

5 Moral Fences

What one pastor does to protect himself from himself for Christ and for others.

By Dr. James MacDonald

Fact: Some kids like to play "near the edge of the cliff," and some kids don't. I always did! I thrilled to stand near the point of no return and feel the rush of staring danger in the face but not backing down. Whether the "edge" was rock jumping into a cool mountain lake or "bumper jumping," moving cars for a lazy slide down a slippery winter street, the potential of peril invigorated me.

That was then and this is now! "When I became a man I put away childish things." (1 Cor. 13:11)

I was a pastor in seminary when the moral failures of the late '80's hit the news and they scared me. In addition to the newsworthy blowouts, I was hearing a shocking number of similar tragedies from my own circle of pastor/friends. I remember one Sunday night in 1987 when I cried all the way to church. I was terrified as I asked over and over, "How does this happen? Could this happen to me? How can I protect myself and my growing little family from the devastation a moral failure would cause? How can I be sure my actions will remain pure when men better and stronger than me were falling like flies?"

As I thought and prayed it through it occurred to me that ministers who fell morally must have disregarded the final warning signals. I knew they didn't go from spirit-filled to stepping off the cliff in one day. I knew they must have crashed some social barriers before their slippage became sexual. I remember wondering where the line was and how I could make sure I never crossed it. I knew I had to make my decisions early and my standards public so that others would know when I was "playing near the edge." I was determined that, by God's grace, I would not take the plunge. In fact, I wanted to stay as far away from the edge of the cliff as I could, so I decided to set up some boundaries of behavior.

I called them moral fences. The idea was to set up some standards of conduct that if never broken would make it impossible for me to fail morally. I remembered back to my days as a bible college student and thinking how strange it was that our college president would not give my (young, beautiful) fiancée a ride to our church almost two hours away when he came to speak. With that in mind, I began to form my list of moral fences.

1) I will not, under any circumstances, ride alone in a car with a female other than my wife or an immediate family member.

No lifts home for a church secretary, no baby sitters driven home late at night, no teen girls in my student ministry, more recently no playmates of my daughters, no exceptions.

One day I wasted two and a half hours in the American Tire store waiting for my car to be done while my secretary, only minutes away, could have picked me up so easily.

Recently while speaking out of town, I had to explain to my pastor friend why it "would not work out for his wife to drive me and meet him over there." It has been awkward at times but the benefits are obvious. How many pastors commit adultery with someone they never ride alone in a car with? OK some, but read on.

2) I do not counsel women in a closed room or more than once.

Judging by the stories we all hear it seems like the majority of ministry infidelity begins through a counseling relationship. No matter what the issue, counseling is a very intimate activity. When the subject matter itself becomes intimate, counseling the opposite sex is like playing with fire. When our church was smaller keeping this standard meant that some women had to seek counsel elsewhere and two or three left our church over my "fence." I was hurt at first but I think it blessed my wife. As pastors we are supposed to be training others to do ministry, not hoarding it for ourselves. (Eph. 4:11-13) I have always felt that my time was better spent training a team of men and women to do the lighter counseling and then referring those with more complex issues to biblical counseling centers outside our church. When I cannot avoid a second session with a woman in our church, I have my wife or another pastor sit in with me. Pretty hard to commit adultery with someone you never spend time alone with.

3) I do not stay alone in a hotel over night.

I did my doctoral thesis on increasing the incidents of self-disclosure of sin among men. I have heard more confessions of addiction to various forms of sexual sin than any one pastor should ever have to hear, and it has changed me. It has left me deeply persuaded that, "there but for the grace of God, (and some moral fences) go I." I know myself too well. Lengthy, unaccountable hours with manifold temptations available and affordable is a recipe for failure. Romans 13:14 instructs us that we are to "make no provision for the flesh." You think I sound weak? I am! And when I forget that weakness, I cease to know God's strength. (I Cor. 12:10) When I travel, I travel with someone. When that is impossible, I stay with a friend. When that is impossible, I do not go. Period! Early in my ministry that meant there were things I missed out on, more recently our Elders have agreed to help fund a travel partner for me. If an outside ministry opportunity is deemed worthwhile, and the ministry cannot afford a second airfare, our church pays for me to take another pastor or elder, or best of all, my wife.

4) I speak often and publicly of my affection for my wife, when she is present and when she is not.

No one likes to play the hypocrite any more than they have to. Marriages that are failing often become silent in public before they become loudly negative. Pastors who resist or refuse to publicly affirm and appreciate the significant role of a supportive spouse may be revealing a private deterioration of that relationship. I have close friends who consistently monitor the way I lead, refer to, and interact with my wife in social and ministry contexts. It was Bill McCartney who taught that the countenance of a wife is the best indicator of marital strength. I know some men in our church feel the heat because I am so publicly wild about my wife of sixteen years, too bad!

5) Compliment the character or the conduct - not the coiffure or the clothing.

I am still working on this one. As our church has grown, and I know a much smaller percentage of the people who attend here, I have seen the power of a compliment become a problem. As pastors we love people and want to be an encouragement. Formerly, if I noticed that Shelly had a new dress or Susan had changed her hair, I would compliment her on that. I felt it was harmless and if it seemed to meet a need and I meant it sincerely I thought, "no harm done." More recently I have observed that this seemingly innocent gesture can have far more impact than I ever intended and potentially meet a legitimate need that I have no business meeting. Apart from family friendships, I have been trying to restrict my compliments to character and conduct. I get to use my gift of encouragement but I focus on the things God is doing in a person's life and not the externals that can be easily misunderstood.

Setting up the "fence" in public.

The fence is useless if I can take it down any time my sinful heart desires. To make it work those around me must know what I have committed to myself to and be willing to confront me if they see a fence broken down. To inform the congregation I periodically weave the fence into a sermon every couple of years. My most recent example was a message entitled "Meeting God in Moral Failure." When the message came to the "how to prevent" part, I simply downloaded the five moral fences to everyone. At the staff level we require a more detailed list of moral fences. From pastors to ministry leaders, to custodians and bookstore staff, every paid staff member is regularly held accountable for this moral code. A former singles pastor found it very difficult not to have lunch alone with women in his ministry, and often "forgot." That is, until we told him we would "forget" to pay him if he "forgot" again. Remember, this is not legalism. Legalism is when we judge another's spirituality based on manmade rules. We are not judging anyone's heart for the Lord, we are simply reasoning together as to how we can be faithful to our commitment to Christ.

Above Reproach? Blameless?

Both Timothy and Titus instruct us that those who serve us leaders in Christ's church must be above reproach or blameless. That is to say, our conduct must be such that it would be difficult, even for those who oppose our ministry, to bring an accusation against us. Many a pastor has had their ministry destroyed over spurious accusations, things that could not be proven false, though they were. I believe our congregation is comforted in knowing that our ministry team is seeking to protect themselves and the church from the pain of ministry moral failure. By examining the behaviors that sometimes lead to moral problems and avoiding them we are embracing the wisdom of Proverbs 4:26 which instructs us to "ponder the path of your feet and let all your ways be established." Of course we must not think that the standards in and of themselves are in any way righteous, they are not. They are only in place as a protection against potentially overwhelming temptation. As I write this article, personal immorality is the furthest thing from my mind.

Last summer, we drove through some very high, single-lane mountain passes on a family vacation. The road was narrow and the drop off was immense. I was very careful! I hugged the mountain and drove very slowly. I kept my eyes on the road and refused to look down, but I am still glad the guard rail was there.

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