

PITFALLS OF CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

Part II

by Jim and Carolyn Murphy

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In Part I of this teaching on the pitfalls of ministry, we examined God's call on every believer's life and the testing of those who respond to His call. We also examined Jesus' temptation by Satan. We now continue with how Satan tempts each of us as ministers of the Gospel.

Satan's Big Guns

I'm not sure it is possible to identify all of Satan's devices. I do think, however, it is fairly easy to identify the devices he uses most often to cripple or to render ineffective those whom the Lord has called to the ministry.

I like the analogy Reverend Costa Deir uses to illustrate the principles contained in this article. Costa says the devil has "big guns" that he uses to shoot at those in the ministry. If we learn about these guns in principle, then we will recognize them when they come along. Here are some of the "guns" Satan most often uses.

1. Discouragement

We are all aware that there are times when things don't go well in our ministry. In fact, there are times when things not only aren't going well, they are bad! These times are some of the devil's best opportunities to target you with his discouragement gun.

Here is how this gun works. When your ministry isn't going well the devil begins to relentlessly invade your thoughts. He usually fires these thoughts (Ephesians six's fiery darts) into your mind in the first person, making you think they are your own thoughts. He will cause you to think thoughts like, "I lost two families last month. The offerings are down." Through your thoughts he reminds you over and over of how bad things are.

Another way the devil aims at you is that he often sends his friendly messengers along. These messengers have traditionally been called "Job's friends." They come to you pointing out all your faults. They tell you what you should have done. Not only do they point out how bad things **are**, they often predict that it's going to get **worse!**

The devil fires this gun of discouragement at you again and again, day after day, night after night, until it has the desired effect -- you become so discouraged that you lose hope. You may even stop praying. Maybe you start to believe that God has forsaken you. If you let this happen, the enemy has hit his target!

2. Self-Pity

After the discouragement gun has rendered us discouraged and maybe even hopeless, the devil then targets us with his self-pity gun. Here is how this gun works.

Again, the devil comes in a soothing, pitiful voice. "I feel so sorry for you," he will say. "You don't deserve this. You poor thing! You've done nothing wrong." Then he gets to his **real** motive, "**If God really loved you**, this wouldn't be happening to you."

He continues on and on until you are swallowed up in self-pity. Self-pity not only consumes you, it can also make everything God's fault! Satan certainly has succeeded if you start blaming God.

3. Fear

This gun can be used at any time, but the devil usually reserves it for those times when things aren't going well. He often uses it in relation to our health or finances. Here is how it works. Things are going well until one day you notice some discomfort in a part of your body. As the days pass it gets worse. Then comes the voice that says, "You've got **cancer!** You're going to die!" And the icy fingers of fear begin to grip your heart until that fear has paralyzed you.

Or, he may use fear concerning your finances. When things aren't going well financially the devil begins to taunt you with worries. You are awakened from sound sleep at 2 am with nagging thoughts like, "How are you going to make it? How are you going to feed your family? How are you going to pay the bills . . . ?" These worrying thoughts persist until fear consumes you. And again, the voice of the accuser always tells you that God has forsaken you and that He isn't going to intervene. If you allow this kind of fear to grip you, you will end up believing that you are all alone and forsaken by God.

4. Greed

Greed is one of the most effective weapons in the devil's arsenal. Greed usually takes the form of a desire for more and more money since it is with money that we try to satisfy our desire for things. The Apostle Paul recognized this pitfall when he said, "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." (1 Tim 6:10 NIV) In the Parable of the Sower, Mark refers to this pitfall as "the deceitfulness of wealth and the desire for other things." (Mk 4:19 NIV)

The devil's greed gun usually begins by convincing you that "you deserve better or even the

best!" He will whisper in your ear, "God's servants shouldn't be poor. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He is rich. You're a child of the King. You should have more!"

Once the devil has convinced you of these things then he begins to tell you that the end justifies the means. You can "stretch the truth" a little here, "bend Scripture" a little there, "withhold a little information here" until you maneuver yourself into more and more money.

In fact he may even convince you to begin to take money directly from the church treasury! At first it starts out as a "loan." An emergency comes up and you haven't the money to meet a need. The devil says, "There's money in the church account. You could borrow some until next pay day. No one would ever know. You can pay it back. Go ahead, it's OK." Now he has a church official taking money from the church!

