

MORAL FAILURE

One of the most painful experiences you'll go through is when a staff member fails morally. What do you say to your staff and how do you handle it? This is an inside look on how Saddleback pastor, Rick Warren, handled such an incident. You'll be reading the transcript as Rick speaks to his staff. Saddleback constructs the restoration plan around the issue the person is dealing with.

Rick:

It is with great sadness that I need to report a staff resignation due to an inappropriate relationship. That's all the details I'm going to give you. I ask you to try to not find out any more about it, because honestly, you don't need to know the details. You just need to know they had a moral failure. They have resigned. To talk about it would be gossip anyway. I would encourage you, if you feel like it, to drop them a note of prayer and encouragement during the next week or two as a brother or sister in Christ.

Having dealt with that, and that's really all the details I'm going to give, I want to talk to you about three or four major issues. I want to talk to you about maintaining integrity in staff relationships. I want to talk to you about the difference between forgiveness and trust. I want to talk to you about avoiding gossip. And I want to talk to you about what to do with potentially damaging information about a staff member or a member of a church. What do you do with it?

First off, I want to recommend that every one of you on staff, relisten to my tape "Maintaining Moral Integrity in the Ministry". It's one of the Leadership Lifters. It's a lesson I reteach our staff every single year. Some of you are new here at Saddleback and you probably have not heard that yet in the go around of the year. But that message "Maintaining Moral Integrity in the Ministry" has a series of what we call Saddleback Staff Commandments that have kept this problem from occurring. It's actually only occurred one other time in 21 years, in the history of our church. I want you to listen to that.

As a staff member you are both a minister and a leader of our church. I don't care what your job is. You are a minister and you are a leader.

The Bible says that leaders are held to a higher standard. And we are to be what the Bible says, "above reproach". That means I want to live my life in such a way that people have to make up stuff about me in order to accuse me of something. It's not a matter of what's black and white and what's gray, not staying out of the gray area and staying clearly living in the light.

We have a set of these ten moral standards, the Saddleback Staff Commandments that you need to be very familiar with. If you violate any of these Ten Commandments you will be disciplined. This may sound legalistic but I would rather go overboard than be thrown overboard. I want to live my life in such a way that it really is above reproach. I can say to you that in 21 years as pastor of this church I have never been - not for a single second - in a room with a woman other than my wife by myself with the door closed in 21 years. It's never happened. I will not even go down the elevator at the ministry center in our office with a female staff member. And Barb and Harriett you know that.

We always joke about who's going to go down first. I just have never put myself in the situation where I've never been alone with any woman, except my own wife.

There are other things besides moral failure. If you're drinking or you're gambling or if you're violating any other of the standards, you need to admit it as a staff member and you need to come to us and let us help you with your recovery. I need to be honest with you. If you have an affair you will be fired from this staff. In the first place, how could you minister if your life is living

a lie? You have to be living a life of integrity in order to minister and what does it profit a man if he keeps his job and loses his soul. What's far more important than you keeping your job is us helping you with your recovery because sin does not have to be the end of your life. But it does have to be a time of accountability, of repentance, of restitution, and of restoration.

Really when you think about it is what is worse about this situation is at the heart of any moral failure is deceit. At the base you end up lying to God, you end up lying to other people, you end up lying to yourself. When you lie to other people then you have lost your credibility and you have lost your trust. And that is what leadership is all about. All of leadership is built on trust. Once you've lost the trust of other people, you're not the leader. I don't care if you've got the position or not, you're not the leader any more.

The amazing thing about trust is it takes years and years to build trust and credibility. But it can be lost in an instant. It can be lost overnight. Then it takes even longer to rebuild trust, to rebuild credibility.

It doesn't really matter when the sin occurred. It could have occurred three months ago, six months ago, a year ago, two years ago or whatever.

If you cover it up then you continue to live in deceit. The Bible says in the book of Proverbs "He who covers his sin will not prosper. But he who confesses and forsakes them gets another chance." You may have committed a sin and then you broke it off but if you keep covering it up, it destroys your fellowship with God and that makes ministry impossible.

