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CALLING

The Pastor's Currency is Influence

Are you spending it wisely?

Lee Eclov | posted April 11, 2018



There was no good reason for the black inadequacy that shrouded me that warm autumn afternoon in Tennessee. I had been with 11 other pastors for the better part of two days talking ministry. I loved every minute. But during the free hours that afternoon, I succumbed to dark depression. It might have been my insomnia, or the tensions back at church, or just a diabolical attack, but it was terribly heavy.

That evening I was scheduled for a 15-minute time of listening prayer with two men from our host church. I'd never done anything like it, but I welcomed the prospect of anyone praying for me. When we met, they explained that they would be silent and wait for God to impress on them the things they should say to me or pray for me. They told me to be sure to test anything they said against Scripture and with the Holy Spirit.

We sat quietly and then the first man said, "Lee, I saw these words in my heart: 'Well done, good and faithful servant.' You've been faithful." I was startled and began to cry, for no one but Jesus could have known how much I needed to hear that.

A few moments later the second man said, "You've probably seen that Christmas movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*. The phrase that came to my mind is when the guardian angel says to George, 'You just don't know all the good that you have done.' That's what I heard the Lord saying to you: 'Lee, you just don't know all the good that you have done.' The Lord told me

to pray that your eyes would be opened because he's going to show you in a fresh way the things you have done—some from a long time ago, and some more recent.”

Two weeks later, Bill, a dear brother at church, told me that the most important phone call he ever got in his life was from me. It was on the day he retired after 32 years at Walgreens. He said I'd called around 7 p.m. that evening suspecting he might be grieving. He was surprised because, while he hadn't expected to feel that way, the finality of it all had hit him hard on the way home. I don't remember that call but Bill said, “That's what a pastor does.”

And so it was that over the next months, again and again, people from years past as well as the present told me, prompted only by the Spirit, of small deeds and words, most that I had forgotten, that had made a difference in their walk with Christ. Their stories were wonders made from the ordinary, like water turned to wine.

My Quest for Influence

At the heart of ministry for most of us is the God-given desire to influence others for Christ and his kingdom. We didn't go into this work for the money. Our currency is influence. I remember praying when I was a young man and out of work, “Lord, please let me do something that will matter in 100 years.” What could be a richer answer to that prayer than the call to pastor?

The quest for influence can play tricks on us, like a desert mirage. Off there in the distance, shimmering, we glimpse the oasis of a larger church where our preaching could reach three or four times as many people, where we could really leave a mark for Christ. Over there, across the dry and weary land of ministry, we see our blog or book that could help many more people than we're touching now. But as it is, we have a couple of calls to return this afternoon, a report to write, a sermon to work on, and a hospital visit to make—all pretty much forgotten by next week.

Keeping our distance isn't good practice. We may get more done but we will have less influence.

Our desire to influence may not be driven by pride or discontent. But influence is tricky and elusive. Nearly 20 years ago, when we came to the church I now serve in the northern suburbs of Chicago, I assumed my influence would grow—meaning that our church would get bigger. It didn't. Now, after a lifetime of restless and unruly ambition, I'm finally at peace (most of the time) pastoring an average-sized church of 200. I've even come to wonder if I have opportunities to influence people in ways my pastoral colleagues in giant churches can't.

That said, my age—66—has become an urgent whisper: “Time is passing. Don't lollygag! Think about what you're doing.” Influence is my most valued currency and one day, not so far from now, spending will cease. These are my spending priorities.

Make Time for Individuals

Most stories of pastoral influence involve a personal touch. The problem with giving people personal attention, of course, is how much time it takes or risking the interruption dragging down productivity (says the task-oriented, crowd-loving

guy). The personal work of pastoring doesn't necessarily synch up well with strategies, efficiencies, and study. Yet what good is a shepherd who doesn't have time for individuals?

There are certainly times when we close the door or let the calls go to voice mail, but keeping our distance isn't a good practice. We may get more done, but we will have less influence. A pastor friend of mine shared this quote by Theodor Cuyler from *How to Be a Pastor*: "The pride of a congregation may be awakened by brilliant pulpit displays; but ... it is personal attention and affectionate sympathy with each individual that bind our congregation to us with hooks of steel."

