

PERSONAL QUALITIES A MINISTER NEEDS TO BE DEVELOPING

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The qualities for a good minister begin with the virtues of good Christian living. In preparation becoming a Christian minister, you cannot bypass Christian virtues and start with the developing professional skills or learning religious information. After all, ministry exists for the express purpose of bringing people into a pattern of living that is more appropriate to, and consistent with, relationship to God and other people. Below is a suggestive list of personal qualities that ministers particularly need to have.

I. Workmindedness

Get your enjoyment out of (a) giving more than receiving and (b) accomplishment as well as experiences. Work means output and goal-oriented activity, which means it is something in which you give of yourself to bring something about. In most cases in the ministry you are not on a time clock and no one checks to see how much time and effort you are putting into the work. Furthermore, so much of a minister's activity is hard to measure in terms of time spent, even if someone wanted to measure it. You are often working outside the office as well as in it. Some around-town conversations you get into with a church member or community person are hard to classify as work or leisure because they lead to opportunities for ministry he would not have had otherwise. What they are depends on what they become, so to speak. You may be eating at someone's home, but during the meal you are talking "church business" or doctrinal issues. The point is that ministers have to be self-starters who are committed to their work, the congregation, and the Lord. Since there are few external sources of motivation, you have to rely on intrinsic motivation and internal initiative. Consequently, people end up evaluating your work is according to results; if things are going and growing, they assume you are getting the job done.

Be a well-rounded worker. A person can work with his hands, his head, and his heart. Some people tend to be physically active and mentally lazy while others are physically lazy and mentally alert. Still others have a good heart but they do not work very hard or think very intensely. In ministry you need to be balanced in the ways you are willing to work even though you will probably not be working as much with your hands as with your minds and hearts. Being personally detached (heart) causes people not to appreciate for your hard mental or physical work. Hard workers will consider you lazy if you are not willing to pitch in and help with your hands even though you may have "a lot on the ball" mentally and even affectively.

II. Gratitude

Be grateful for the financial support you receive from the church and from church people (cp. Philippians 4:10-17). Remember that you are not paid for your work; you are

supported so you can do the work. A minister's financial package is not as inadequate as it used to be, but in most cases it is still not outstanding. Accordingly ministers can feel cheated in comparison to other people with equivalent education, experience, and responsibility. As a counterbalance, however, church people often bring you fruits and vegetables from their gardens and orchards or give you meat from time to time. They probably invite you over for a meal more often than they do other members of the church. If the church has a parsonage, they usually pay for the upkeep and do much of the work involved. The more you show them you appreciate what they are doing to support you (instead of complaining that it is not more) the more they will be inclined to do. People enjoy doing things for people who show that they really appreciate it. Some gifts will not in themselves be that large or that special, but receive them relative to the love of the giver more than the value of the gift. Here of all place "it's the thought that counts." Learn to be given things, shown things, and even told things. Move gratitude felt into gratitude expressed, which is "thanksgiving."

III. Non-Defensiveness

Unfortunately ministers are among the worst offenders when it comes to reacting to criticism and suggestions. The reason may be that listening or being corrected appears to take the leadership out of their hands. If that is the problem, they misunderstand what it means to lead; it probably indicates their own personal insecurity as well.

Learn to take constructive criticism and listen to advice. If people know you can receive suggestions without getting offended or getting your feelings hurt, they will offer their ideas in a less critical fashion. Many people feel uncomfortable disagreeing with you or wanting you to do something differently. They almost have to get mad before they work up enough courage to say something. They wait so long because they are afraid of rejection. They end up waiting too long—until they do not care whether they are rejected or not—and then "dump" on you in angry tones. You can help them avoid this pattern by projecting an openness to other people's ideas, which means they will come to you sooner and more easily with their concerns.

