

The Temptation of Stagnancy

If intimacy is the gift at this first level, then stagnancy is the temptation. Ironically, it is our doing nature that breeds rather than overcomes this stagnancy. For the godly steward, the call to lead must be simultaneously a call to greater depth in our relationship with God. Yet so often the opposite occurs. As the demands of the job pile up, our time and focus on this life-giving relationship diminish. Our people expect us to be, both physically present everywhere and spiritually prepared at all times. No leader can do both, and too often we trade the quiet time of spiritual preparation for physical presence at meetings, events, fundraisers and the like.

We must see this trade-off as a deal with the devil. It is nothing less than a surrender to depending a little more on our own strength and a little less on God's; trusting a little more in our own ideas and a little less on God's wisdom; being a little more content with listening to our own voice and those of our people than to the "still, small voice" of the Holy Spirit.

There are three symptoms of this stagnancy: self-reliance, distance, and shallowness.

Self-reliance. Self-reliance is the subtle dethroning of God from the center of our lives. In the life of the leader under siege this does not happen in an obvious way, but a little at a time. The enemy does not storm in and demand that we deny Christ and take the throne of our lives by force. Instead, it happens in little ways, edging its way into our lives. It is the result of a slow loss of daily intimacy with God.

One beautiful autumn day in my Seattle-area home, I had a load of wood delivered for our wood stove. Instead of paying extra for the wood to be split, I bought it in unsplit cut to length logs, thinking I would save money and get some exercise in the process. The truck dumped a large load of these cut to length but unsplit logs in my yard, averaging about 60 centimeters across. As it pulled away, I was impressed by the size of the pile and the amount of work that awaited me.

So, in typical fearless, lumberjack fashion I put on my best leather gloves, grasped the handle of my heavy splitting axe and positioned the first hunk of wood directly in front of me. I set my feet firmly, squared my shoulders, eyed the center of that piece of wood, drew back the mighty axe and with a powerful swing brought the full force of its sharp edge slamming perfectly into the dead center of the log. The sound it made, was not what I expected. Instead of the crack of wood splitting, the blow I delivered reverberated with a quiet "thupptt." The maul's edge bounced off as if repelled by some demon force, and the wood glared back at me, unphased. I smiled confidently and thought, *Must be a knot*. So I repositioned the log and repeated the process, only again to hear the benign "thupptt." A bead of sweat trickled down my forehead as I weighed my options.

Clearly force was my only weapon, so I began furiously swinging the axe at the piece of wood, which didn't seem to mind much. It just sat there, enduring my blows as my calm demeanor turned to frustration and then outright panic as I considered the pile of fifty or so stubborn rounds of wood waiting for me. Finally, with my knees shaking, my arms quivering from the repeated swings of

the heavy axe and sweat blurring my vision, I took one last desperate swing. I missed my mark, significantly. Instead of hitting the center, I nearly missed the entire log. My maul caught the round only about 5 centimeters in from the edge. And an incredible thing happened. Crack! A piece of the formerly unconquerable log came flying off. As I stopped to study the situation for a moment, it dawned on me that I didn't need to (and couldn't, for that matter) split the log down the middle. Instead of one fatal blow to the center, the log was hewn by a succession of lighter blows around the edges. One by one, each swing brought the cracking sound and pieces separating from the main log.

Within just a few moments, with less work and only a few well-placed strokes, the once invincible round lay in ten pieces around me. What was left was the center piece, still bearing the marks of multiple blows to which it had not yielded. However, this time I took one easy swing, hit the same marks I had created in vain earlier, and the log, no longer surrounded by the mass of wood that had been chipped away, split straight down the middle and fell in pieces at my feet.

I learned a great lesson that day, far beyond how to split logs. The enemy seldom attacks us with blows to the center of our faith. He knows there is too much strength to destroy us with such a frontal attack. So instead, he plans his blows more carefully and lands them more strategically. Quietly, without much fuss, he works away at us around the edges. There he finds it much easier to split off little pieces that go almost unnoticed.

These pieces are the small compromises we make in our time with our Lord. They are the little, seemingly harmless concessions we make to self

reliance. They are the growing number of times we, work in our own strength and according to our own wisdom. They are the trade-offs we make to be more visible and active in our leadership roles. Slowly, piece by piece, compromise by compromise, we, are being chipped away like wood. And the cost is our intimacy with God.

