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Remaining centered this Christmas

By Pete Scazzero

It is ironic that Christmas is often the time we as pastors find ourselves least centered on Jesus. With the emergence of social media and new technologies, this problem has reached new proportions.

The following is an adaption of my top 10 lessons for leadership applied to this Advent season.

1. **Be yourself.**

You and I are uniquely crafted by God to lead. That means we cannot do what others can. You may be able to do more or less. The great challenge of leadership is to calmly differentiate your "true self" from the demands and voices around you. Discern the desires, vision, pace, and mission the Father has given as you lead. Take off Saul's armor. How much activity can you sustain without losing your soul? And remember, "to live unfaithfully to yourself is to cause others great damage" (Rumi).

2. **Your first work is to be contemplative before God (to be with him).**

Our goal during this season is to lead people to Jesus and help them center on him. But you cannot bring people where you have not gone in God. We are not CEOs or even preachers first. We are called to be contemplatives first (Psalm 27:4). Above all else, cultivate a pure heart before God, loving him.

I like what Thomas Merton once wrote: "Untie my hands and deliver me from sloth. Set me free from the laziness that goes about disguised as activity when activity is not demanded of me and from the cowardice that does what is not demanded in order to escape sacrifice."

3. **Practice Sabbath.**

Take a 24-hour period each week to Sabbath – to stop, rest, and contemplate God. You are not God. This essential spiritual formation practice is not something to drop during the celebration of Christ's coming. I take from 6:00 p.m. Friday to 6:00 p.m. Saturday at a minimum. Large spiritual issues are at stake, especially with regard to trusting God to be in control. Relinquish the ministry to Jesus.

4. **Embrace the gift of your limits.**

Remember that "a man can receive only what is given him from heaven" (John 3:27). You will be present to your spouse and children in proportion to what you've received from being in God's presence. It takes time and effort to think through thoughtful gifts with meaning for your family and key leaders. I encourage you to make sure you have the margin in your life to do that.

5. **Wait on the Lord.**

This is your life. You will finish the end of your days waiting on the Lord. This is the most important work there is if you are to allow your soul to grow up and be what God wants you to be. Be sure to carve out time for this.

6. **Don't neglect ministry to yourself.**

"Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Timothy 4:16). Investing in your development is your first ministry. This includes monthly and quarterly retreats, utilizing the gift of therapy along the way, finding a good spiritual director, and seeking mentors at different stages of the journey. It is the most loving gift you can give your church. What does this mean for Christmas? Take a few moments now to ask God what you need to remain connected to him over the next few weeks.

7. **Lead out of your vow of marriage.**

Scripture is clear about marriage between one male and one female as a taste of Christ's free love for his bride, the church. And central to this marriage vision is the sexual relationship. It is essential, not peripheral, to your spiritual formation and discipleship as a Christ-follower.

8. **Live what you preach.**

Good sermons take a lot of time to gestate. If the sermons aren't changing you, they will not transform anyone else. This is both a joy and an agony if fresh revelation from Scripture is going to come through the unique prism of your life. This never changes, whether you have been preaching for six months or 30 years.

9. **All the work of pastoring is holy and sacred.**

It took me 19 years to learn this hard lesson, and I am still learning it. Preparing budgets and job descriptions, hiring, firing, planning a good meeting, handing in reports, confronting conflicts, etc. is every part as holy as prayer and Bible study. Be sure to fight against the sacred/secular split first in your own life and then in the life of the church. Recover a biblical theology of work and spirituality.

10. **Things are not as they appear.**

So often what looks like a blessing is not. What looks terrible in the short run is, very often, a rich gift. When you think you are going forward, you may be actually going backwards. What appears as success, oftentimes ends up being a failure and setback. Failures will teach you much more than success every time.

The pressures of Christmas can distract us from what's most important. I hope these 10 lessons will help you focus on Christ and enjoy this holiday season.

Pete Scazzero is senior pastor of New Life Fellowship in Queens, New York City, and author of *Emotionally Healthy Spirituality* (Nelson, 2006) and *The Emotionally Healthy Church* (Zondervan, 2003). To learn more about Pete's ministry, visit www.emotionallyhealthy.org.



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