

Warning Signs

Toxic...Pt.2

We've just begun a new series on toxic church culture and how to avoid it. We said in week one, that more than a denomination or a doctrine, the thing that draws you into a church more than anything is its culture; the patterns of learned and shared behaviors and actions that mark any social subset, written or unspoken. It's kind of "the vibe" that a church puts off over time. You *feel* it as much as anything. And culture is highly contagious – you become like who you hang around - so you want to make sure you're being drawn into a healthy one, not a toxic one.

I want to tell you a story I read about recently. Now, unlike the stories I started with last time, I do not know this one first hand. It took place in the 70's when I was but a wee lad. Billy James Hargis was a fundamentalist pastor who came to fame by spearheading Christian anti-Communism in the 1950's. In the 1960's he turned his attention to the sliding sexual morality of the nation.

Reverend Hargis became very popular in evangelical circles and, in addition to his church, used his influence to create a network of radio stations, a Bible college, and publishing house.

He was behind such best selling literally gems as *Communism, Hypnotism and the Beatles* and *Is the School House the Proper Place to Teach Raw Sex?*

But all of his influence would disappear like so much sand when, in 1976, *Time Magazine* published an expose called "The Sins of Billy James". Several young men at his college came forward to charge that Hargis had engaged in sexual relations with them over a three year period. What set the ball rolling was a couple from the college that, on their honeymoon, the groom - wanting to start his marriage with a clean conscience - confessed to his wife that he'd had sex with Pastor Hargis, only for her to confess that she had as well! The sins of Billy James, indeed!

Now, that's particularly salacious I admit, but since then such scandals have only become more widespread. The hypocrisy of people who proclaim one value publicly – while carrying on the exact opposite behind closed doors – is common knowledge thanks to – for one, the boom in investigative journalism that followed Watergate – but exponentially greater due to the power of social media. Every single one of us is carrying a broadcast news camera with instant satellite upload connection in our pockets at all times.

And of course this is not limited to religion. The stories of powerful men – and let’s be honest, it’s almost *always* men – who abuse their authority and public trust – be it in the realm of business, sports, entertainment or politics – are commonplace. And all of it erodes the glue that holds society together. I’m convinced that one of the reasons nobody trusts anybody else at the moment is because we’ve had too many examples of bad behavior exposed for it to be an outlier. How many times have we uttered, “Oh no, not...”?

But I think it’s especially damaging in the church. I think on a level people kind of expect political leaders to be morally suspect – I saw *Hamilton!* – but we expect more from our faith leaders. And we should! After all, people’s eternal destinies are at stake. I know personally of people who have left the faith after the fall of a Christian leader. Even Jesus said, “Strike the shepherd and the sheep will scatter.”

Listen, we’re a Protestant church, which means we believe and practice the “priesthood of all believers”. I do not claim to be any more important to God than anyone else because of what I do. In His eyes, we are all the same – the ground is level at the foot of the cross. And yet, of course, there are going to be different standards based on vocation. We all know how that works.

I have a brother-in-law who is a defense contractor. He had to go through *extensive* background checks to qualify for his high security job – including interviews with family members. Even now, he has different restrictions on his life than I do. For instance, he’s not allowed to leave the country without prior written notification. All I have to do is show a passport.

The same is true of ministers of the gospel. James, the brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem church gave a warning that, honestly, haunts me. **James 3:1**, “*Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach **will be judged more strictly.***” When you stand up in front of people and interpret the Scriptures and say, “Thus saith the Lord...”, there is a responsibility that comes with that. Because, if I lie to you about something, a newer Christian or a seeker, might just ask – reasonably – “What if he was lying about *everything*? What if the gospel is a lie, too?”

Now, I’m not better than anybody else. I’m still made of the same flesh. As Luther said, we’re all simultaneously saint and sinner. It is certainly possible that I could succumb to weakness and sin. But that’s all the more reason why – as James states – the consequences have to be more severe. For the sake of the authenticity of the gospel.

This is why, men, if one of you has an affair and I have an affair, we might both lose our marriage, but you can still go back to work on Monday. Meanwhile, my career is over. Of course, there may be a place for restoration depending on my level of repentance, the severity of the offense and the discernment of the denominational elders that I am submitted to. But I can promise you, at the *least*, I wouldn't be back at SWFF. And that's as it should be.

Nobody, and I mean nobody, is greater than the mission that God has given the church in this world through the revelation of His son, Jesus Christ. In the first sermon that he ever preached, Jesus revealed the kind of culture that the movement founded in his name should emulate.

