

REAL MINISTRY IN A COMPLEX WORLD

Leadership

JOURNAL

The following article is located at: <http://www.christianitytoday.com/le/2014/june-online-only/my-easy-trip-from-youth-minister-to-felon.html>



My Easy Trip from Youth Minister to Felon

The spiral into sin that destroyed my life and ministry.

Name Withheld

Seven years ago I was hired by my church to be the new youth minister. The youth group was on life support at the time, with only a few students involved. My wife and I, newly married, already had good relationships with the students and their parents and, with my college ministry experience, I seemed to be the perfect fit for the position.

The ministry grew steadily. Within a few years the group that once struggled to fill a minivan was taking over 40 students to camp every summer. Teens were involved in every area of our church. The students were participating in local, regional, and international missions, and were inviting their friends to our activities. The gospel was being taught, and students were accepting Christ, getting baptized, and serving.

Other youth ministers, wanting to experience the same growth in their groups, would ask me for tips on how to reach and connect with students. The growth of the youth group was so significant that our church was pursuing the purchase of a bus and considering plans to expand the facility and build a gym. We had outgrown our own building. I had no doubt that God had called me to the position and that he had even greater things in store for the ministry and for me.

But there was one problem. Because of that problem, I am now in prison and the youth group is back on life support. This is the story of how I went from being a successful youth minister to a convicted felon in 3 easy steps.

My inner failure

A few years into my marriage and ministry I began to believe a lie. The realities of parenthood and marriage were sinking in, and I felt unappreciated at home. From my perspective, I was excelling at work and at home—and this perceived lack of appreciation led me to believe I deserved more.

Sin that is not dealt with doesn't fade away. It destroys us from the inside. Meanwhile, there was someone else in my life that appreciated me very much. Seeking approval and appreciation, I gravitated toward that person. She and I were always happy to see each other and looked forward to each other's company. Before long, we were texting each other and interacting through social media. Nothing scandalous or questionable—a Facebook "like" or comment here, a friendly text there. Things friends do.

But I knew what appeared innocent was, in reality, wrong and very dangerous. Red flags kept popping up. *Why was I not talking about this "friendship" with my wife? Why was I being secretive and sneaky about it? Why didn't I, in the earliest stages, when I knew the "friendship" was rapidly escalating beyond what it should be, slam on the brakes?*

The answer: I had failed to address the sin in my life. Sin that is not dealt with doesn't fade away. It destroys us from the inside.

Consider King David's adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. Well before Bathsheba's pregnancy and David's successful plot to have her husband Uriah killed, the King was already acting selfishly:

"In the spring of the year, the time when kings go out to battle, David sent Joab and his servants with him, and all Israel. And they ravaged the Ammonites and besieged Rabbah. But David remained in Jerusalem." (2 Samuel 11:1)

At a time when kings went out to war, David chose to stay home and pursue leisure rather than fight alongside his countrymen. David's choice to stay home provides an insight into where his heart was at the moment. He was being selfish. Perhaps he considered himself better than his soldiers or deserving of more pleasure than the average man. David's selfishness led to adultery, which then led to lying, deceit, and murder. The effects of his sin hurt his family for generations.

Selfishness is at the root of all sin and I had been very selfish. I fooled myself into thinking that by working hard and being a good father, I had

earned a certain amount of reward. Since I felt I was not being rewarded at home, I deserved to be rewarded elsewhere. I never *thought* those words clearly, but my actions clearly revealed the condition of my heart.

A wrong and vicious cycle

Wrong thinking leads to sin, and sin leads to more wrong thinking. In the early stages of this extra-marital relationship, I thought that I was seeking approval from someone other than my wife because I was not receiving it from my wife. But me seeking approval and appreciation elsewhere had dramatically impacted how I related to my wife. The unaddressed sin—my selfishness—caused my wife to respond to me differently. I see now that I failed to nurture our marriage properly, but at the time I silently blamed *her* for driving me away.

Like David, my selfishness led to infidelity. Then, to destruction.

