tell personal stories that make you more the hero than you actually were. You will find ways, in public settings, of talking about private acts of faith. Because you think you are worthy of acclaim, you will seek the acclaim of others by finding ways to present yourself as "godly."

Now, I know most of the pastors reading this will think they would never do this, but I am convinced that there is a whole lot more "righteousness parading" in pastoral ministry than we would tend to think. It is one of the reasons that I find pastors' conferences, presbytery meetings, general assemblies, ministeriums, and church-planting gatherings uncomfortable at times. Around the table after a session, these gatherings can degenerate into a pastoral ministry "spitting contest" where we are at least tempted to be less than honest about what is really going on in our hearts and in our ministries. After celebrating the glory of the grace of the gospel, there is way too much self-congratulatory glory talking by people who seem to need more acclaim than they actually need or deserve.

#### 2) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO BE WAY TOO SELF-REFERENCING.

We all know it, we've all seen it, we've all been uncomfortable with it, and we've all done it. The bottom line is this: proud people tend to talk about themselves a lot. Proud people tend to like their opinions more than the opinions of others. Proud people think their stories are more interesting and engaging than others. Proud people think they know and understand more than others'. Proud people think they've earned the right to be heard. Proud people think they have glory to offer.

Proud people, because they are basically proud of what they know and of what they've done, talk a lot about both. Proud people don't reference weakness. Proud people don't talk about failure. Proud people don't confess sin. So proud people are better at putting the spotlight on themselves than at shining the light of their stories and opinions on God's glorious and utterly undeserved grace.

### 3) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO TALK WHEN YOU SHOULD BE QUIET.

When you think you've arrived, you are quite confident in and proud of your opinions. You trust your opinions more than you trust others', so you are not as interested in the opinions of others as you should be, so you will tend to want your thoughts, perspectives, and viewpoints to win the day in any given meeting or conversation. This means you will be way more comfortable than you should be with dominating a gathering with your talk. You will fail to see that in a multitude of counselors there is wisdom. You will fail to see the essentiality of the ministry of the body of Christ in your life. You will fail to recognize your own bias and spiritual blindness. So you won't come to meetings, formal or informal, with a personal sense of need for what others have to offer, and you will control the talk more than you should.

### 4) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO BE QUIET WHEN YOU SHOULD SPEAK.

But self-glory can go the other way as well. Leaders who are too self-confident, who unwittingly attribute to themselves what could only have been accomplished by grace, often see meetings as a waste of time. Because they are proud, they are too independent, so meetings tend to be viewed as an irritating and unhelpful interruption of an already-too-busy ministry schedule. Because of this they will either blow off a meeting or tolerate the gathering, attempting to bring it to a close as quickly as possible. So they don't throw their ideas out for consideration and evaluation because, frankly, they don't think they need it. And when their ideas are on the table and being debated, they don't jump into the fray, because they think that what they have

opined or proposed simply doesn't need to be defended. Self-glory really will cause you to speak too much when you should listen and to feel no need to speak when you surely should.

### 5) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO CARE TOO MUCH ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE THINK OF YOU.

When you have fallen into thinking that you're something, you want people to recognize the something that you think you are. Again, you see it in the Pharisees; personal assessments of self-glory always lead to glory-seeking behavior of some kind. People who think they've arrived can become all too aware of how others are responding to them. Because you're hypervigilant, watching the way the people in your ministry are responding to your ministry, in ways you are probably not aware of you will begin to shape the things you say and do for the purpose of self-acclaim. You will begin to say and do things in a way that gets you the recognition that you think you deserve. Sadly, you actually begin to fall into ministering the gospel of Jesus Christ not for the glory of Christ or the redemption of the people under your care but for the sake of your own glory. I have done this. I have thought during the preparation for a sermon that a certain point put a certain way would win a detractor, and I have watched certain people's reactions as I have preached. In these moments, in the preparation and preaching of a sermon, I have forsaken my calling as the ambassador of the eternal glory of another for the purpose of my acquiring the temporary praise of men.

### 6) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO CARE TOO LITTLE ABOUT WHAT PEOPLE THINK ABOUT YOU.

But this too can go another way. If you think you've arrived, you may go the direction of caring way too little about what people think of you. You are so self-assured that you simply don't think you need to have your thoughts, ideas, actions, words, plans, goals, attitudes, or initiatives evaluated by others. You really don't think you need help. You don't think that what you have to offer will be enhanced or sharpened by the contribution of others. So you again and again do

alone what should be done in a group process. And if you work with a group, you will tend to surround yourself with people who are all too impressed with you and all too excited to be included by you, and who will find it hard to say anything to you but yes. You have forgotten who you are and what your Savior says you daily need and are: living in a place of both personal and ministry danger.

7) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO RESIST FACING AND ADMITTING YOUR SINS, WEAKNESSES, AND FAILURES.

