A Self-Feeding Program for Pastors — and Their Church

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Your words were found and I ate them, and your words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart; for I have been called by Your name, O Lord God of hosts.

Jeremiah 15:16

The sullen staff member entered my office, saying only, "I think my season is up here." I'd heard those words before from others. Over many years as a pastor I've welcomed people in and I've bid them adieu. For some, it was a normal part of growing and maturing, but this one would leave me confused. He had been with us four years. "Is there any reason why you feel your time may be up?" I asked.

"Well …" he hesitated, "I'm just not being fed here."

I hate those words, from a staff person or a church attender. Not because I'm insecure, but more because the very culture of New Hope, our church community, is designed to alleviate symptoms like these. For the past ten years, we have intentionally built a culture that includes a self-feeding program for each individual, beginning with our staff. The refusal of this responsibility opens the floodgates for a codependency of sorts---one that requires others to don the responsibilities God intends for every person.

I challenged him with this picture:

> Imagine that my wife sees me one day, gaunt and emaciated. My eyes are sunken into gray sockets, my body is frail, exposing my skeleton; my abdomen is distended from starvation. I've obviously not been eating. When she sees me in this condition, she exclaims, "What in the world is happening to you?!"
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> My answer is: "I'm not getting fed around here." Then, continuing my lament: "No one is feeding me."
>
> What do you think her response would be?
>
> "Feed yourself!"

I then asked the staff member if he was doing his daily devotions. My words were met with an empty stare. I knew he had let this one life essential drop off his list of what was important to ministry success.

I accepted his resignation.

I remember a time when, as a pastor, I was in that same exact place, faced with the looming consequences of a nonexistent self-feeding program. I also recall having delegated that responsibility to others.

THE REALIZATION

Shortly after I became a Christian, I found myself complaining to God about the quality of my church's academic-style preacher who often flew things at a high altitude where I was unable to cruise. I began my complaint in a bathroom after a service.

"God!" I called out, hoping I was alone in the men's room. "I'm going to starve in this place! I'm not getting fed. I'm dying here, suffering from malnutrition!"

I'm not sure if it was a chuckle from the stall next to me or a reply from heaven, but I recall becoming acutely conscious of something as the Spirit spoke to me from the depths of my own anguished being.

What about ME? He seemed to whisper. *Am I not enough? Why are you blaming others for your lack of growth? You are depending on once-a-week feedings, but as you grow up you must learn to feed yourself! I will be your Mentor.*

My problem wasn't a lack of resources; my problem was that I was expecting others to spoon-feed me. Until that point I'd resisted God's best programs and his most gifted teacher, the Holy Spirit. He had been inviting me to be his student, but I'd remained unresponsive. I wanted others to do what only I could do: take responsibility for my own spiritual health and nourishment.

As I began to get into the Bible on my own, I saw that Psalm 32:8-9 struck at the core of my error.

> I will instruct you and teach you in the way which you should go; I will counsel you with My eye upon you. Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check, otherwise they will not come near to you.

I had to admit the ugly truth: I was that horse. I was that mule. It's no fun making that confession. It was time for me to take responsibility for my own future.

THE LAST FIVE PERCENT

I hate to break the bad news to you, but about 80 percent of all you do, anyone can do! For example, going to work, attending meetings, checking e-mail, answering phones, going to soccer games and lunches and dinners.

Additionally, about 15 percent of all you do someone with some measure of training could do in your place. Whether it's preaching a sermon, running a program, teaching a class, or fixing a problem, there are education and training available for someone else to do what you do.

But at least five percent of what you do, only you can do. No one else can do it for you.

Only I can be a husband to my wife, Anna. Only I can be a dad to my three children. Only I can keep my body healthy. And only I can grow spiritually! No one else can do the last five percent for me. I alone am responsible for it. Only you can keep yourself spiritually healthy by feeding yourself. No one can do it for you by proxy. The same is true for your church members.