Luke 4:18-21, “*The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, 19 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*’ 20 *Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, 21 and he began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”*”

That's it. Doesn't talk about the size of your building or your attendance or your budgets. Do you preach good news to those who need it the most? Is it a church culture that in everything it does and says and *Tweets*...tells people that they can find favor with God? Does *our* church culture look like that? Jesus lived out those values...and the culture of his followers reflected it.

We are *all* responsible for those values. Remember what we said last time, disease in a single branch can spread to the whole tree. But at the same time, there is one individual who can chop the tree down quicker than anybody else...and that's the pastor. And so I want to talk this morning about how to spot the early warning signs of a toxic pastoral culture in a church.

Because, again, some of you may find yourself looking for another church one day and you need to know what to look for. *And - because* I'm not exempt from sin - you have to know what the signs look like should they appear *in me*. It's like Old Yeller; they loved that dog, but when it got the rabies...you got to take it out back and...*click*.

So I want to give you two early warning signs of a toxic pastor this morning. But before I do...let me tell you real quick what I'm *not* talking about. Don't shoot the dog just because he sneezes! I've had a cough for over a week now. You can't *have* a cough in public these days. If you're at a restaurant and the water goes down the wrong pipe...just go home and sit in the dark, your social life is over!

So we need to distinguish between a toxic or abusive pastor, and a pastor who simply upsets or offends us. I'm not talking about differences of opinion or strong leadership. Listen, there are all kinds of different forms of church governance. The Bible does not mandate one over the other and, in fact, you can build a biblical case for most all of them. Some churches have strong board structures and some have strong pastor structures. I've seen both be successful, I've seen both be toxic. Health is not determined by the structure of the leadership, it's the hearts of the leaders in whatever the structure is.

Strong leadership is not necessarily abusive leadership. Yes, a culture can be ruined through abusive leadership, but it can also be ruined through a *lack* of leadership. Last time, I mentioned that I read leadership books and that they have trace amounts of ego poison in them I have to be careful with it. But

that doesn't mean I shouldn't read leadership books; that would be an unhealthy over correction.

We live in a culture right now that is very anti-authority. Some of you say, "Of course!" But hold on, there's a difference between authority and *authoritarianism*. Authority is good. God has established authority structures on earth in order to keep chaos at bay. There's a place for mutual respect and mutual submission in all levels of society.

But we want to knock down *any* authority right now. And I do believe that a lot of that *is* due to the abuses that have come to light in recent decades. I mean, if you can't trust Dr. Huxtable! This is why what we are talking about is so important. *But*...some of our anti-authority mindset is just good old human sin and selfishness. Especially in America, we are the most individualistic nation on the planet. "Nobody's going to tell *me* what to do!"

But it's also just fallen human nature. We're a race of rebels. I'm going to tell you a weird Bible story next week out of the books of *Judges*. And there's a refrain that is repeated over and over in that book, (**Judges 17:6**), "*In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as they saw fit.*" And that is a recipe for chaos.

So we're not talking about just strong leadership. Just because a pastor is leading in a direction you may not want to go – and because of the leading of the Holy Spirit, you don't have to follow them there – but it doesn't mean it's toxic or abusive leadership. It doesn't mean just something you don't agree with. It doesn't mean the pastor says something you don't like. In fact, if you care about maturing in your faith, you should *expect* to hear things that you don't like. There are frequently things in my sermon that *I don't* want to hear! The Bible steps on all of our toes.

I'm reading a new biography of the most important theologian of the 20th century, Karl Barth, and I had to laugh when I read an excerpt from a sermon he gave in his first pastorate. Now, he was young and I wouldn't advise actually *saying* this from the pulpit, but there's a hint of truth in it. “You have a wish for me to be a false prophet...the false prophet is the pastor who pleases the people. But to have a pastor in the village means to have eternal unrest in the village, [to have] a person who in the most uncomfortable way will continually question everything and will give unexpected replies to all questions.”

So, I'm sorry, if your idea of coming to church is just Sunday after Sunday of motivational speaking and happy thoughts for your soul – well, you can certainly find that – but you're not going to find it here. Because I don't find it in the ministry of Jesus, or Paul or *anyone* in the Bible to be honest.

So we're not talking about strong leadership or differences of opinion. What then *are* the warning signs of toxic leadership? Certainly there are more, but I want to focus on two: Narcissism and power through fear. **First up, Narcissism.** For some reason, church leadership too often seems to attract unempathetic, selfish narcissists. Whether they simply find their way to the top, or the top of the leadership tower attracts them – and both are probably somewhat true – far too many churches have narcissists in leadership.