Soon this "borrowing" becomes a regular occurrence. And ... with the passing of time, the idea of paying it back has long since departed. The devil's greed gun has downed another victim. (Of course, this same principle applies to believers in a business setting too.)

5. Power and Control

Power and control work differently but are close cousins. One who covets power seeks to gain authority over others. One who seeks control strives to manipulate those under his power to force them to act according to his desires. The devil knows if he can hit Christian leaders with this gun then he has succeeded in terminating their effectiveness in the kingdom of God. If he can bring a leader under the power of this gun, he has made a little "god" of him. Once that happens God can no longer effectively use this person. Why? Because he no longer needs the Holy Spirit - he is his own power source.

Have you ever been in a meeting where it was evident that every decision was being controlled by one individual? No one said or did anything apart from the subtle directions given by the spiritual "master of ceremonies." Everything is under control. Even the Holy Spirit is shut out. Yes, we all have been in such meetings. The "master of ceremonies" has been hit by the control gun!

Or take the individual who is always saying and doing things to gain the favorable attention of his denominational leaders. He often orchestrates circumstances that tend to promote his own image, even at the expense of his peers. This is a leader who has been targeted and hit with the power gun.

6. Illicit Sexual Desires

The devil learned long ago of the power of sexual desire in human beings. God intended this powerful force to be used as a bond, holding husband

and wife together. God intended it to be used with love and gentleness as a blessing to mankind as well as for reproduction. But the devil has perverted sex. In his scheme sex is "high entertainment." To him it is for all to use anytime, anywhere, with anyone, and in any manner. The devil has succeeded in selling this concept among many in the world today. The devil has learned that when he can contaminate a Christian leader with this lie he has brought down another of God's ministers.

Some years ago I sat in stark unbelief listening to a well known international evangelist who was accused of sexual misconduct with young women. He told the group of ministers who confronted him that, "Jesus was always accompanied by young women wherever he went, and He freely used them for His sexual gratification." Therefore it was OK for him to take young women with him as he traveled and used them for his own sexual gratification!

Is there no limit to the power of the mind to justify sin? I think not when one has been hit with the devil's illicit sexual activity gun.

7. Pride

Our Christian is now in a season of God's blessing. Things are going well. If he is a pastor, the church is growing. The messages have been good and well received. It seems that everything he or she does prospers. His family is doing well too, his children are serving the Lord.

The devil comes along to examine this minister and his work. He thinks, "well, my discouragement, self-pity, and fear gun certainly won't work here! I know . . . I'll use pride! Here is a perfect target for my pride gun."

Then the devil comes subtly to our minister telling him that all of these good things are happening because he is better than the other ministers in the community. "You are special," he whispers. "You are so good! You really know how to preach. There is a 'special' anointing on you. God is blessing you because you deserve it . . ."

The victims of this gun often take on a sort of slick ministry image. Their ministry resembles a smooth-running business of the world. There are many, many casualties in today's church who have been shot through with the devil's pride gun.

8. Health

It is common knowledge world-wide today that certain foods taste good but can be damaging to our bodies. From time to time cultish groups arise who are extremely health conscious. They only eat certain foods prepared a certain way. Most often these cults are associated with demonic rituals and various forms of false religions.

Once I was traveling with a powerful brother in Christ. I observed that he was very particular about the food he ate. I thought, "Surely he isn't one of those 'health food' cult people!" Curiosity persuaded me to ask him why he was so particular with his food. His answer was direct, to the point, and still rings in my ears. He said, "If you lose your health, you lose your ministry. This body doesn't belong to me. It belongs to Jesus and He has made me the care taker of it."

I gained a whole new perspective on my health and physical well-being! The devil would love to trim ten to twenty years off your life, or he would love to give you a stroke and leave you disabled. But good eating habits are not the only things that contributes to our health.

In some of the nations I have visited, people love to drive fast. They drive far too fast for the road conditions. In so doing, they are opening the door wide to a sort of self or demonically orchestrated destruction. They are putting themselves as well as completely innocent victims in a position to be killed or maimed. I know of a number of pastors and missionaries who are either dead or unable to continue ministry because of auto accidents.

I realize this isn't a pleasant subject but we must remember my brother's words, "If you lose your health [or life!] you lose your ministry." This is one gun the devil loves to fire. It may take the Lord twenty to thirty years to produce a good, balanced, powerful minister. If the devil can trim a few of the last and most fruitful years from that ministry through sickness or accidents, he has won a great victory.