It’s for this last five percent that each of us will be held accountable in that great and final day. It’s the last five percent that will determine the depth of influence we will have on the generations after us. It’s the last five percent of us that will decide how joyful our marriage will be and how genuine our legacy is.

And one of the most important aspects of the five percent is this: No one but you can sit before the Lord to hear his instructions for you! Jesus’ words again ring true as he speaks to you and me: “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many things; but only one thing is necessary, for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from her.”

The last five percent … it’s something we have to discover and then be responsible for.

.. Only I can be a husband/wife to my spouse.
.. Only I can be a father/mother to my children.
.. Only I can grow myself spiritually.
.. Only I can keep myself healthy.
.. Only I can keep myself disciplined.

I know I will need some help with these. I need coaching and mentoring. My big challenge still lies before me: applying what I learn.

Just as only one thing really is necessary, there’s only one place to find this help. Let me introduce you to someone who has been given the assignment to assure our foundations … if we will allow him.

TRUTH NEEDS A GUIDE

As a new believer I made a very common error. I wanted others to study hard and prepare well so they could dump bushels of knowledge into my brain.

I didn’t realize that knowledge---even biblical knowledge---is like sodium in raw form. Sodium can be destructive to humans … until it gets converted into a higher form: sodium chloride, or table salt. In the same way, knowledge is never an end in itself. It must be converted into a higher form---wisdom---for it to become useful and beneficial to us. To that end, God sends us the Holy Spirit, who will “guide us into all truth” … because *truth needs a guide*.

> *I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that he may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth.*
>
> John 14:16-17; 16:13

Sure, we shepherd others. But they remain primarily responsible for their own spiritual well being. And as pastors, God has assigned his Spirit to be also our Guide---the Guide who will deposit God’s very wisdom into our lives.

So how does that work? Does the Divine Mentor implant information and insight into our subconscious minds while we sleep? Does he build a golden aqueduct between heaven and our soul, and then open wisdom’s floodgates so that it can pour directly into our minds?

Not exactly.

We receive direct revelation about God and discover his wonderful promises in only one place: the Bible. The psalmist cried out to the Lord, “You have exalted above all things your name and your word.” (Psalm 138:2 NIV)

God’s Word, the Bible, is crucially important to our everyday lives. And don’t think obscure religious knowledge here. *Think food. Think water. Think air.*

As a pastor who has worked with people for over 33 years, let me speak plainly: You won’t survive without God’s insight and wisdom.

I’ve encountered many pastors and people who believe otherwise, and I’ve watched them implode. We gain all-important wisdom only as the Divine Mentor instructs us through a living interaction with and understanding of God’s Word.

Our need for such a guide becomes increasingly vital as we get closer and closer to the end of history, for that is when spiritual deception will become most rampant.

Paul warned his young disciple Timothy of a startling fact about living in the end times: There would be more false prophets than true ones! He cautioned that many people living in those days will have a strong tendency to be “always learning and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

Without the Guide, we can learn facts all day long and yet never move one inch closer to the truth that will make a difference in our lives. But with the Spirit imparting to us God’s wisdom as he reveals it to us from his Word, the whole picture changes. With the Lord as our Divine Mentor, the wisdom of the ages gradually becomes our own.

TRAVELING COMPANIONS

Did you know that top athletes always rely on a coach? In terms of “equipment,” every superstar performer brings along more than clubs or rackets or cleats.

I’ve heard people ask, “Why would they need a coach? They’re the best in the world!”

That’s *why* they’re the best in the world. They cannot become and remain the best at what they do until they understand and apply the crucial essential of being coachable.

This is equally true for each of us, so God designated and assigned some of history’s best mentors to us. Sometimes, they will keep us improving. Other times, they will just keep us alive.

> *By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain … and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks.* (James 1:9 NASB)

Abel *speaks?* This man goes all the way back to when man could still see angels with flaming swords barring the way to the Garden of Eden. He called Adam “Dad” and Eve “Mom.” He was the first man to ever die on planet Earth.