Bring a Sense of the Lord

Christians have no one else in their lives like their pastor. They do not see us as we see ourselves. Part of our calling is that people sense that we bring them the very presence of the Lord. Dave Hansen, in his book, *The Art of Pastoring*, writes,

Because of my position as pastor, the family I visit knows from the start that something about God is happening. I listen to them tell their story. ... After a while I pray for the family. You wouldn't think that listening to people would be such a big deal. But listening to us is what God does, and the fact that I listen to a family the way Jesus does makes a comparison happen inside them. A subconscious process tells them: Jesus listens to me; this is what Jesus is like. They sense they have been talking to Jesus all along.

No one else has quite such an effect on people as pastors. Never underestimate the singular privilege it is for a believer to be known, loved, and listened to by their pastor.

Before moving to our area, Jo and Arthur had loved the two large churches they had attended, one in Australia and one in Singapore. When their time in our church came to an end, Jo wrote in her blog that I was "the first shepherd on earth who knows my name. I will never forget the first time Pastor Lee called my name in the foyer the second Sunday we met. I was moved beyond words." That's all it took—learning Jo's name.

Grace Always Leaves a Mark

One of my favorite quotes is from Scottish author and theologian John Watson: "Be kind, for every person you meet is fighting a great battle." Kindness is not restricted to Christians, of course, but Christ-like kindness is part of the coat of many gracious colors believers are told to put on (Col. 3:15). I like to look around the edges of our church where the spiritual wallflowers wait. I like to honor people who don't expect it; ask questions of folks who think they're uninteresting; surprise someone with, "You've been on my mind lately." I'm hoping for influence.

I like to honor people who don't expect it.

I suspect that God gives pastors a special potency in grace-giving. Perhaps it is the sympathy we've acquired having seen more than our share of the secret battles people face. Maybe it is the Word-rich way we can speak and

listen after years of handling Scripture. It might be that we bring some of the peace of God's green pastures and still waters. Ultimately, I believe pastors draw people to something of the Good Shepherd's heart.

There's a sweet woman who often serves me a muffin and coffee in the mornings. She has cancer. A wig covers her head, and her body aches terribly. I'm sure there are other customers praying for her, but I wrote her a note with a prayer she could read again and again, and I gave her a booklet with all the Bible verses which tell us not to be afraid. Small things, but "little is much when God is in it."

Sometimes, Say the Big Thing

Most pastors have learned that once in a while God allows us to say one thing—one big thing—which turns the rudder of someone's life. "I think you should consider seminary." "It is time for you to set things right." "Have you ever thought of working with kids?" We must be careful lest we begin to think our gut speaks for God, but there are times when we watch or listen to someone and a strong impression begins to form. Say it. When pastors love their people and are sensitive to God's Spirit, I think people hear what we say as if our words were in italics.

The biggest thing we can say to someone is the gospel. A few months ago, I began to notice a guy at my bagel shop every morning, sitting by himself and reading. One day we struck up a conversation. He was desperately tired of his job despite his success. He was disarmingly candid about his lack of direction. I asked him, "Do you have a Bible?" He didn't, but he warmly welcomed my offer to bring him one and my promise to pray for him. We talked a couple more times and then he took a new job that kept him away. I felt like I'd lost my opportunity with him, but then I got this text message: "I have been meaning to write to thank you for opening my heart and mind to the Lord. I had a friend contact me out of the blue. He is active in a men's Bible study group and said 'something' was pulling him to reach out to me. We all know that 'something' was the Lord."

"You Just Don't Know ..."

The Holy Spirit has an uncanny way of using the smallest things to leave a lasting impression. Younger pastors just have to take it on faith that they're doing and saying things—mostly very ordinary things—that matter more than they'll ever know.

Years ago, at an open house at my son's middle school, a P.E. teacher told Andy, "I knew your dad years ago. He led me to Christ." I didn't remember.

Every year on May 5, Jim says, "Do you know what today is?" On that day in 1983, their daughter Katie (10 at the time) fell out of a tree and suffered several broken bones with fears of internal injuries. I went to the hospital and sat with them for a long time. After all, that's what pastors do. Every year Jim says, "I will never forget what you did for me." I honestly don't remember that evening.

I suppose it is a good thing that we "just don't know all the good we have done." Day in and day out, we plant and water little seeds, like the man in Jesus' parable. "Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain" (Mark 4:27–28).

Lee Eclov is pastor at the Village Church of Lincolnshire (north of Chicago) and an adjunct professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