Everybody has a past. Everybody on staff. I have a past, you have a past. But it's secrecy that destroys our lives and destroys our ministry. It's not the sin, it's holding the secret of the sin that creates a double life, a double standard and a life of hypocrisy. If you are struggling in any area as a staff member I beg you, I beg you to come see me. Let us talk about it, let us help you. I'd rather hear it from you than hearing it from somebody else. I don't want to have somebody calling me a year from now in another state saying, "Do you know 'this' about a staff member?" I want you to come and talk to me and let us work on it and let us work on a recovery program in your life.

You need to understand the difference between forgiveness and trust, because most of society has no understanding of these two concepts. Forgiveness is a personal issue but trust is a positional issue. It's a leadership issue, because as I said, all leadership is built on trust. Forgiveness is instant. The moment this staff member came to me and it was revealed, confessed, I immediately forgave them. Why? Because I have been forgiven. I will never have to forgive anybody else more than I have been forgiven by Jesus Christ. We live in a state of constant forgiveness. We are all trophies of grace. And the Bible says that we are to forgive as we have been forgiven and God forgives us instantly and God forgives us completely and so we are to forgive instantly and completely to others. Forgiveness is based on grace.

But trust is a different issue. Trust is rebuilt slowly and trust is not built on grace. Trust is built on behavior. For instance, if a woman is being battered by her husband and the husband comes to her and says, "Will you please forgive me?" She must forgive Him because of what Jesus commands. She has to forgive him because if she doesn't bitterness will be in her heart and then she is sinning. But she does not have to let him back into the house because he has not proven to be trustworthy. Forgiveness is instant. Trust takes time. Forgiveness is built on grace. Trust is built on works, it's built on behavior. And as I've said, you cannot lead people if they don't trust you.

Whenever a leader has a moral failure they need a time out. They need to get out of the spotlight. Always being in the spotlight blinds you and you cannot be in recovery and be in the spotlight at the same time.

And you cannot minister and really lead while you're trying to rebuild your life because it divides up your energy. It's like a bunch of light bulbs. If you've got one light bulb plugged into a battery it will go for a long time. If you put in two light bulbs, it drains it in half the time. When you've had a major failure in your life, you need to put all your energy in restoring your fellowship with God, restoring the fellowship with those you've hurt, making restitution, and you don't need to have any energy going out for anything else. So a leader needs a time out.

I want to say this very clearly. Restoration to ministry or restoration to leadership is possible. I believe that. It is definitely possible. I do believe in the God of second chances. But it should not be assumed. It requires a long time track record of proving several things. Proving accountability, proving responsibility, proving repentance, and proving most of all humility.

Why do I say most of all humility? Because the thing that allows us to change after a major failure is grace. Grace is the power to change after we've stumbled. Where do you get grace? The Bible tells us "God gives grace to the humble, but He resists - He opposes - the proud." When I'm prideful, God is not just looking the other way. I am living in opposition to God when I'm prideful. And of course, when I cover up my sin what is that? It's pride.

It's very humbling, it's actually humiliating, to admit a failure, particularly a moral failure. But in that very act of humiliation we find the grace to change. The very thing we hate the most - having people find out, having people know, feeling humbled by that is the very attitude that will make the change in our lives and will allow us to grow and let God bring good out of bad and have our character rebuilt and our lives restored.

It does take these issues of accountability and repentance and humility.

When a Christian leader sins - and I'm talking about leadership now, as I said, everyone of you as staff members are leaders - they need to step out of the spotlight and they need to get a secular job while they work on their marriage, while they work on their relationship to God.

This is not something I just made up. Everything we try to do here at Saddleback is based on the Bible. The Bible is very, very clear about what to do in this situation. In 1 Corinthians 5:1-13 you can find it all spelled out there and I hope you'll study this passage after this meeting. Let me read some of it to you out of the Message paraphrase.