How well do you know your pagan mythology? I had a class on Greek mythology back at UT – it was a lot of names! And one of them was Narcissus. He was an incredibly handsome god – little “g”. And one day he walked by a pond and caught a glimpse of his reflection, and he was smitten. My wife tells the story of one of her sisters who used to always position herself in the living room in such a way that she could see her reflection in the fireplace glass. And I was like, I know *that* story!

So Narcissus is entranced, but because it's only an image that has captured him, he can never obtain the object of his deep affections. And in his spellbound state, he's unable to do anything but stare, so he eventually dies from starvation – or suicide in the Roman version. And so the lesson is, don't be a narcissist; someone who cares only about themselves – what they look like and what other people think of them.

The Mayo Clinic offers a good definition:

“Narcissistic personality disorder...is a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for excessive attention and admiration, troubled relationships, and a lack of empathy for others. But behind this mask of extreme confidence lies a fragile self-esteem that’s vulnerable to the slightest criticism.”

Now, most of us struggle with selfishness. All of us – but especially men – have ego needs that are difficult to manage. Some of us have more emotional maturity than others. Many of us have issues of low self-esteem – whether we show it on the surface or not. But we’re talking about something that goes beyond that. This is a selfish drive that – especially in pastors – makes everything about them. In fact, it can be difficult to *separate* the pastor from the church.

I have confessed to you many times, that this church can be an idol in my life – the thing I look to other than God for my value and significance and purpose. I have spent time in counseling working on that. Because that’s dangerous. Romans chapter 1 tells us what happens when idols are allowed to go unchecked in our lives. It leads to all kinds of bad behaviors.

And that’s true of pastors and a church. One way you can test this is how does the pastor respond to criticism? Now, *nobody* likes criticism. Let’s just put that out there up front. It’s painful. But we have to grow to see criticism – even when it’s done poorly – as a gift. It might not even be valid, but do we pray about it, and ask God to reveal some kernel of truth, or do we defensively dismiss it out of hand? Get angry with the critic even?

Narcissists can’t handle any criticism. And therefore narcissistic leaders gravitate towards enablers who will pave their way to power, or at least not stand in their way. The operative term for enablers is **sycophants** – people who fawn over someone in a position of power and influence in order to gain power and influence of their own. I am so thankful that there are people of power in our church that feel perfectly comfortable to disagree with me!

In fact, I interviewed a person for the associate pastor role that eventually went to Pastor Connor and I’ve known this person for sometime, we are friends. But the biggest thing I had to tell them in the interview was, “If this were to work out, you would *have* to learn to give me bad news.” This person has a pleaser personality and is sometimes hesitant to disappoint me. I need people around me who will tell me the truth at all costs – especially truth I don’t like.

The ancient Roman philosopher, Plutarch, wrote a treatise called “*How to Tell a Flatterer from a Friend*” – the title of the essay gives you the whole point.

Proverbs 27:6 says, “*Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.*” Love someone enough to tell them the truth. Friends don’t let friends become narcissists.

But it goes both ways. We have to encourage truth telling in others. We have to ask for cold feedback and not punish it when we receive it. Narcissistic leaders are extremely sensitive to criticism. Rage is a common response – sometimes overt and other times through passive-aggressive actions and retribution. I talked in the opener about Bill Hybels, senior pastor of Willow Creek Church and an influential minister in my own life. He was brought down at the literal finish line of a forty-year ministry over charges of sexual misconduct and abuse of power.

The church brought in – eventually; they initially botched the accusations badly - an independent review board and here is one example of their findings; “Historically, annual performance reviews have been a painful process for the elders because of the Senior Pastor’s defensive outbursts. The board improved the process to make it go smoother and include feedback from all his direct reports and all Lead Pastors. Unfortunately, leadership staff were warned by their peers not to give any negative feedback that could be traced back to them for fear of repercussions from the Senior Pastor.

As a result, most of the negative feedback was not offered up by the staff to the performance review committee, and negative feedback was offered in a generic way. Some negative feedback was asked to be softened at the request of some board members believing the repercussions would not be worth it.”

For narcissists, it’s all about control. By the way, this is why narcissistic pastors, of churches large and small, tend to gravitate towards non-denominational churches where they answer to no-one, or to their own handpicked sycophants. I’m not saying you can’t find narcissists in denominations – you certainly can and do – but all kinds of studies show that independent churches are especially vulnerable to toxic pastor culture.