Abel goes back just a bit, don't you think?

Yet the Bible says this man still has something to say to you and me. He will take his place as an assigned mentor.

And so will Noah, Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, Elijah, Nahum, John, and Peter. Likewise, Sarah, Deborah, Ruth, Naomi, Mary, Martha, Dorcas, and Priscilla. And scores of others. These men and women, though they no longer maintain an earthly address, wait to speak to you out of the living Word of God.

They are waiting to mentor you---to encourage and correct you---just as a good coach will instruct his players. At times they will raise their voices, because they see you rushing toward a dead end. On other occasions they will stand in your path, like the angel with the drawn sword who blocked Balaam, and say, "You're not going to do it."

When you want to take a left turn down a blind alley or head the wrong direction on a one-way street, it may be Jeremiah or Ezekiel or David who will exhort or reprove you. Regardless, these are phenomenal mentors to have on your side!

I remember grumbling on the golf course one day about how terrible my round was going. (God always seems to answer my prayers, except on the links.)We were playing in a foursome, but I didn't realize a fifth had joined us on the fourteenth green. Just as my grumblings were increasing in decibels, I heard James whisper, "Let the brother of humble circumstances glory in his high position." In other words, "It could be worse!"

Immediately I recognized the voice of someone I had just talked with that morning over coffee. I remember chuckling quietly and whispering to myself, " Busted!"

A MULTITUDE OF MENTORS

Over a period of about 1,500 years, God chose more than 40 different men to write down his divine words in a book. Just like he gave the angels assignments to be ministering spirits, so he's given the people of his book the assignment to mentor you and me.

I can't think of a better mentor for a businessman than Solomon, who reached an unbelievable pinnacle of success while still a young man.

I can't think of a better mentor for a pastor than Moses. This great leader shepherded a congregation, not of thousands but of millions! We can walk with him through the desert and feel the sand's heat on our toes.

I can't think of a better mentor for a professional than Luke, the physician, or for an educator than Paul, or for a mother than Mary. You get the idea. God has given these men and women the assignment to mentor his children in every facet of life. They live in the Scriptures by his power and breath, through his inspired Word.

All these have gone before us, Scripture says. And now they're in the grandstands, cheering us on. Isaiah, Sarah, Ezekiel, Mary, Matthew, Ruth, Daniel, Esther---all of them and many more stand ready and eager to mentor us. We have only to ask.

THE GOOD AND THE BAD: LESSONS FROM BOTH SIDES

There are two basic kinds of mentors in the Bible. Most of them, like Abraham, Daniel, and James, are godly mentors. They teach us how to live wisely, how to please the heart of Almighty God.

But the Bible also features many mentors who, through their examples of foolish or even evil living, teach us how not to live. God includes the stories of Cain, Esau, Ahab, Jezebel, Herod, and Judas, allowing their shrill voices to live on so that we do not make the same destructive choices they made.

They provide potent illustrations that will speak to us from the downside of poor decisions. Solomon reminds us of this:

> *I passed by the field of the sluggard*
> *And by the vineyard of the man lacking sense,*
> *And behold, it was completely overgrown with thistles;*
> *Its surface was covered with nettles,*
> *And its stone wall was broken down.*
> *When I saw, I reflected upon it;*
> *I looked, and* received *instruction.* (Proverbs 24:30-32)

A few years ago, a young man left Hawaii for a short time to enter a popular mission's school of biblical studies. When he returned I asked him, "How were your classes?"

He replied, "Some were dynamite! But some were a total *waste*."

"What do you mean?"

"Some of the instructors were good, but the rest were awfully bad. So I didn't learn much from them."

"No!" I challenged. "Don't do that! You can learn as much from the bad as the good."

"You don't understand," he said, explaining his plight. "Some were so tedious, we were bored stiff within three minutes."