A situation like this occurred in the church in Corinth. Paul was talking about the moral failure of a leader in that church. He says in verse 1 "I received a report of scandalous sex within your church family. Shouldn't this break your hearts? Shouldn't it bring you to your knees in tears? Shouldn't this person and his conduct be confronted and dealt with? You must not simply look the other way and hope it goes away on its own. Bring it out in the open and deal with it in the authority of Jesus our master." And that's what Paul says to do.

He says bring it out in the open. One of the reasons is it gets rid of gossip and we'll talk about that in a minute. He says, "Assemble the community. I'll be present with you in spirit and our master Jesus Christ will be present with you in power. Hold this man's conduct up to public scrutiny. Let him defend it if he can. If he can't, then out with him. It will be totally devastating to him of course and embarrassing to you but better devastation and embarrassment than damnation. You want him on his feet and forgiven before the master on the day of judgment." Paul goes on to say, "You pass it off as a small thing but it's anything but that. Yeast too is a small thing but it works its way through the whole batch of bread dough pretty fast. So get rid of the yeast. I wrote you in my earlier letter that you shouldn't make yourselves at home among the sexually promiscuous. I didn't mean that you should have nothing to do with outsiders of that sort or crooks whether blue or white collar. I am saying that you shouldn't act as if everything is just fine when one of your Christian companions is promiscuous or crooked. You can't just go along with this, treating it as acceptable behavior. I'm not responsible for what the outsiders do but don't we have some responsibility for those without our community of believers? God decides on

the outsiders but we need to decide when our brothers and sisters are out of line and if necessary, clean house."

Those are pretty painful words but we have to do what God says. I don't like disappointing people. I don't like getting people's disapproval.

But there is something that I fear more than the disapproval of other people. And that is the disapproval of God. I am jealous for the integrity of this church. I would rather die - I mean this! - than hurt this church. I'd rather stick a knife through my heart than harm the reputation of this church. The Bible says when you have to clean house, you have to clean house.

So when anybody has had a moral failure, they need to be taken out of the spotlight of ministry. People say, "Why don't we just keep them on staff and try to restore them while they're on staff?" Because the Bible says not to. The Bible says they need a time out. And they cannot be working on their life at the same time. You can't just crash your life and keep on working no matter who or what you confess to. The sooner, obviously, you confess the better. That way you get it out of the deceit phase.

What I'm saying is this. Forgiveness is immediate but restoration after adultery always takes time. And I have found in now over thirty years of public ministry that it takes at least a year. At least a year, for people who have stumbled in ministry with an affair. And it takes deep and very painful growth. You cannot rush your return to ministry no matter how much you or I or anybody else would like that to be possible.

Let's talk about the issue of gossip for a minute. When you become a member of Saddleback church you sign a membership covenant. You promise to keep that covenant as a member. The first item on that covenant says, "I will protect the unity of my church by not gossiping." You make a promise, not just as a staff member, but as a member of this church not to gossip. Gossip destroys churches faster than any other single issue. The second is dissent but number one is gossip.

What is gossip? You've probably heard me say this many times. Gossip is when you're sharing information and you're neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. If I'm not part of the problem and I'm not part of the solution and I'm talking about it then I am gossiping. The Bible has a word for that. It's called sin.

Gossips are always very needy people who get their power from sharing secrets and withholding secrets. By holding on to information they draw the attention to themselves. It makes them the center of attention and that's why they do it.

When someone comes up and gossips to you, instead of participating in their sin you should avoid them. In fact, you should encourage them to seek council. Do not enable them. Did you know that by law if you accept stolen goods and you know they're stolen goods by law in America you could be held accountable for the same penalty as if you stole them yourself. When you listen to gossip that's stolen information. When you continue to listen to gossip instead of stopping it, or instead of leaving the situation God says you're as guilty as the one who was just speaking.