When people make suggestions or offer criticisms, be slow to react to what they say. They often do not mean what they at first sound like they mean. Count on their inadequately expressing ideas; otherwise you can get concerned before you realize that what they mean is not as bad as you thought at first. Try to treat the issue objectively rather than take it personally; most people are not out to hurt you or "get you." Your task is not to defend yourself or justify how you have done something, but to accomplish the purpose of your calling to the glory of God and the profit of men. Do not immediately start pointing out weaknesses in their suggestions even if you see some. Waiting a while before you answer or asking questions about their point conveys to them that you are showing them respect by thinking about their proposal; then if you set it aside you can give clearer reasons for doing so. A slow, controlled "soft answer turns away wrath" (Proverbs 15:1). Listening to criticism does not mean believing it is accurate. Keep the person talking till you find out what is really bothering him. Sometimes the things verbalized are not the real problem. Communicate the attitude that the two of you are on the same team; it is just a matter of deciding together how best to get things done.

IV. Humility

Most of us have rather little to be proud of. We can always know more, do more, live better, be wiser. There may be those in your congregation who highly appreciate your abilities, commitment, or work. Do not let their praise blind you to the faults you really have and the greater progress you ought to be making. God is not the only one that “resists the proud and gives grace to the humble”; most people do the same thing. The person that exalts himself will find other people tearing him down, probably because they do not like the implied “put-down” on them: “he who exalts himself will be abased”; that is a social pattern.

V. Courtesy

The way you treat the checkout person at the grocery store or other customers while you are shopping or waiting in line at the bank says a lot to the person in the community. The same goes for the way you respect other motorists in traffic and other people at the gas pumps. Being rude to other ministers in town on the excuse that they are “false teachers” is still rude. You do not have to make yourself a doormat for other people to walk on, but courtesy and respect are a far cry from making yourself a zero. Do not give little hints that you expect special consideration because you are a minister, either in price breaks at the store or special privileges, say, on checking out books from the library, parking regulations at public places, and the like. There is nothing about being a minister that entitles you to special privileges.

VI. Compassionateness

Take it easy with the less-than-ideal people in town—the old and infirm at the senior citizen home, the marginal person in the pew, the ignorant and uneducated man on the street, the people that are having problems in their marriages or with the kids. Except for God’s grace you could be any one of them. Actually, before all is said and done, you may be guilty of some sins they are committing or be lacking in some ways they are deficient, or suffer what they are suffering. When you care about people, you focus on how you can help them or how you can help them become rather than on what they are. Your concern is for the good things they are missing or for the unhappiness they are experiencing from their sin or their condition. In this age our role is the same as that of Christ, who did not come to condemn the world but to save it.

VII. Faithfulness

Faithfulness obviously refers to faithfulness to Christ and therefore the Christian calling generally, a matter applicable to all Christians regardless of their roles in the body.

Consequently, faithfulness includes a wide range of *moral expectancies* implied by identification with Christ and faithfulness to Christian teaching, that is, faithfulness to *the word*. We do not preach ourselves but Christ and the message he gave us. We need to keep that distinct from things like *psychological research*, however helpful its insights may be as reinforcements the plain teaching of scripture.

Faithfulness includes faithfulness to ministry in contrast to a multitude of other affairs of this life in which it is easy for a church leader to get entangled (2 Timothy 2:4). We need to keep that ministry distinct from political concerns that are in themselves important and even relevant, but the pulpit is not the place for “civil religion.” Our role is not to be anti-communist leaders or social activists per se in regard to a host of issues and worthy missions clamoring for attention. Our stance in Christian ministry is from the perspective of Christ, as Paul put it, to “know nothing among you except Jesus Christ crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2).

Not getting entangled in affairs of this life and knowing nothing by Jesus Christ imply attitudes toward the ministry that keep ministers, not only from getting too involved even as private persons in the “social gospel” plea, but from getting overly involved in *community efforts* that are unrelated to their ministries. They are attitudes also that keep ministers from *sidelights* that are too time consuming: hobbies, Amway distributorships, and the like.

Another important thing both for you and your ministry is faithfulness to you spouse and family. In a day when cultural expectancy conforms less and less to Christian ideals, Christian leaders need to make stronger conscious commitment to Christian morals in marriage. In some ways ministers are more vulnerable than other people are to sin in this matter. (a) Being in leadership role draws some women to you who might not be drawn to other people. Counseling situations lend themselves to perversion, especially when a kind of co-dependency develops between a counselor who “needs” affirmation and a counselee who “needs” security. (b) Since there is no real end to what a ministry can involve, ministers can get too involved in it for their own good and for the good of their marriages and children. Neglecting the “home fires” may not lead the minister into sin, but it may create a domestic vacuum that makes sin easier for the spouse to get into. It is not a matter of putting the church or the family first and the other second; it is a matter of integrating them for the better health of both. After all, the wife and children have a part in the church even though it may not involve leadership ministry.

