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NOT EVERY HILL IS WORTH DYING ON

THE GREATEST THING IN leadership I have learned in my 30 years of leading churches is: *Not every hill is worth dying on.* It took me many years to learn this. If I had learned it earlier in pastoral ministry, each church I have served would have prospered more effectively. The fellowship would have been sweeter, the growth would have been greater, and the preservation of that growth would have been more successful.

When did I learn the lesson? It did not happen at a turning point, but through a process. Some things in leadership you can only learn through your own growth and the growth of the entity you are assigned to lead. The evolving of the organization with growth in structures, personnel, dollars, and expectations requires the leader to operate by the conviction that not every hill is worth dying on.

As I write these words, I think about the times I could have carried so many more people along with me on the vision path if I had only been more patient and personal along the way.

In the name of “urgency” or “reaching,” we can at times hurry matters in a church when hurrying up is not an asset, but a liability. Even though I believe I have operated with this principle in mind for the past decade, at this point I cannot go back and change things from earlier days. I must trust the sovereignty of God in all of it because blessings were more than apparent in each church I have served.

I cannot recall anyone telling me, “Ronnie, not every hill is worth dying on.” I wish someone had spoken to me that clearly and directly. Perhaps they did, but my passion distorted my hearing. In case no one has said that to you, whether you are a rookie minister or an icon minister, let me tell you right now: *Not every hill is worth dying on.*

IT’S NOT ABOUT BEING RIGHT

Ministers are strong people. I believe God made us this way because He wants us to be strong as leaders, strong through conflict, and strong in engaging the culture. Yet the call from Jesus’ heart is for us to be gentle. Gentle, not indicating weakness, but operating with tamed strength.

Most Christians are more interested in being right than they are about being Christ-like. When we always have to have our way or have the last word in a debate over an issue,

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we may lose people on the vision path because we do not operate with Christ-likeness. As ministers, we can add to the fire at times, rather than serving as the vessel of peace in the midst of the storm.

Wounded Christians lay on the brink of becoming spiritual carnage on the side streets of our churches because a minister or an employee or a church leader “just had to be right.” Someone just had to make a point. Someone did not have the wisdom to let it go, but stayed on it too long to bring lasting benefit.

The Christian life is not about being right. It is about being Christ-like. I heard this said years ago and I have never forgotten it: *If Satan cannot get you to do the wrong thing, he will get you to do the right thing in the wrong way.* This satanic ploy has limited, jeopardized, or ruined many ministers.

When you think you always have to be right, you will have to die on needless hills. Being right and being Christ-like do not have to be competing forces. Rightness is doing something the way Jesus would do it. Jesus not only did what was right, but He always did it in the right way. He was a picture of godliness and holiness, and He brought glory to God the Father.

Do not lose your testimony over being right. Do not lose your leadership over being right. Add to your testimony and your leadership by being Christ-like. This takes care of both at once.

Each time you make a decision, you either add to the value of your account or you lose value on your account. What is your leadership value right now in your church?

WHAT'S IN YOUR POCKET?

Years ago, at a leadership conference conducted by former pastor and now leadership guru John Maxwell, I heard him talk about “the change in your pocket.” I may not remember all the details, but I have never forgotten the basic principle.

A leader has only so much change in his pocket. Your calling gives you some change. Your position gives you some change. Your tenure gives you some change. Years ago, church leaders started with a lot of change in their pocket. People used to respect the call of God upon a person's life, far more than they do today. People used to respect the position of the pastor far more than they do today. People used to respect tenure in a given ministry far more than they do today. So as a minister today, you start with less change in your pocket than any generation of ministers before you.

Therefore, the change you have in your pocket this very moment based upon your calling, position, and tenure can only be increased through proper decision-making. Conversely, since you have only so much change in your pocket to begin with, and since you may have lost a little due to some decisions made, you lose more change when you do not make good decisions.

When you constantly have to prove you are right and don't take time to work toward making the best decision at the right time, you will lose more change in your pocket. If this occurs and you face a hill that you have to die on, you will have nothing left in your pocket to go to a committee, a board, a body, a group, or even to an individual to ask them to join you in your desired vision path.