I don’t believe in independent churches. I don’t think they are biblical. Southwest Family Fellowship is *not* a non-denominational church. That may surprise some of you, because we don’t make a big deal of our denominational affiliation – I think it’s more important actually for *me* than it is for you. In many ways we are *culturally* different from other churches in the movement. But the way we say it – it’s on our website – we are an inter-denominational church that is affiliated with the Assemblies of God. Meaning, whatever flavor of Christian you consider yourself, you are welcome here.

But I am ordained with the Assemblies of God denomination and I can't just do anything I want. I am submitted to a whole Presbytery chain of elders above me who serve to hold me accountable when it comes to my theology, my morality, and my money. If you have a serious complaint about me, that's where to take it. Monica in the church office has all the contact information you would need. Heck, I'll do it right now; go to www.northtexas.ag and look up the leadership team. You can reach out to anybody on that list.

So response to critics is the first test of narcissistic leadership. But perhaps the most damning is a lack of empathy. See, when you're always looking at yourself, you can't be bothered to look at anybody else. A couple of years ago, *The Atlantic* magazine ran an article – not without controversy – called “Power Causes Brain Damage”. I told you leadership was poison!

But in it, they record the findings of a neuroscience program in Ontario that conducted a fascinating experiment. They put the heads of a variety of people from the very powerful to the not-so-powerful under a transcranial-magnetic-stimulation machine. And what they found was that the more power you had - and the longer you've had it – the more inhibited was a specific neural process called “mirroring” that may be the cornerstone of empathy.

To empathize with someone, we have to be able to put ourselves in their shoes, as it were. See the world through their eyes. “There but for the grace of God go I.” We have to mentally mirror, or mimic, their experience. But the accumulation of power directly leads to the reduction of the part of the brain that makes that possible. Isn't that fascinating? And terrifying? It's a warning to all of us.

Let me tell you, those people down on the street corners – I'm not saying you have to give them money every time, or *anytime* – but they are the canaries in the cold mine of your soul. Do you see them? Do you acknowledge their presence? Do you pray for them? We must intentionally cultivate empathy.

Who did Jesus hang around? Just the cool kids? No, he was full of empathy towards the least of these. The problem cases. The outsiders. When a pastor begins to just hang around people like him – people that can do something for him or for the church – that is a warning sign. Is the pastor accessible? That's harder the larger the church grows just because of logistics, but it shouldn't be impossible.

There is a disease in the contemporary church in America that I call “Green Room Christianity”. You know what a green room is? You go to a concert...Miranda Lambert is going to be in New Braunfels next Friday. For a couple hundred bucks a ticket you can be there. But will you actually *meet* Miranda Lambert. You will not. While you are sitting in your seat waiting for the fun to begin, Miranda Lambert will be hanging out backstage in the green room. Will they let *you* in the green room? They will not. Why? Because Miranda Lambert is *better* than you!

That’s what we believe in American celebrity culture. Now, I think that’s doing us all kinds of harm. Celebrities don’t tend to be the healthiest of individuals, do they? The higher the pedestal, the further the fall. I don’t think God intended for any of us to be celebrities – but that is especially true in the church.

There is a growing trend in church architecture to have green rooms. Now, there’s obviously a need for a place to get organized off stage – we have one right there. But any of you can go in it – I promise it will disappoint you. And I also don’t hang out back there, do I? No, before and after service, I want to be out front where you can find me.

But if you go to a church conference – and increasingly, just to a big church – you will find super lavish green rooms where the “celebrity” church staff can “refresh” – or as I call it, “hide.” That’s not healthy. What it actually does is create an insider/outsider culture.

And this is not just jealousy – there are a couple of conferences where I get to go back in the green room. It’s nice, they’ve got Topo-Chico back there! But I made a decision a couple of years ago not to do that anymore. I didn’t like what it did to my ego. What it did to my soul. Jesus was all about tearing *down* insider/outsider culture. In fact, we’re going to *end* this series with what a Jesus modeled culture would look like for a healthy church – so I won’t go into detail today.

But when a pastor loses the ability to find common ground with anyone and everyone in the church, that’s a warning sign. And the more power we have, and the longer we’ve had it, we have to be intentional about growing that part of our brain. You’re not immune as leaders either. What’s the name of the person who empties your trash at work? How do you treat interns? What do you know about the person who works in the office cafeteria? Empathy. Can you put yourself – even just in your imagination – in the experience of another.

