

Personal Life and Growth

Detailed Outline *Part 1 of 3*

Potential elders often ask, “What do I do as an elder? What’s my first duty? Where do I start?”

The answer is Acts 20:28: **Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.**

I. Guard Yourself.

You cannot care for souls of others if you cannot care for your own soul.

Paul says the same thing to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:16: **Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.**

Both of the above passages are in the context of false teachers, the agents of Satan. Paul is talking about spiritual warfare. He is talking about being on the front line of battle. The first thing you have to do as a Christian soldier, as a shepherd of the souls of God’s people, is to guard your own spiritual life and doctrine.

Richard Baxter:

“Take heed, then, for the enemy has a special eye on you. You are sure to have his most subtle insinuations, incessant solicitations and violent assaults. Take heed to yourselves, lest he outwit you. The devil is a greater scholar than you are, and a more nimble disputant. . . . And whenever he prevails against you, he will make you the instrument of your own ruin.” (The Reformed Pastor [repr. Grand Rapids: Sovereign Grace, 1971], 7)

How do you care for your soul?

1. Guard what you read.

Whatever you read will inevitably change your thinking and attitude. So be careful what you are reading, whether it is secular material or spiritual material.

2. Guard whom you listen to.

Carefully guard who you listen to as teachers, whether they are political pundits or Bible expositors. Remember, we become like those who teach us.

3. Guard your prayer life.

Carefully guard your prayer life, because that is always the first thing to go when we are hyper-busy.

4. Guard against unconfessed sin.

Carefully guard against unconfessed sin that will cause your heart to become cold and resistant to the voice of the Holy Spirit. Deal with sin right away.

5. Guard your life from weights that will impede the Christian race.

Hebrews 12:1: **Lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.**

A weight is not always sin. It is something that impedes the Christian race or bogs down your advancement in the lifelong race before you.

6. Guard your sexual life, your marriage, and your children.

If you are an elder, you put your marriage at risk and your children at risk, because you are a very busy person. Satan is winning many, many victories in this area of the sexual life. Guard your sexual life.

7. Guard your love for God.

Guard your love relationship with God, your affections for God.

Jesus said that the greatest commandment is to love God with all your being, and then to love your neighbors as yourself. They are inseparable commands. So you must guard your love relationship with the Lord.

8. Guard your growth in Christ: always be growing, learning, maturing.

The key issue is this: you are either growing in Christ or you are stagnating. You cannot be neutral. God will not allow it.

If you're stagnant spiritually, the church will be stagnant spiritually. If you're coasting spiritually, the church will coast. If you're living off the past, the church will not move into the future. If you are not excited about your Bible, world vision, your ministry of shepherding people, not excited about the church and where it is going, the church will also be neutralized and stagnant spiritually. A local church gets very little beyond what its leaders are like.

One way to guard your soul and make your personal ministry to people more effective is to see that you're constantly growing and maturing, pressing forward in the Christian life.

Let's look at what the Scripture says about our personal growth and maturity in Christ.

II. The Biblical Mandate to Grow in Christ

1. 1 Timothy 4:7-8

Rather train [exercise or discipline] yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds the promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

The apostle Paul likes the image of the athlete. We are spiritual athletes. The idea is this: keep on exercising and continue to exercise yourself to godliness.

When we think of this metaphor of exercise or training, we should be thinking of what an athlete goes through: strenuous effort, self-discipline, self-denial, sacrifice, concentration, a scheduled program, knowledge of how to improve, plan for improvement.

Philip Towner gives a good definition of godliness:

“Authentic Christian existence . . . the interplay between the knowledge of God . . . and its observable outworking of behavior that is appropriate to that knowledge.” (The Letters to Timothy and Titus, NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006], 174.)

Godliness is authentic Christian behavior, attitude, speech, lifestyle that is in accord with gospel truths.

D. A. Carson warns that athletes do not drift into excellence, and neither do Christians drift into godliness:

“People do not drift towards holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate towards godliness, prayer, and obedience to Scripture, faith, and delighting the Lord. Instead, we drift towards compromise and call it tolerance; we drift towards disobedience and call it freedom; we drift towards superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of loss self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.” (For the Love of God, Volume 2: A Daily Companion for Discovering the Riches of God’s Word [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006], 23)

We are to exert effort into exercising and continuing to exercise ourselves to godliness. Don’t stop exercising; don’t stop training and disciplining yourself to godliness. Be a growing Christian. Exercise your spiritual muscles.

2. 1 Timothy 4:15

Practice these things, immerse yourself in them, so that all may see your progress.

Paul wants *everyone* in the church to see Timothy’s spiritual progress and growth.