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It is my goal as a leader to be loaded with change in both of my pockets. It should be your goal, also. This does not mean you do nothing. If you think that, you have missed it completely. What this means is

that your wisdom in leadership exercised over time has resulted in ample change in your pocket. This way, not if, but when the hills come that you have to be willing to die on, you will have ample change to recover in your leadership.

Never underestimate the value of making an investment in people. I had a good friend, Jack Bailey, who was a crusty old football coach and a former Razorback. Jack had an enormous influence on the lives of both my boys. Jack could tell story after story, from his days in the military to recounting each game he coached. Jack so willingly cared for and loved others, especially the younger generation. I saw him do this again and again. Since Jack died, we have missed him so much.

I am convinced that one reason Jack always took a great interest in my boys, Josh and Nick, is because the first time I remember meeting him was after he had surgery. I was the new pastor in town, making the hospital rounds. I can still recall walking into that room to see this big man. There were tubes everywhere, but he was cracking jokes. When he found out I was a football lover, we connected immediately. You see, along the way in ministry life many years after this, whether it was his service or counsel

I needed about my boys, old Jack Bailey gave it willingly. Why? Because of my investment into his life in those opening ministry days. I gained change in my pocket to call upon him. The interesting thing is, so did he. I would have attempted to climb Mount Everest because of his investment into the lives of my boys!

I am living right now in the blessing of having change in my pocket that only comes through years of service to the same church. I am able to lead our fellowship to do things we would have not considered in years past. This is possible because of trust that only comes when you have change in your pocket. When you have led the same people for 20 years, they have witnessed your highest and lowest moments in life and ministry. When you are consistent, willing to admit your weaknesses and failures, as well as applaud them because of the successes, you add change in your pocket.

THE HILLS WORTH DYING ON

Some of you will be relieved to know that I do believe there are some hills worth dying on. In this day and time, there are plenty, but let's focus in on just three of them.

Truth

I must be willing to die on the hill of God's truth found in Scripture. The Bible is God's infallible Word. It not only contains the Word of God, but it *is* the Word of God. The Bible is truth without any mixture of error. I am a Christian minister who believes in the inerrancy of Scripture, yet I believe we should only defend it in Christ-likeness.

More people are more willing to die for their traditions than for the truth found in Holy Scripture. When the Bible is mocked or scorned, we must be willing to die on that hill. You must stand in your pulpits, in your meetings, and everywhere else you go with the confidence that the Bible is God's truth for today.

Therefore, the Scripture, nothing else, should navigate what churches do. Scripture is not threatened by someone packaging it in creativity as long as Scripture remains the focus. Orthodoxy can be packaged in innovation. This does not jeopardize truth. It verifies that truth is eternal. It verifies that truth can stand the test of time.

Therefore, you must have enough change in your pockets that when someone in your church wants to question the virgin birth of Jesus or they are standing in a classroom or leading a study questioning that it is truly grace alone that saves, you can stand up for what the Bible teaches and have people rally with you wholeheartedly. The result will be that you will have more coins in your leadership pockets than you had when you began to deal with the issue.

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Morality

Jesus was very clear about the church being salt and light in this world. We must be the moral conscience of our regions,

nation, and world. Biblically, we have no alternative. We have to engage the culture.

Therefore, in this fragmented society inside and outside of the church, we may be challenged when we have to stand for righteousness in matters pertaining to the hot button issues in our world. Ministers have to live morally upright and we need to hold the standard high in our churches and in our nation.

Consider the present-day marriage debate — do we have a choice on taking a stand? We must stand for one man being married to one woman for a lifetime. It is not about two men living together or two women living together in unholy matrimony. If we do not stand strong for biblical marriage, we are contributing to the efforts of those who want to redefine marriage. The one place people must hear God's truth is the church.

Therefore, you will spend some change with a few people when you speak out in the marriage debate, but you will lose a lot of change with others if you decide to sit on the bench during moral debates. Our mission is to change the world with the life-changing message of Jesus Christ. This must always remain central, not the social issues of our day. We will have to speak to the challenges along the way or we will end up with a very mediocre commitment to morality in our churches.