When a leader loses this, it can create the neurological conditions for what's called the "**power paradox**". Ironically, once we have power, we lose some of the capacities we needed to gain it in the first place. How does a leader get people to rally to their cause? How do you get them to like you? By convincing them that you care. By showing them that you have their needs in mind. You see this in growing churches all the time. What starts as a mission to *reach* people for the gospel, can easily become a mission to *use* people for the advancement of the organization.

So what happens when a leader loses the ability to motivate through empathy? Again, a mark of narcissism, the first warning sign of a toxic pastor. Well, that leads to the **second warning sign: power through fear**. Listen, as a pastor, I don't have any power over you – not really. Not like other institutions in your life. If you choose not to come to church, I can't dock your pay. If you don't volunteer in a ministry, I can't fire you. If you don't study the Bible, I can't give you a failing grade that will alter your future career choices. If you don't give financially, I can't audit your accounts.

I have zero real power over you in a land of religious freedom – and thank God for that! But I still have to *lead* you. So the pastor has two tools in his or her tool box. One is fear and intimidation. And the other is

hope and inspiration. And let me assure you, fear and intimidation works – why do you think so many pastors use it? – it works especially in the short term. If you whip a horse, it *will* run faster. But you have to *keep* whipping it.

Fear is not a long-term motivator. Teachers, you get this. Fear of an upcoming test may make a student study. But do they really *learn*? Do they grow? Lasting change comes when they have a long-term goal. "I'm studying not to keep from failing, but because I want to *become* something. I want to be a doctor someday and therefore I have to do these disciplines today." Most teachers inspire that kind of thinking. But some just teach toward the test because that's how *they* get evaluated, and *their* advancement is what really matters. You can have a toxic culture in the classroom just like you can in the church.

Hope and inspiration takes a lot longer. I often think of the story of the old pastor of an old church who hired a new young associate pastor. And the young pastor noticed that old pastor would always tell the congregation from the pulpit how great they were. He'd take up the offering and say, "You're such a generous church." He'd talk about an outreach and say, "You're such a loving church."

But the longer the younger person was around, the more he realized what an actual mess the church was. These people were always fighting and they were stingy and they would do one thing on Sunday morning but another thing on Saturday night, and it was like pulling teeth to get them to show up to an event.

And he began to wonder if the old pastor was getting senile. And finally he couldn't help but ask, "Why do you tell them these things? Don't you see all the deficiencies in this congregation? Why do you say all these nice things about them?" And the old man said, "Well of course I see the reality, son. But I choose to hold a crown over their heads until they grow up into it."

That's wisdom. But you have to be patient. It doesn't happen quickly. And it's painful. Look, fear says, "If you don't do this, I'll *kill* you." The gospel of Jesus Christ says, "If you don't do this, I'll *die* for you." I can promise you that older pastor had done a lot of dying to self to get to that place. Probably a lot of ego builders he missed out on when it came time to brag at the pastors fellowship meeting. Because if all you care about is building the brand, increases in numbers and noses will get you that. And you can get that through fear.

I want to play you a clip from a sermon given by Mark Driscoll, the mega-church pastor whose toxic leadership personality lead to the downfall of his entire church. I talked about him in the opening of week one. This is a sermon about the biblical story of Nehemiah. In this particular text, the prophet is talking about cleansing the priesthood from some unsavory spiritual leaders. I've strung together a few clips, but you get the general tone. **(Driscoll clip 1:11)**

That's a Sunday, on Monday he called in two elders and fired them. Why? Because they raised some concerns – as they'd been instructed to do, actually – about a proposed change to the church's bylaws that would essentially rest all real authority with Mark and a select group of his loyalists. These two men were terribly abused by the church – kicked out, lost lifelong friends, the only spiritual home their kids had known – because they dared bring a critique to the narcissistic pastor. And you better believe that sermon was a warning to the rest of the staff as well.

When a leader chooses to wield the sword of power, a culture is formed that responds to the blade of fear. There's a lot of ways to manipulate fear in a congregation. We will limit your access to insider status – you just don't get invited to the green room anymore. We can publicly shame you as warning to others in the congregation. Which again ostracizes you. Nobody wants to be on the outside.

I could always beat you up and tell you what a mess you are. Guilt is a powerful motivator. And most of us sense deep-down we don't measure up anyway. So I make you drink the spiritual poison, and of course, who has the antidote? I do! So if I say you've got to show up every Sunday to get the antidote...This is one of the abuses that directly led to the Protestant Reformation.