So I am begging you as a church leader, as a staff member, it is your duty to confront and stop all gossip immediately when you hear it. You don't just walk away from it, you stop it. Whether it's from other staff members or it's from members of the church you say, "This is gossip. We shouldn't be talking about it." That's all you have to say. This is gossip, we shouldn't be talking about it.

When you're in a small group. Small groups often couch gossip in the phrase, "Prayer request." Small groups should pray about their own problems not the problems of other people. Gossips in

a small group should be confronted. The Bible tells us in Titus that they should be warned twice and if they do not change after being warned twice the Bible tells us in Titus they should be asked to leave if they persist. They should be asked to leave the church or leave the group.

When somebody comes to you and they start to tell information never, never promise to withhold information told to you by a gossip. What it does is it makes you a party to their sin. If somebody tells you something damaging about another person and you can't help it and then they ask you to keep it a secret then you must take it to a pastor who can help. Because you don't want to be holding on to information that makes you a partner in crime or a partner in sin.

That brings up this issue: what do you do when you hear rumors? And there are lots of them in a church of Saddleback's size. What do you do when you hear rumors? Or you hear potentially damaging information about a staff member?

You've got two choices.

One you can go directly to that person in the spirit of Matthew 18. In Matthew 18 it tells us the formula for biblical confrontation. It says if you've got something against your brother or they've got something against you, you go to that person directly and you confront them. Then it says if they don't listen you go get another person and you go back and you confront them again. Then it says if they don't listen to that, you take it to the elders. The elders of Saddleback church are the pastors of Saddleback. The word elder, pastor and bishop are all used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to the same church leader.

That's what the Bible says to do. I didn't say that, Jesus did. You go to them directly. If they don't listen you take another person. And if they still don't listen you say, "Since you're not listening to us, we're going to take it to a pastor." And you go directly to them.

That's your first choice. If you don't want to do that or you don't think you can do it you just go ahead and go directly to a pastor. What you don't do is take it to a small group and say, "We need to pray about this." Then you have just become a gossip.

What do you do when maybe a staff member is struggling in an area, and maybe they come to you and they talk to you about an area of sin? This is not gossip. It's their coming to you. Now you know information that could cause them to either be disciplined or if it's an affair could cause them to lose their job. What do you do in that situation?

You encourage them to go talk to a pastor. I'd say, "I think you need to go talk to Pastor Rick about this. I think you need to go tell Pastor Glenn about this." My door is always open to our staff. So is Pastor Glenn or Tom or Doug or Brett or John or Forrest. Any of our pastors would be more than happy. We do it all the time. We really do. You'll never know about it because we keep confidences.

If you say, "I think you ought to go to Pastor Rick and talk to him about it." Give them a week and then tell them, "If you don't do it I'm going to come back to you in a short time. And in the spirit of Matthew 18 I'm coming with another person to convince you to do that." Then if they still don't you bring it to the pastor.

These are difficult days. My heart is broken over the situation. I've already cried a whole lot. We're working with those involved and we're praying for restoration and healing in their lives - their personal lives and in their families. But for you, let this be a warning. The Bible says, "Let him who stands take heed lest he falls."

The Bible says, "The heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. Who can know it?" That means my heart is deceitful. Rick Warren's heart. So is yours. We're kidding ourselves if we don't think we could stumble.

Given the right situation, any person is capable of any sin given the right circumstance. That's why we do not come to this with a spirit of pride or arrogance or self-righteousness. The Bible says, "Let him who is spiritual gently restore those who have stumbled." And that's what we hope to do.

So be praying for our staff and be praying for the families involved and be praying for our church and be praying for yourself and your own family. That we will walk with integrity and we will walk with humility, that we will not allow gossip to dominate our church but we will follow the biblical prescriptions of dealing with sin when it occurs. We shouldn't be shocked because we are all sinners, we're all saved by grace. But we all need to live lives that are worthy of the trust and respect that leaders are given and realizing that sin doesn't just hurt one person but it always hurts many, many innocent people.