Does your family see you progressing spiritually? Does the church see you progressing spiritually? Are you going forward for the Lord? Let everyone **see your progress**.
Douglas Smith:

“When leaders are learning and growing, everything about them communicates the same opportunity to other people. They’re excited; they do things differently. One of the most profound—and unusual—experiences people can have on the job is to see their leaders grow. “(John Carver, Boards that Make a Difference: A New Design for Leadership in Nonprofit and Public Organizations [San Francisco, CA: Wiley and Sons, 2006], 212.)

Let me assure you people want to see you pressing forward—reading, learning, getting fresh vision. It will excite the church. The church will follow you! People want good leadership.

Dr. J. Robert “Bobby” Clinton has investigated every Biblical character in the New Testament. He says only one fourth end well. Here is his conclusion:

“We have observed that most people cease learning by the age of forty. By that we mean they no longer actively pursue knowledge, understanding, and experience that will enhance their capacity to grow and contribute to others. Most simply rest on what they already know. But those who finish well maintain a positive learning attitude all their lives.” (Paul D. Stanley and J. Robert Clinton, Connecting: The Mentoring Relationships You Need to Succeed in Life [Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1992], 222.)

If you want to be a Christian who is growing and going forward, you have to have a positive learning attitude all of your life.

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II. The Biblical Mandate to Grow in Christ (cont.)

3. 2 Corinthians 4:16

So we do not lose heart. Though our outward nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day.

Notice, Paul doesn't say weekly, monthly or yearly. Every day there is this inner growth, this conforming to Christ. In 2 Corinthians 3:18, Paul says we are being transformed **from glory to glory**. In other words, there is this daily Christlikeness formation within us. What an exciting life the Christian life is! We are to be consistently growing in our lives and moving forward and being transformed into Christlikeness.

This is the vision we need to have as leaders. We are going to be leaders who continue to grow, press forward, mature, and become more like Christ until the day we die.

4. Philippians 3:13-14

But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul is a man who is continually pressing forward, looking forward, going forward, never backward. The most natural thing for all of us is to slow down, to lose our zest for learning, to lose our thirst for Christ and the knowledge of Christ. That's the most natural thing. But here is a man in his sixties, pressing forward, looking forward.

Paul also talks about helping others press forward: **I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.** (Phil. 1:25)

5. 1 Peter 2:2

Like newborn infants, long for [or crave] the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation.

Peter uses the analogy of a newborn infant who craves milk, the sustenance of life. We too are to crave the pure spiritual milk which is the truth of the gospel recorded for us here in Holy Scripture. We know nothing of Christ, nothing of the gospel or the great truths of the gospel outside of the Word of God. And so, like that newborn baby who craves milk, we are to crave the very sustenance of life, which is the Word of God.

6. 2 Peter 3:18

But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Here's a direct biblical charge to grow in the amazing grace and knowledge of our wonderful Savior. Throughout life, we are to pursue learning about our great Savior, this great salvation he provided, and the wonderful truths of the gospel. This is to be a lifelong pursuit.

"Leaders need to model growth." People are like trees that grow their entire lives. There is no such thing as a full-grown tree. The day a tree stops growing, it starts to die. We are to grow all our lives. It has been said: "When you're through improving, you are through as a leader." A leader is a learner.

7. Hebrews 5:11-12

About this [Christ's high priestly ministry] we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food.

What a terrible, awful thing it is for a Christian to be dull of hearing the Word of God, hearing God's voice. Peter O'Brien states that the reason these believers became dull of hearing is that they refused to grow. As a result of resisting growth, they became dull of listening to the Word of God, a most terrible condition for a believer in Christ.

Frederick Bonfils: "If you live in the past, you won't have a future."

III. Growing Christians Influence Others for God.

Only growing Christians influence others for God. Oswald Sanders wrote, "Leadership is influence." (*Spiritual Leadership* [Chicago: Moody, 2017], 29).

You cannot be contagious for God if you are not growing in your faith and knowledge of Christ. If you are not excited about your faith, you cannot stir up others. If your mind is not expanding and if your heart is not growing, how can you affect the next generation, the hearts and the minds of our young people?

To be a good leader you need energy, a lot of energy. So, I have to ask you this: do you get energy by growing and maturing in the knowledge of Christ? Do you have fresh knowledge of Christ and the Scriptures? Do you have fresh vision for the world and world missions? Do you have fresh ideas? Do you like to grow and press forward? Do you like to change, or are you in a spiritual rut? Nothing encourages me more than seeing men and women in their fifties, their sixties, their seventies, and their eighties going forward for God and constantly learning and changing. That encourages me.

E. Stanley Jones:

“There are scars on my faith, but underneath those scars there are no doubts. The song I sing is a life song. Not the temporary exuberance of youth that often fades when middle or old age sets in with their disillusionment and cynicisms . . . No, I'm eighty-three, and I am more excited today about being a Christian than I was eighteen when I put my feet upon the way.”

