Forgiveness, Grace & Consequences...

The Bible is abundantly clear—God freely and abundantly offers forgiveness to all who come to Him with "a broken and contrite heart." (Psalms 51:17) Certainly King David understood more of the love and forgiveness of our God than most people will have the opportunity in this lifetime to know. But, does God's grace eliminate the need for anyone, no matter what they have done, to be hindered from picking up where they left off? Is this truly what the Bible teaches?

Let's think about it for a moment. He is standing on the very border of the Promised Land. For 40 years Moses endured censure, heartache and almost relentless persecution, from his own people. And then, in the very last moments before the children of Israel are preparing to cross over into the beautiful land of promise, he is pushed—not forced—to commit a grievous sin.

Some may wonder at the reason God seemed to deal so harshly with Moses. After all, isn't forgiveness with God complete when we confess we have done wrong? Doesn't God's Word implicitly state, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness"? (1 John 1:9 (NIV)) Why, then, must God enact such a stiff penalty? Wasn't Moses forgiven? In fact, it almost seems as if God is rubbing it in instead of offering grace and forgiveness. God tells Moses, "Go up this mountain in the Abarim range and see the land I have given the Israelites. After you have seen it, you too will be gathered to your people, as your brother Aaron was." (Numbers 27:12-13 (NIV))

At first glance it seems somewhat harsh. It sounds like God is saying, "Here it is Moses! Look at the wonderful inheritance your people will be getting to enjoy! But for you, sorry, you're going to die." Something else must be going on here. God's own Word tells us that, "He does not willingly bring affliction or grief to the children of men." (Lamentations 3:33 (NIV)) So what is really taking place? When God pronounced to Moses the penalty of losing the privilege of going into the Promised Land with the rest of the children of Israel who, by the way, were many times more rebellious and unfaithful than Moses was, He told him, "for when the community rebelled at the waters in the Desert of Zin, both of you disobeyed my command to honor me as holy before their eyes." (Numbers 27:14 (NIV))

You see, Moses had special privileges. He was highly honored. He spoke with God "face to face, as a man speaks with his friend." (Exodus 33:11 (NIV)) The consequences for his actions were directly in proportion to the exalted position he filled.
When a spiritual leader falls, it is not the same as just any member of the congregation. God has honored him; placed him in a high position of sacred trust. And, like Moses, when he falls, he fails to honor God "as holy: before the eyes of the people." There must be serious consequences for such heinous actions. It's not a matter of forgiveness. It's a matter of violating a sacred trust—a trust that can never be completely restored. If God's leaders fall, ultimately, they lead others to lightly regard the sacredness of their position and the high and exalted purity of God's Holy Law. When leaders fall, they fail to honor the sacredness of God's character and bring reproach and disgrace to Him before the eyes of the people.

Some may be wondering, "what about restoration?" Even Peter was restored to his position after he denied his Lord three times. True, Peter's sin was enormous, but Peter's fall was vastly different from that of a minister caught in sexual sin. Sexual sin destroys not only the one who commits the act, it very often destroys the one they lead into sin as well. Peter's actions, sinful as they were, were sinfully self-preserving, not willfully destructive of another. Yes, it was his pride that led to his downfall, but his love for Jesus and his position were not used to justify his actions or to satisfy his need of self-exaltation.

In reality, a fallen minister more closely resembles the actions of Judas than those of Peter. Judas took from the disciple's moneybag, an action that was done to gratify his own lustful desires—the gain of earthly pleasures. He was so self-absorbed he couldn't seem to get enough. His passion for more led him to commit one of the most horrendous crimes ever committed. He sold his Savior to serve his passion. Ultimately, he sold his own soul to gratify his sinful desires. Like a morally fallen minister, his position was used to gratify his lust, clearly distinguishing his actions from those of Peter's.

You may be thinking, "Well that may be true, but there is the account of King David's fall. And, God even called him "a man after His own heart." Yes, David committed adultery and murder. And he was forgiven and allowed to remain as king of Israel. Certainly, some may believe, there is a precedent here for restoring a fallen minister. But is there really? Perhaps an argument could be made in favor of restoring the fallen. With that premise, one would use King David's life as a model of grace. But, if one takes that position, then there are other questions that must be addressed.

Were there any consequences for David's sin? Yes, there were many. David's sin, in terms of consequences, was one of the most costly sins a fallen leader had to endure. God tells David, "You did it in secret, but I will do this thing in broad daylight before all Israel." (2 Samuel 12:12 (NIV)) Most ministers who fall have real difficulty admitting the actual heinousness of their actions. The first reaction is to minimize or justify why this happened. They, like David, try to hide their sin. You will hear words like, "I fell from grace," or "I took my eyes off Jesus." All true, but this type of confession only minimizes the seriousness of their actions and personal accountability. These types of justifications are often spoken in order to gain sympathy and support, rather than to reveal the true nature of their sin.