In the 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church would sell "indulgences". It was basically the Pope's ability to shave time off of purgatory for good behavior. So let's say your mother died, the priest could come and say, "Well, of course we both know your mother wasn't a saint, so it's too bad she's roasting in those flames of torment. Boy that kind of thing must weigh on your conscience. If only there were some way to ease her suffering...hey, I've got an idea. You know we're trying to get this cathedral built. If you made a certain investment in the church, I bet the Holy Father could be persuaded to put in a good word for your mom with the man up stairs." Is it any wonder the Catholic Church and the Mafia both originated in Italy?

Now, I'm not beating up on the Catholic Church. There's nothing wrong with them that 2,000 years of fallen human tradition wouldn't do to any denomination. My denomination is 100 years-old and

we've got plenty of things to work on. But my point is, fear as a motivator is not new to religion. In fact the biggest power play of all is "God's going to get you if you don't do what I say."

Some of you might have been led to Christ out of fear – fear of hell maybe. Listen, many of us came to Jesus for illegitimate reasons. And God in His sovereignty will use those reasons, but we must advance beyond them. We cannot normalize them. Because fear is the enemy of faith.

And there is no place for fear in the Kingdom of God. The currency of the Kingdom of Heaven is love. God loved you so much that his own son chose hell in your place...so that you don't have to. And the gratitude we have when we see what Jesus has done for us is a totally different level of motivation for behavior and thinking.

There is a fine line between motivation and manipulation. And the determining factor between the two is in the human heart. A toxic pastor – and a toxic culture – will try to control you through power and fear. But that's not the Jesus way. **Zechariah 4:6**, says, "*This is the word of the Lord... 'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty.*"

When I came to start this church 18 years ago, I had a mantra: there's one Holy Spirit, and I'm not him. And that's still my heart. I'm going to tell you the truth as God leads me to tell it. And that may be uncomfortable at times. But I'm not going to brow beat you over it. I'm not going to use coercive means to get you to change. Communicating truth to you is my job; changing you is the work of God's Spirit. And there's one Holy Spirit...and I'm not him.

I don't want to control anybody. Well...of course I do. And the reality is, the more influential this church grows – and even just the longer I'm here – the greater the danger that I too could slip into patterns of toxic leadership. I don't think I'm a narcissist...but would I recognize it if I were?! But I do know that I can be pretty self-absorbed. I can be selfish. There are times when it would be easier not to spend time with people and just hide away in my isolated prophets chambers.

I have to be intentional about growing a healthy character – even after all these years – so I can do my part to grow a healthy culture in this church that God has called me to. This church that He loves so much. I have to pay attention to my blind spots. And so do you. And I have to help you see what you don't want to see. And you have to help *me* see what I don't want to see. That's why we're doing this terribly uncomfortable series.

I am humbled by the role of leadership that God has called me to in this church. I do not take it for granted. And like Paul I can say, “In my flesh dwells no good thing.” Meaning if I ever choose to walk in the flesh instead of the spirit, we're all in trouble. I am not better than any of these leaders who have fallen, who drug their congregations down with them, who have wounded their families and their communities. We must all of us be wary of the trap of pride, the flattery that the devil constantly whispers in all of our ears, “It could never happen to *me*. *I'd* never do that sort of thing.”

On the other hand, I don't want to walk in fear. I don't want you to walk in fear. You don't have to look at me through squinted eyes every Sunday. Just be aware of warning signs. And at the end of the day, this is, for all of us, a matter of faith. Let me read you a scripture that has been very dear to me since a young age. It's the closing verses of the very short letter of Jude.

Jude 1:24-25, “*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*”

That's not only a good verse, it's a good prayer. Can I tell you, in the end, I don't have much confidence in myself to do this right...but I have every confidence in the one who saved me and filled me with his Spirit and called me to be your pastor. So I pray that prayer all the time, "Lord, not me, but Christ in me."

Let me give you one more prayer. Part of my routine of spiritual disciplines is to follow a daily prayer book. Each day – morning, noon and evening – there are written prayers that are shared in common by Christians at set hours all over the world. It's an ancient spiritual practice, and one that has been very good for me.

There's always a single prayer for the week that is repeated at each session. I want to close this morning by reading the current "Prayer Appointed for the Week". Every time I've recited it, I am struck by how appropriate it is for this particular message. Of course, it's not just for pastors – it's appropriate for all of us – but it is certainly fitting for those of us who are "judged twice".

"Grant to me, Lord, I pray, the spirit to think and do always those things that are right, that I, who cannot exist without you, may by you be enabled to live according to your will; through Jesus Christ my Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen."

Let's pray...