We overcome self-reliance with submission, not with more doing. The key for us here is that stagnancy is a symptom of our **doing**, not our lack of doing. **The more we seek to do, the more we fail to be.** Author and pastor Douglas Webster writes, "Taking initiative is not the starting point for spiritual growth...Instead of a quest for success there needs to be a rest for the soul, from which life's meaning, purpose and significance proceed."

We see that even here we must identify and avoid the temptation of a doing dominated way of life. For it is easy to insert ourselves as the primary actor in this process. By doing so, we destroy the very thing we are seeking to attain. Hannah Whitehall Smith puts it this way:

“Man's part is to trust, God's part is to work Plainly the believer can do nothing but trust; while the Lord in whom he trusts, actually does the work entrusted to Him Your part is simply to rest. His part is to sustain you; and He cannot fail.”

Distance. Steve Korch describes the sense of distance from God as a symptom of the stagnancy that comes when we value our work over our character. Oswald Sanders looks at it from another angle, noting that when we ignore our stewardship of our relationship with God, it is we who have

created the distance we feel: "Both Scripture and experience teach us that it is we, not God, who determine the degree of intimacy with Him that we enjoy. We are at this moment as close to God as we really choose to be."

When we fail to submit ourselves completely to God, we commit ourselves to an unauthentic spiritual life. We may still go through the motions, but we end up dishonest with God and impersonating life. The result is a sense of distance from God, and the fruit is disappointment with God.

To overcome this distance, we must recapture intimacy with our loving God. Again, we find that it is in our "being" that we find intimacy with God. The surrender of the will is an essential element of that intimacy. In it we acknowledge our weakness and place ourselves under the authority of God's Word. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

Shallowness. When we cling to the shallows and refuse the call to go deeper into unknown waters, we face stagnation. We were not created for the shallows. God has so much more for us out in the deeper water. It is fear that causes us to pull back from going deeper, and pride that provides the false sensation that "I can do everything I need to from the shoreline, thank you very much!"

One of the most terrifying places to find yourself is working in a leadership position vocationally while you are still splashing around in the shallow waves spiritually. This is the place from which leaders begin to gain power and make ethical compromises. Shallow leaders are easy prey for the sexual and financial temptations that always prowl around the power that comes with

leadership. With their journey of transformation on hold and intimacy with God receding, these leaders are left fully exposed to the attacks of the enemy.

We must move from spiritual shallowness to the next deeper step in our relationship with God. Korch says. Until we go deeper, we are left to fight with our old nature, constantly gazing back into the former life and fighting battles with it over and over again.

Self-reliance, distance and shallowness are the great enemies of our intimacy with God. They lead to stagnancy and leave us standing on the shore.

As stewards of our relationship with God, we must recognize these danger signs. When we are called to be steward leaders, the danger signs must become loud alarms.

The great news is that the God who created us, saved us, and now daily awaits our response to his gentle calling into deeper waters is a long-suffering and patient God. He will not drag us into the surf kicking and screaming. Neither will he give up on us and leave us to ourselves. He will always call, always offer, always wait.

What is the next deeper step in your relationship with God?

A Discipline: Praying for a Restoration of a Thirst for Intimacy

Every day in the life of a steward leader must begin with a thirst for intimacy with God. Pray for it, cultivate it, repent of the obstacles you have placed in front of it, expect it as a gift from God, and celebrate it when it is found.

This thirst is a gift, but it must be pursued and received.

Start your day with a prayer that asks God to restore in you the thirst and hunger for deeper intimacy with him. David prayed, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation" (Psalm 51:12). That daily prayer of restoration is the discipline of the steward leader. As God answers this sincere prayer, the habits and practices you will need to maintain this intimacy and to go deeper with Christ will be revealed through your time with God. There is no formula for greater intimacy, Just a heart that yearns for it daily.

- [Yet so often the opposite occurs. As the demands of the job pile up, our time and focus on this life-giving relationship diminish.](#) Have you experienced this?
- [The more we seek to do, the more we fail to be.](#) Why is this true in the life of a Steward Leader?
- [When we fail to submit ourselves completely to God, we commit ourselves to an unauthentic spiritual life.](#) What is the connection between complete submission and an authentic spiritual life.
- [One of the most terrifying places to find yourself is working in a leadership position vocationally while you are still splashing around in the shallow waves spiritually.](#) Why is this so?