F. B. Meyer: “I do hope my Father will let the river of my life go flowing fully till the finish. I don't want it to end in a swamp.”

Effective Christian leadership starts with your relationship with Christ and your growth in Christ.

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IV. Practical Ideas for a Leader's Growth in Christ

1. Pray for a desire to grow and mature.

Since the time of the fall, man has been hiding from God. Spiritual things are difficult for us. Thus, we have to pray that we do not lose our thirst for the Word of God, or lose our desire for worship, prayer, service, and the fellowship of the Lord's people.

Oswald Chambers:

"A great fear has been at work in my mind and God has used it to arouse me to prayer. I came across a man whom I knew years ago, a mighty man of God, and now ten years have gone and I meet him again—garrulous and unenliven. How many men seem to become like that after forty years of age! The fear of sloth and indulgence has come home with a huge fear and fairly driven me to God to keep me from ever forgetting what I owe him."

How natural it is to lose our thirst for knowledge, for study, for truth, and for expanding our minds and our hearts. Let us pray daily about this. Whenever we see the waning of interest or love for God, let us immediately confess it and pray for a fresh energy and interest in love for him and his precious Word.

2. Protect your prayer life.

We are all very busy people. Hyper-busyness is a part of the new modern age. We are travelling at warp-like speed, and the first thing to go in the Christian life is our prayer life. We get so busy for God we have no time to pray. We don't have time for God.

In Acts 6:4 the twelve apostles declared that **we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.**

Here at the dawn of Christianity, the twelve apostles lay down the principles for pastoral elders: devotion to prayer and the Word of God. These priorities the apostles learned from the Lord Jesus. He was a Man of prayer.

Let me also encourage you not only in prayer but in worship and in singing to God.

3. Protect your Bible-reading time.

The greatest treasure God has given us outside of his Son is the treasure of his Word, the Bible, the very words of God, the Truth and the Light.

As leaders, we all need to be Berean Christians. Acts 17:11: **Now these Jews . . . received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.** Let us be Berean-like elders, searching the Scripture daily.

It is said, “You cannot be too busy driving to stop for gas.” You too need to fuel your tank (your heart and mind) with the Word of God like the Bereans did.

Colossians 3:16: **Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another.**

4. Listen to audio messages.

This is a wonderful way to grow spiritually and to fuel your tank as you spend yourself in ministering to other people.

Most of us spend a lot more time driving in a car than we realize. Or we go for a walk or go to the gym and exercise. During these periods of time, we can listen to great Bible expository preaching by some of the world’s greatest teachers. You can literally get a Bible school education in several years by just listening to audio messages.

5. Go to good conferences.

Going to good conferences can be excellent training for future and present elders. Conferences are not only occasions for education, but key opportunities to acquire new resources (books and audio messages) for the church body at home. Use conferences to educate your eldership and to become aware of what is going on in the worldwide church of Jesus Christ.

6. Raise your consciousness about the world around you.

Our Lord gave the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19-20). He gave a global commission to disciple *all nations*, baptizing and teaching new converts to obey everything Jesus had taught them. We are thus internationalists. We are globalists.

A Christian leader should be a Great Commission leader. We have a big gospel, not a tiny gospel. A healthy church is a missions-minded church. A good Christian leader is a missions-minded leader. We should be interested in world news and events that affect the advancement of the gospel and the work of our missionaries.

As a leader among God’s people you also need to be aware of important cultural shifts in society, new theological and philosophical trends, and changing moral values. These trends are affecting the minds of your young people. You may not care about these things, but your young people are involved in them daily at school, and eventually these trends come into the church.

Acts 20:31: **Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.** An elder who is preoccupied with the world or his own personal interests, distracted from the work of God, is not alert and will not be able to protect the church or prepare young people for living the Christian life.

7. Watch for distractions.

Sociologists say we live in the age of distractions, unlike any other age. This is particularly true with the technological distractions and traps—Facebook, email, text messages, video games, and movies. People are becoming addicted to these things. Sadly, they are not addicted to the Bible or world missions. They are addicted to machines, movies, TV, and sports.

Many people today are amusing themselves to death, wasting the short life they have been given by God upon this earth.

8. Be concerned about your ongoing education as a Christian leader and an eldership group.

You want your children to continue to learn, don't you? You send them to school; you spend a lot of money on their education; you want them to learn, grow, and prepare for life. Why then should *you* stop growing? Why are you not interested in your own education?

An eldership should be learning, growing, and concerned about ongoing development in the things of God. Talk about this as a group of elders, how you will educate yourselves.

Be a learning, growing pastoral eldership!