"That's fantastic!"

"What?"

"You can learn valuable lessons from them," I said. "Take notes on that. Let them read like this: 'Our morning teacher is able to bore us to sleep in only three minutes. This has rarely been accomplished! This must be a miracle.'"

I continued. "*Analyze* what he did: What made it so boring? Was it his monotone voice? Lack of research? Tired passion? If you can figure out how to learn from the bad as well as from the good, you'll learn twice as much in life."

That's why God put into the Bible raw, unedited accounts of men and women behaving both wisely and foolishly. He handpicked these people to mentor us, the good and the bad together. Remember what Paul said? " For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through endurance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

Lessons come from every angle. So get ready! The best gems will come from those ignoble characters who have left them behind … unclaimed. If you will go there, those treasures will belong to you!

Do you want your inheritance? Talking about our standing in Christ, as heirs to God's promise to Abraham, Paul wrote: "As long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by the father"

Your inheritance is what God has in store for you, that latent treasure, that potentiality, those possibilities for your life. He keeps most of it under the guardianship of caretakers until you come of age. It's almost as if the biblical mentors are caretakers who steward your inheritance until you come of age. So they will teach you, advise you, tutor you---mentor you---until you receive the fullness of what God intends for you.

You have a divine inheritance waiting. This is held in abeyance, in trust, until you come to a point of maturity. So here's the real question: How badly and how soon do you want your inheritance?

PURSUE THE BEST

The people around you are going to influence your life. The influences will be good or bad … so pursue the best ones. Don't leave this to chance. Go after it!

> *He who walks with wise men will be wise,*
> *But the companion of fools will suffer harm.*

Do you hear your mentor's instructions? We become like those people we hang around with. As far as the "why," you've probably heard the answer so often it sounds like a cliché. But it happens to be the truth. *Wisdom is contagious. It's something you catch more than something you comprehend.*

If we want to be wise, we have to hang around wise men and women. You and I must diligently pursue those who will have the best and most uplifting influence on our lives.

"That's fine," you may be saying, "but I don't have people like that in my life right now. In fact, many people I'm around in my family and at my job aren't living the sort of life I want at all. Where do I find these wise men and women?"

Actually, they're in close proximity---right this moment. They are Joseph, Daniel, Abigail, Isaac, Mary, Jacob, Ruth, Joshua, Esther, Josiah … the wisest people in history are waiting for you! When you hang out with them, their insights and perspective on life will rub off on you.

It doesn't matter what age you are, what school you attend, what environment surrounds you---you can choose to be in the company of wise people. And you can start today.

Their voices continue to echo down the hallway of God's house, and after thousands of years not one decibel has been lost through degeneration of sound. Their words are as alive today as the day they were first uttered.

Captured in a kind of time warp, these mentors steward potent lessons of life and wisdom, awaiting a diligent discoverer. The prophets still speak. The coaches still live. The guides await your visit. In fact, they *covet* your friendship and they *expect* your company. Listen to the writer of Hebrews, talking about the Bible's men and women: "And all these … did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, *so that apart from us, they would not be made perfect.*"

Physical death did not terminate their lives. God gave them the eternal assignment to tutor future generations of his children. They received a divine commission to mature us. Apart from us, they wouldn't be complete. They would have lived unfinished lives, because they are made complete only in us.

Discover these mentors as I have! I have oft strolled with David and listened to the sound of his harp in the hills. I have traversed the hot sands of the Sinai with Moses and listened to the Niagara of grumbling skeptics. I frequently have accompanied Solomon and listened to Wisdom shouting in the city square. I have even wrestled with Samson, begging for the answers to why he was so duped by Delilah.

These are real heroes who inspire us through their success and disciple us through their scars. We will walk alongside their rough, unedited lives, without pretense and with no best-foot forward performances.

They invite us to enter their dwellings. Are you with me? Our mentors are calling for us.

They've made their decision. The next one is ours.

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