I believe that these eight big guns of Satan's have brought down countless ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The good news is that as we stay steady, and as we continually fix our eyes on Jesus and on His word, we can overcome every trap the enemy has for us.

Worries of This Life

Another pitfall for our ministry is that of worry. When Jesus taught the Parable of the Sower to the multitudes, the disciples came to Him later and privately asked Him to explain it. The first two categories of seed do not generally apply to those well along in ministry, but the third category does.

This is the seed that fell among the thorns. Jesus said of this seed, "... but the **worries of this life** ... come in and choke the word making it unfruitful." (Mk 4:19 NIV, emphasis added.) This is a genuine snare that all of us must be on constant guard against. Countless are the ministers of the Gospel who have had the power of their ministry drained away through worry and anxiety.

Some folks are born worriers. Their minds are continually projecting "worst case scenarios" into all of

life's circumstances. "What if this or that happens?" (This could also be a ninth gun of Satan in that he can stir up these thoughts too.) The tragedy of this way of thinking is that Jesus has promised us that if we "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well"! (Matt 6:33 NIV) It is a simple matter of priorities. If we put Him and His kingdom first, then He supplies all our needs. There are times in every Christian ministry when we simply must rivet our eyes on Jesus and keep on keeping on. We simply must discipline our minds not to worry. We must do what we are instructed to do in Philippians:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (4:6,7 NIV)

Persecution As a Pitfall

I know that it is difficult for some to understand why so many ministers are persecuted. But we must remember that Scripture makes it clear that "... everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus **will be persecuted.**" (II Tim 3:12 NIV, emphasis added.) Let me identify and distinguish the causes of persecution. Sometimes we are persecuted because we have either sinned or made mistakes. This is not being persecuted for the gospel's sake. It's the natural consequence of our own sin or errors.

But there are other times when we are persecuted for adherence to and obedience to God's word. That's persecution for the gospel's sake. Such persecution can often easily be avoided by compromising our stand on God's word. But compromise is a very dear price to pay for avoiding persecution!

Let's identify the sources of persecution. As I see it, there are three principal sources, 1) from outside the church, 2) from inside the church, and 3) from family and friends.

1. Persecution From Outside the Church

The church of Jesus Christ has suffered persecution in every age, at least somewhere in the world. For those Christians who live in countries where non-Christian religious leaders dominate the government, persecution comes from attempting to practice even the most fundamental tenants of our faith.

For others who live in freer societies, the persecution may come from taking a strong stand on an issue, whether it be political, social or moral.

2. Persecution From Inside the Church

In the heart of every human is the capacity to rationalize. Often this human rationalization requires the twisting of Scripture. Then those who have twisted

Scripture become self-righteous and convinced that they are in the right.

These situations occasionally exist within segments of a local church, sometimes even within the leadership of the church. With the passing of time their hearts grow hard. They become:

... darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts. (Eph 4:18 NIV)

Then one day the pastor, or a prophet, exposes this situation and begins to shine the light of Scripture on the sin. The guilty parties may attempt to viciously persecute the expositor. This is persecution for the gospel's sake within the church. Bearing persecution under these circumstances is indeed sharing in Christ's sufferings! Jesus was persecuted when He spoke the truth about the Pharisees.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Matt 5:10-12 NIV)

3. Persecution From Family

Persecution can also come from our own family and friends. Unbelieving family members may persecute a member of the family who is a Christian because of his or her stand on sin. But believing family members may also persecute another family member who is a Christian and who takes a stand against them because of their sin. Jesus said,

"For I have come to turn "a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law, a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.'" (Matt 10:35,36 NIV)

Conclusion

One may ask, with all these pitfalls to our ministries, where is the victory in Jesus? Let me end by reminding all of us of God's promise in Romans, chapter eight:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 8:35-39 NIV)

In Part III of this article, we will continue to explore other pitfalls to those in ministry.

HUNDREDFOLD MINISTRIES, INTERNATIONAL

P. O. Box 625
Blue Jay, CA 92317

Telephone 909/336-9701

E-mail: jim.murphy@hundredfold.org Web site: www.hundredfold.org

Rev. Jim Murphy and his wife, Carolyn, of Blue Jay, California, United States, head Hundredfold Ministries, International. They write Christian teaching literature and travel to the Developing Nations of the world teaching Christian leaders. Hundredfold Ministries, Int'l is a cross-denominational Christian ministry dedicated to strengthening the church in the Developing Nations of the world.

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