God told David his secret sin would be broadcast in the "broad daylight before all Israel." Some may wonder, "Wasn't God worried about His reputation when He publicly made known David's fall?" Apparently, God was more concerned about the effects David's sin would have on the people if it were kept secret. Like the prophet Eli's sons, who committed adultery with the women in the church, David's sin would "make the LORD'S people to transgress." (1 Samuel 2:24 (KJV)) Often a moral fall and restoration are kept secret, allowing the fallen minister to continue on without any fear of embarrassment or real consequences.
For David, God told him, "Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own." (2 Samuel 12:10 (NIV)) Was life going to be a bed of roses and "easy street" for David after his fall? Certainly not! Additionally, God told him, "Out of your own household I am going to bring calamity upon you. Before your very eyes I will take your wives and give them to one who is close to you, and he will lie with your wives in broad daylight." (2 Samuel 12:11 (NIV)) Serious consequences indeed! How many fallen ministers would argue, "Keep me in my ministry, God forgives. I, like David, am a man after God's own heart. He wants to restore to my ministry to me. The best years of service are still ahead for me...." if, indeed, this were their fate? Their focus, too often, is "all about me." The church they devastated, the spiritual lives they destroyed by their actions, all are pressed into the background, and the spotlight is clearly directed to gain sympathy for themselves and to minimize their "mistake." How unlike David, "a man after God's own heart," they truly are.

God told David, "The sword will never depart from your house." (2 Samuel 12:10 (NIV)) Clearly, the penalty was severe. David lost four sons. He lost the honor and prestige he had so wonderfully achieved through his prior loyalty and faithfulness to God and the people. And, what he did seriously impeded the evangelistic work of the church, for God told him, "You have made the enemies of the Lord show utter contempt." (2 Samuel 12:14 (NIV)) Given all this, we are forced to ask the question: "Is it worth the risk of such extreme loss to the church, to God's reputation, to the victims of a fallen minister's actions, to restore him back to his position?" How could such a risk be worth the taking?

What then is true restoration? Both Moses and David were restored to a saving relationship with Christ. But, Moses' service as a leader of God's people came to an end. God did not abandon Moses or David because of their unfaithfulness. In both cases, He showed the children of Israel an extremely important lesson--one that we would do well to heed. If, after being used by God in a most solemn and sacred work, one lets go of their hold on Him and causes His name and church to come under censure and reproach because of their sin, there are extremely dire consequences. For both of them there was great loss. Joshua succeeded Moses as the leader of Israel, and David's effectiveness as a leader was destroyed. His own sin caused division and abuse in His family, which led to insurrection from his son Absalom and disgrace to the children of Israel.

To a fallen leader I would say, "It's time, with humble submission, to accept the consequences your actions have brought upon you, and to honor God and the church you failed to serve by refraining from seeking to restore your position."

Moses gives us a wonderful example of how a fallen minister should respond to God's hand of discipline. He lays down his rod of leadership and honorably turns over the reigns to another whom God has chosen to take his place. He does not protest that he is God's chosen instrument and that, even though fallen, he is still called and qualified to lead God's people. Moses quietly and humbly steps aside. He places his life into the hands of a God he loves and trusts.

It's not about forgiveness. The Bible is abundantly clear. Moses was raised to life and was granted eternal life, but his fall excluded him from being able to further lead God's people here on Earth. It's not unforgiving, unkind, or un-Christlike to not allow a fallen minister to regain the position they once held and through which they abused another. In fact, it is one of the most loving things we can do. Not simply for the morally fallen, but for the church, and for the highly honored name of our Creator whom we exalt before the world. It is imperative that we set a right example--one that shows God's mercy and forgiveness--but one that also reveals He holds accountable those who serve as His leaders. Leaders often fall because the position they once held, if
unguarded, easily leads to self-exaltation. To reinstate a fallen leader and place them back into the same position where the temptation to repeat their former actions is very great, is neither wise, nor in their own best eternal interest.

What, then, is our responsibility to those who have fallen? Often times, our feelings and personal attachment to a fallen leader find us encouraging them to stay in leadership. People will try to cheer on the fallen leader, telling them to get back on their feet and once again rise to greatness, when God has clearly said it’s time to step down.

The reason we have such difficulty distinguishing between our emotions and principles is because we are more concerned with what pleases man, rather than showing our fidelity to God. Why, at this point in time, is this so important? As one author so eloquently stated, "We are nearing the judgment, and those who bear the message of warning to the world must have clean hands and pure hearts. They must have a living connection with God. The thoughts must be pure and holy, the soul untainted, the body, soul, and spirit be a pure, clean offering to God, or He will not accept it.... " (Testimonies on Sexual Behavior, Adultery, and Divorce, p. 55) When a leader becomes defiled through sexual sin, they cause the church and "the enemies of the Lord" to "show utter contempt" to God. The work they purportedly gave their whole heart, love and life to serve becomes tainted, and the gospel loses its power to convict men and women of their own sins.

If we cannot clearly see what God requires His people to be, then we most certainly will not be able to discern the high level of integrity His ministers must possess in order for their service to be acceptable and effective for Him. To encourage someone to stand if God says, "step down," is extremely dangerous--not only to the one whom we encourage, but to us individually as well. Ultimately, we too will have to bear the consequences if a fallen minister who is again "restored" to leadership abuses someone else. My prayer is that, as a church, we will vigilantly search our hearts to see if we are indeed following where God is leading.

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