The "friendship" continued to develop. Talking and texting turned flirtatious. Flirting led to a physical relationship. It was all very slow and gradual, but it was constantly escalating. We were both riddled with guilt and tried to end things, but the allure of sin was strong. We had given the devil far more than a foothold and had quenched the Holy Spirit's prodding so many times, there was little-to-no willpower left.

We tried to end our involvement with each other many times, but it never lasted. How many smokers have quit smoking only to cave in at the next opportunity for a cigarette? We quit so many times, but the temptation of "one more time" proved too strong.

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Loving me, instead of Jesus

As a minister in my early 30's, I was in the sweet spot—about halfway between the age of a student and the parents. The students looked up to me as a cool older brother that they could go to with life's problems. The parents saw me as a responsible young adult with whom they could trust their sweet, rebellious teens. I wanted the parents to trust me and the students to love me.

If the parents trusted me, they would support the ministry. But I didn't want just a youth group full of students that were forced to attend. I wanted the youth to *love* their group. More honestly, I wanted the students to love *me*.

The youth group was very small the first few years. The beauty of a small group is that one can build meaningful relationships with every student in the group, a task which proves more difficult when the group grows. In those early years, the group was very close. It felt like a family. As the years passed, the students who were middle-schoolers during the group's infancy became the core members, the leaders in a large group. Youth group is a year-round commitment. School teachers have students for 9 months, then trade them in for a whole new group. A youth minister is involved in the lives of his students year-round for up to 6 years. Over the years I had become very close with the small handful of students that had been involved since the early years. They had developed into leaders and I depended on them for feedback when planning activities. One of those students, though, I was depending on for more than just feedback.

My heart was not totally corrupt. My team of youth workers and I worked hard to have a Christ-centered ministry and there was much fruit to prove it. But I was often made the hero of the group's successes. With false modesty, I would accept the praise of parents, church members and students. Many were aware of the group's humble beginnings. They patted me on the back for ushering in a season of unprecedented growth. I would pay lip service to their compliments by crediting "a great team of committed youth workers," and "students' boldness in inviting friends." I knew that when the youth workers and students were recognized, it was still a reflection upon my leadership abilities. Not once did I credit the Lord—as Paul did in [1 Cor 3:6](#): "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth."

If I was applauded by the church. I was revered by the students. They loved the camps, retreats and mission trips I planned. The activities and games I organized were the most fun. My lessons were smart, funny and memorable. I was preaching about Christ crucified, but if He had shown up at one of my events, He would have been no higher than the second most important man there. I was the king of my own little kingdom, but pride comes before the fall.

In early June of 2012 I was the keynote speaker at a baccalaureate service for the graduates of the largest high school in our community. Later that month I took over 40 students to a missions-based camp. There were hundreds of students at camp and my youth group was the largest. A couple of weeks later I led a mission trip to Haiti for the outgoing seniors. Throughout all of this, the too-close relationship continued.

By all visible measures, I was a success and the youth group was firing on all cylinders, a model for other ministries to emulate. By the invisible measures that only the Lord can see, though, I was filthy and bringing nothing but dishonor to my position as a minister and to Jesus' name. In spite of me, the group continued to grow, flourish and produce fruit.

Warnings ignored

If the consequences of sin are so painful, so severe, why doesn't God prevent us from falling so far?

God does not stop us from sinning, but neither is he sitting idly by, waiting for us to stumble. He provides clear warnings for us in his word. He uses other believers to hold us to account and, most amazingly, he use the Holy Spirit to speak to us from the inside.

In his Word, God gives ample warning against sin as well as instructions on how to avoid it. He repeatedly calls believers to be holy because he is holy. Our failure to fully recognize the holiness of God is directly responsible for our failure to obey him.

If the consequences of sin are so painful, so severe, why doesn't God prevent us from

When Uzzah saw the Ark of the Covenant tipping over and was struck dead for reaching out to stabilize it, was God being unfair? No, God had given clear instructions that no one was to touch the ark because it was holy.