By the way, let's understand clearly. These issues are biblical issues, not moral issues. Keep the debate on what God says. Stay on the message of what the Bible says. When you speak about God's truth, you always represent what is right; however, let's remember that we must always do so in a Christ-like manner.

Great Commission

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) should drive every Christian and every church. The Great Commission is Jesus' command to make disciples in every people group in the world, "baptizing them . . . teaching them." Every Christian needs to be a Great Commission Christian who is an active part of a Great Commission church.

For a church to advance toward the future in health and growth, the church needs to be emblazoned by the Great Commission. Yet not everyone involved in church shares a passion to have a healthy and growing church with the world on its heart. I have always been told that people in church will be happy until you ask them to serve, ask them to give, and ask them to go. Serving, giving, and sending are all part of being a Great Commission church. Herein lies the challenge of leading a church toward fulfilling their God-assigned task.

How much change do you have in your pocket? I hope you have some to spend on ensuring your church moves toward the fulfillment of your assignment. When you ask people to die to their own dreams for the sake of unity in the church, it may cost you. When you ask people to become equipped in special ways, it may cost you. When you ask people to serve and step up to greater service and commitment, it may cost you. When you ask people to give of the resources God has given to them, it may cost you. When you ask people to go into their own world and the multiple people groups all around the world to share Jesus, it may cost you. All of this and more should come

as a strong conviction about and commitment to the Great Commission.

There are other matters through life and leadership that are hills you may need to die on. I have just chosen these three because they seem to be quite dominant in our culture, even church culture, today.

WHEN YOU GO TO THE HILL

Good leadership determines not only to die on the right hills, but chooses the timing of when to ascend the hills for battle. Let's mention some strategic experiences you should go through before you ascend the hill.

Leadership has been clear

There are many voices in today's world competing with your voice as a minister and leader. What you live as the leader may be lived only an hour to a few hours a week by your people. What appears to be clear to you may still be unclear to them. The competing voices can get you in trouble if you assume your people are hearing what you are saying. One of the biggest sins of church leadership is the sin of assumption. We cannot assume anything. We must be clear.

If you have been clear and the people can articulate back to you the issue at hand, then leadership has been clear. If that is so, then you move on to ensure that the . . .

Processes have been thorough

When the leadership has been clear, you need to ensure the processes have been thorough. Have you gone through the various

networks of decision-making bodies on the issue at hand? Have you done your homework? Have you connected with the right players about the matter at hand to answer their questions or address their concerns?

These questions, as well as others, are important to answer in order to ensure the processes have been clear. You cannot get yourself into trouble or lose an important biblical, moral, or Great Commission decision because you did not take the time to walk the issue through the processes in your unique church culture.

If the leadership has been clear and the processes have been thorough, then one of the most important and final experiences is in regard to . . .

God's timing

Before you ascend the hill, you need to check the timing. The decision to ascend the hill cannot be made because of pressure from a special interest group in the church or because you would just like to get the matter behind you. It has to be God's timing. When God's timing is right and you stand for truth, morality, or the Great Commission, the chances of winning at the hill are greatly enhanced. Yet remember, all of these three may occur and you may still lose at the hill with many, most, or all of the people.

Wisdom is exercised when you have been clear and know it, the processes have been thorough, and you have waited on God's timing to ascend the hill. A wise man will always do things in

God's timing in God's way by God's Word. If you have worked through these issues and you stand in confidence, you have no other choice other than to ascend the hill.

WRAP-UP

Do not die on needless hills. You will have to die on a few necessary hills as a leader. Just make sure when you do that you have some change left in your leadership pockets. Don't waste your change on matters of insignificance in the big picture of church and leadership — matters like colors for a room, furniture preferences, having to have the final word about something within a committee, what you need to do at one of the Christmas services, or whether the parking lot needs to be paved now or three months from now. Keep the big picture. Choose your hills wisely.

From one minister to another: *Not every hill is worth dying on.*

Remember: “He has made everything appropriate in its time” (Eccles. 3:11).