Why do any of us get upset or tense when confronted? Why do any of us activate our inner lawyer and rise to our own defense? Why do any of us turn the tables and remind the other person that we are not the only sinner in the room? Why do we argue about the facts or dispute the other person's interpretation? We do all of these things because we are convinced in our hearts that we are more righteous than how we are being portrayed in this moment of confrontation. Proud people don't welcome loving warning, rebuke, confrontation, question, criticism, or accountability, because they don't feel the need for it. And when they do fail, they are very good at erecting plausible reasons for what they said or did, given the stresses of the situation or relationship in which it was done.

Pastor, are you quick to admit weakness? Are you ready to own your failures before God and others? Are you ready to face your weaknesses with humility? Remember, pastor, if the eyes or ears of a ministry partner ever see or hear your sin, weakness, or failure, it is never a hassle, it is never a ministry interruption, and it should never be viewed as an affront. It is always grace. God loves you, and he has put you in this community of faith, and he will reveal your personal spiritual needs to those around you so that they may be his tools of conviction, rescue, and transformation.

8) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO STRUGGLE WITH THE BLESSINGS OF OTHERS.

Self-glory is always at the base of envy. You are envious of the blessings of others because you see them as less deserving than you are.

And because you see yourself as more deserving, it is hard not to be mad that they got what you deserve, and it is nearly impossible not to crave and covet what they are wrongfully enjoying. In your envious self-glory you are actually charging God with being unjust and unfair. In ways you may not be aware of, you begin to be comfortable with doubting God's wisdom, justice, and goodness. You don't think he has been kind to you in the way that you deserve. This begins to rob you of motivation to do what is right, because it doesn't seem to make any difference.

It is important to recognize that there is a short step between envy and bitterness. That's why envious Asaph cries in Psalm 73, "All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence" (v. 13). He's saying, "I've obeyed, and this is what I get?" Then he writes, "When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you" (vv. 21-22). What a word picture—a bitter beast! I have met many bitter pastors, men who are convinced that they've endured hardships that they really didn't deserve. I have met many bitter pastors, envious of the ministries of others, who have lost their motivation and their joy and are heartlessly cranking out ministry week after week. I have met many pastors who have come to doubt the goodness of God, and, tragically, they don't tend to run for help in their time of need to someone they've come to doubt.

9) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO BE MORE POSITION ORIENTED THAN SUBMISSION ORIENTED.

Self-glory will always make you more oriented to place, power, and position than to how submission to a greater King is worked out in the context of your ministry. You see this in the lives of the disciples. Jesus hadn't called them to himself to make their little-kingdom purposes come true but to welcome them as recipients and instruments of the work of a better kingdom. Yet, in their pride, they missed the whole point and were all too perseveringly oriented to the question of who would be greatest in the kingdom.

You can never fulfill your ambassadorial calling and at the same



time want the power and position of a king. Position orientation will cause you to be political when you should be pastoral. It will cause you to require service when you should be willing to serve. It will cause you to demand of others what you wouldn't be willing to do yourself. It will cause you to ask for privilege when you should be willing to give up your rights. It will cause you to think too much about how things will affect you rather than about how things will reflect on Christ. It will cause you to want to set the agenda rather than to find joy in submitting to the agenda of Another. Self-glory turns chosen and called ambassadors into self-appointed kings. And when this happens, in ways you and I might not be aware of, we are ministering to promote a person, but that person just doesn't happen to be Jesus Christ.

10) SELF-GLORY WILL CAUSE YOU TO CONTROL  
MINISTRY RATHER THAN DELEGATE MINISTRY.

You, when you are full of yourself, when you are too self-assured, will tend to think that you're the most capable person in the circle of your ministry. You will find it hard to recognize and esteem the God-given gifts of others, and because you don't, you will find it hard to make your ministry a community process. Thinking of yourself more highly than you ought to think always leads to looking down on others in some way. It is personal humility and neediness that will cause you to seek out and esteem the gifts and contributions of others. Pastors who think that they've arrived don't tend to like group process and tend to see delegation as a bit of a waste of time. In their hearts they think, *Why should I give to another what I could do better myself?* Pastoral pride will crush shared ministry and the essential ministry of the body of Christ.



It is important to say that I have written the above section with personal grief and remorse. In shocking self-glory I have fallen, at some times in my ministry, into all of these traps. I have dominated when I should have listened. I have controlled what I should have given

to others. I have been defensive when I desperately needed rebuke. I have resisted help when I should have been crying out for it. I have been too full of my own opinion and too dismissive of the perspective of others. I have paraded my stuff for the approval of others. I am sad as I reflect on my many years of ministry, but I am not depressed. I am not, because in all of my weakness, the God of amazing grace has rescued and restored again and again. He has progressively delivered me from me (a work that is still going on). And in being torn between the kingdom of self and the kingdom of God, he has miraculously used me in the lives of many. In love, he has worked to dent and deface my glory so that his glory would be my delight. He has plundered my kingdom so that his kingdom would be my joy. And he has crushed my crown under his feet so that I would quest to be a good ambassador and not crave to be a king.

In this violent mercy there is hope for every person in ministry. Your Lord is not just after the success of your ministry; he is working to dethrone you as well. It is only when his throne is more important than yours that you will find joy in the hard and humbling task of gospel ministry. And his grace will not relent until our hearts have been fully captured by his glory. Now, that's good news!