R.C. Sproul writes in his seminal book *The Holiness of God* that Uzzah considered his hand more holy than the

falling so far?

muddy, sinless ground beneath him. He failed to recognize how completely holy God is and how much sin separates us from him. God does not look upon sin. The reason Jesus cried out from the cross "My God, why have you forsaken me?" was because in that moment he was bearing the sins of the world. Jesus felt the Father's gaze leave him. We wonder why we don't feel the presence of God in our lives while we're all tangled up with sin. It is because we separated ourselves from him.

Just like Uzzah had no excuse, neither did I. God's Word gave me plenty of warnings and instructions, which I failed to heed.

God also uses other believers to draw attention to our sin. Early in the relationship, my "friend" and I were accused of being too close to each other. We were offended and dismissed the allegations as jealous words. After all, at the time we were just talking. Even then though, we were lying to ourselves and others. We knew that our relationship had crossed a line and discretion was needed. We played off the allegations and used them as an excuse to draw closer to each other. Sin had a powerful hold on us.

Third, God convicts us of sin through the Holy Spirit. The very Spirit of God lives within the believer. He is guiding us to all truth, discerning spiritual things for our human minds, praying for us with deep groans when our words fail and convicting us of our sin. Consider this: The same Spirit that hovered over the face of the deep at creation lives within you. The same spirit that came in power on the day of Pentecost lives within you. The same Spirit that Jesus promised to send to us as a counselor lives within you.

That Spirit, the spirit of God, convicts us and pleads with us to resist sin. Yet we ignore the warnings. We quench the Holy Spirit. Once a sinner ignores the prodding of the Holy Spirit the first time, it is easier to do each subsequent time. Eventually the sinner becomes numb to the prodding of the Holy Spirit.

God never gives up on us, but when it is the only remaining option, he will give us over to our sins. In the Bible, when God "gave them over to their sin" ([Romans 1:24](#)), it means that he allowed sinners to hit rock bottom, so they would then realize their need to be rescued. God does not want anyone to sin. He hates sin and does not look upon it. Yet he also knows when someone is so lost in sin that their only hope of returning to him is to reach the end of themselves and recognize their need for a savior.

In my extramarital relationship I did not heed God's warnings or commands given to me in the scriptures. I failed to admit my sin and repent when confronted by another believer. I also quenched the Holy Spirit and became numb to the Spirit's pleadings.

All things come into the light

You may have guessed by now that the "friend" in my relationship was a student. She was one of the core students, involved from the very beginning. Our families were very close, which meant a lot of time together over the years. She adored me and I loved the adoration.

Submit your ministry, marriage and life to the Lord.

When my wife discovered incriminating text messages on my phone, I knew instantly that everything was about to come crashing down. After hours of screaming and crying, she packed some bags, loaded our 2 kids into the minivan and left the house at 3 AM. I have not seen my kids since. It has been over a year. The only time I have seen my wife has been in court. We have not communicated in one year. I lost my job, and was required to drop out of seminary. I pleaded guilty to 2 felonies, am serving time in prison and will be a registered sex offender for the rest of my life.

You know your own area of selfishness. Maybe it's dangerously close to mine. Are you flirting with a student, playing favorites or struggling with lust? Whatever it is, stop *now*. Repent of your sin and make it known to those who need to know: your spouse, your boss, your accountability partner. Deal with your sin before it destroys your life and brings down your family and church in the process.

Submit your ministry, marriage and life to the Lord. He is faithful. He will establish you and guard you from the evil one. Put to death in you what is earthly, so God can get back to using you for His glory.

Sooner or later, all things come into the light.

Author's Note: In response to readers' concerns, the author of this piece has offered the following clarification: "I recognize that what I initially considered a consensual relationship was actually preying on a minor. Youth pastors who do the same are not "in relationship" but are indeed sexual predators. I take 100 percent of the responsibility for what happened."

Churches rarely think about student-leader boundaries—until the unthinkable happens. Don't wait until something happens.

An excellent resource for protecting student/minister boundaries is [Draw the Line: Relational Boundaries for Safe Youth Ministry](#), available from our friends at [Church Law and Tax](#).

The writer serves as a GED tutor and helps lead the Christian community at the facility where he is serving his sentence. He is due to be released in the fall of 2015.

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