V. Reliability

Leaders have to accept responsibility. “I forgot” will not be overlooked too many times before your natural leadership will disappear in the minds of other people. Not remembering appointments quickly erodes your credibility. Write things down! Use 3 x 5 cards to keep lists of what you need to do. Have a planning calendar, if necessary, to help you plot out your day--something you can carry with you, not just a desk calendar “at the office.” Once you get something written down, you can relax knowing that you will not forget about doing it. Then each morning look over the things you need to do that day; it will give you a feel of being on top of things without sensing so much anxiety over having so much to do.

Above all things, finish what you start. Moving from one thing to another without finishing the first one gets to be a habit. People get in the habit of doing what they like to do

more than what they need to do. As long as some project is new and interesting they keep at it, but as soon as the novelty wears off they start letting it slide because something else has caught their attention.

Make sure you are reliable in your financials dealings. Not paying your bills is not practicing what you preach. You will be viewed as another Elmer Gantry. In this connection endeavor not to get into more debt than you can handle comfortably particularly remembering that unexpected financial demands may come up. Merchants may not be too sympathetic to not receiving their due because they may not realize that you are not paying them because you cannot pay them. Not being able to pay may even reflect negatively on the church in the eyes of the community.

VII. Flexibility

Get away from needing large amounts of free time. Part of the reason for saying this is that ministers will seldom be able to cover their part of the work in a church in a 40-45 hour week. A more realistic expectancy ought to be in the 50-60 hour bracket. Related to this fact is the additional fact that you need to feel comfortable working when other people have free time. Sunday is a full work day for ministers. For the typical church member, however, Sunday may be the only day they have off. Consequently, for your sanity and their cooperation do not fill Sunday afternoon with meetings; the same goes for meetings after evening church. It might not be a bad idea to free up Sunday evening and use Wednesday night instead.

Get used to being interrupted. Take the attitude that interruptions are opportunities to help people you care about. Ministry means serving them when their difficulties arise, and a person's difficulties do not worry about being convenient even to that person's schedule much less to someone else's.

Get away from needing lots of entertainment. Instead of trying to get enjoyment out of play (non-directional activity), learn to get enjoyment and fulfillment out of work (goal-oriented activity). One mark of an adult is learning to get satisfaction out of work.

Get away from the needing too much privacy. Every person needs some "I time" when he can think without interruption or can put his mind in neutral, but being a private person and being a leader do not mix.

Get away from the need for lots of money and the things money can buy. Along with this goes frugality and self-restraint. Wastefulness does not set well with other people who work hard to make ends meet. You need not expect people in the church to be good givers when you do not show responsibility in the use of your money and things.

Get out of the habit of thinking that there is one way to do everything. The main point is to get the job done (effectiveness). It is better to get it done less efficiently than not to get it done at all because you have been too intrusive in how the church goes about its business. Part of what it means to do something "right" in the church is to get people to take greater ownership of that responsibility; increasing their interest and willingness to help often means allowing them some freedom and "say-so" in how to do it. After all, it is better for them to take twice as long doing it in a less efficient way than for you to have to do it and perhaps to end up not being able to get it done at all.

VIII. Self-Discipline

In general, develop an internal locus of control. Do not get in the habit of depending on pressure or other people for your motivation. Learn to get up in the morning; do not rely on your schedule to force you out of bed. Letting schedule and other people set your agenda takes control of your life out of your hands. You will not have a good self-image when you do not feel in charge even of yourself. Going to bed at a decent hour and getting up in the morning is especially crucial in rural areas, where people are accustomed to rising early and getting at the chores. The same thing applies to most third-world mission areas. If you are sleeping till 9 o'clock in the morning, people will consider you lazy and they do not follow lazy people.