

"... the news about him spread all the more, so that crowds of people came to hear him and to be healed of their sicknesses. But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed." (Luke 5: 15-16)

It was not when ministry slowed that Jesus took time to pray - it was when ministry opportunities abounded! When Jesus was constantly sought after and had multiple opportunities to do much good and teach the word of God to many eager listeners, Luke tells us Jesus often removed himself from people for the purpose of prayer. If you think our schedules are too busy, our agendas too hectic, and our tasks too overwhelming – think about the mission the Lord came to fulfill. He was to present himself and his message in such a way that people would know assuredly that he came from God and was in fact God in the flesh. He was to show people the way and convince them that he is the way. He was to teach people the truth and help them understand that he is the truth. He was to give people eternal life by leading them to believe that he is the life. In short, his mission was to do everything the Father called him to do including surrendering his body to evil men who would horribly torture him and kill him. Jesus was faithful to God's purposes to the end of his life trusting that God would bring him back from the dead. He accomplished everything the Father sent him to accomplish. His secret of success is no secret at all for those who read the Gospels carefully: "He often withdrew to lonely places and prayed."

Having been in full-time ministry for over twenty years, I understand first hand how overwhelming the job becomes. I constantly feel the need to do twenty-five things with the time to accomplish three! Which three? Do I work extra hard and accomplish five? Do I do shoddy work and accomplish ten? And when I finally get a break and begin to feel on top of my workload someone comes in with an unbelievable difficult situation needing my help immediately. Jesus knows all of these burdens much more intensely than you or I could ever experience. I marvel at how Jesus handled interruptions, how he used his time, how he never allowed stress to wear him down. What I've learned is that the closer I imitate Jesus' prayer life, the more peace I have in my ministry (peace from knowing I'm not alone), the more joy I have in my life (joy comes from having God's perspective), and the more I know God is at work in and through me (rather than me working for him). It is for this reason that I have written this booklet: to encourage ministers to set aside time each year for a personal prayer retreat. It's time we follow the words we have been singing for years and spend, "much time in secret with Jesus alone."

My Story

I was privileged as a young ministry student to attend a seminar on prayer and fasting by Albert Lemmons. That seminar literally laid the foundation for my prayer life like nothing else I had been exposed to. As Lemmons opened the Scriptures on these subjects, I found myself soaking up the information like a sponge. That seminar helped me understand that nothing of eternal worth would ever be accomplished in ministry without prayer.

Realizing the need to pray and knowing how to pray are not the same. In those early years, I thought that all I really needed was a prayer method and enough discipline to use it properly. As a student at Harding University in the late 1970's, daily Quiet Time was being heavily promoted. I became convinced that with enough discipline, I could have a period of prayer and Bible reading every day in the morning. As long as my Quiet Time was used as a tool it was very valuable to me. However, after years of trying to have a consistent, daily period of prayer and Bible study, I realized that I had made Quiet Time a matter of success or failure. Just having a Quiet Time became the objective. When I went a day or two or three or more without a Quiet Time, I felt very guilty, like I was letting God down. I alternated between feeling good that I had "done my time" and bad that I had not had my Quiet Time. I finally decided to get off the guilt train and use a different approach. (If Quiet Time is helpful to you, by all means continue to have it. However, if it has become a legalistic standard by which you measure your spiritual progress, let me assure you that no text in scripture requires a daily period of prayer and Bible study.)

My next attempt at learning how to pray involved the accumulation of knowledge. By my early years in ministry, I had already read a few books on the subject of prayer. However, now that I realized that Quiet Time was not giving me what I needed, I began to read every book I could find on the subject. I was particularly intrigued by former Civil War chaplain E. M. Bounds who wrote extensively on the subject. Knowing that every thought must be weighed by the Word of God, I read the entire Bible and marked every passage that mentioned prayer. I then sorted what I had highlighted in books and underlined in my Bible into categories and typed a 111-page compilation of notes. These became the basis for a thirteen-week sermon series complete with a weekly discussion group talking about the sermons. All of this was very valuable to me and I often return to those notes for instruction and contemplation. But, there is a great difference in knowing about prayer and knowing how to pray.

I now know that what has really taught me how to pray is not method, discipline nor knowledge. My struggles are what taught me how to pray. My struggles exposed my deep need for God. My deepest need is not for a method, nor more discipline, nor even Biblical information. I need God! I need him all the time, but it was my struggles in life that made my need so apparent. The realization of my great need for God is teaching me how to pray like Jesus.

Reflecting on my 26 years as a Christian, I can see how this realization of my deep need for God brought me many times to his throne in prayerful solitude.

- In college I would sometimes go to my good friend Joe McReynold's farm with my sleeping bag to sleep in his field under that stars. Generally, these were times of confusion when I needed God's perspective and direction for my life. They were times I recognized that I needed what only God could provide.
- In 1994, during a time of personal crisis, I was invited by a camp caretaker to spend some time in solitude at his camp, which was not being used at the time. I

went and spent two days and one night. I was struggling with depression and, with my church leaders' approval, had taken six weeks off to seek the Lord through study, prayer, and counsel. It was during my time at the camp that the Lord gave me a breakthrough and helped me discover the road to renewal. I still had to walk the difficult road before me but my time of prayerful solitude had brought hope to my weary heart.

- The true beginning of my annual prayer retreats came in 1998. During a time of unbelievable stress and church conflict, I was given a gift by two perceptive spiritual brothers, Mark Stanfield and Stan McGrew. The gift was four days and three nights in the peace and quiet of a cabin in Rand, Colorado. (You say you've never heard of Rand – nobody else has either, that's why it was so peaceful!) Before going to the cabin I made a decision that I would have no unnecessary outside influences during my retreat. No newspaper, no radio, no television, no movies – nothing except things that would enable me to communicate with God and hear what he had to tell me. I spent the majority of my time in prayer, Bible study, worship, and journaling. God gave me so much perspective that when I returned to my home congregation, I was much better able to discern his leading. Because of this perspective, I made the difficult decision to leave a congregation that I loved and had worked with eleven years in order to take a much needed Sabbatical.
- In 1999, as my Sabbatical came to a close and I needed to hear from God to know where to go next, I spent a week at a friend's cabin in a very secluded spot. This was the first retreat that I spent the entire week fasting. I had fasted on a number of occasions before this, but this was the longest fast I had been on to date. For the first time I fasted with nothing on my schedule but worship and prayer. Out of this prayer retreat, I came to clearly understand what I needed to look for as I talked with churches about working with them.

In December 1999 I began preaching for the Clear Lake Church of Christ in Houston, Texas. The clarity with which God made it known to me that this was the place he was calling me to minister was remarkable. I have often told people that I felt so strongly that God was calling me to work there that had I not taken the position when offered to me I would have felt like I was directly disobeying God. I contribute such clarity specifically to the week of prayer and fasting that I had just weeks before traveling to Houston for the interview weekend.

One of the things I talked to the elders about before taking the job was the need to have a personal week of prayer every year. They agreed that would be beneficial to my ministry at Clear Lake, and it was written into my contract. Since that time every year I take one week, find a solitary place, and devote myself to prayer. The benefits have been beyond my expectations. The greatest benefit is the peace, love, and joy the Lord pours out as I seek his face. Being in his presence with nothing else on the agenda but spending time with him brings great reward! He has also blessed me each year with specific direction for ministry.

- August 2000. My first annual prayer retreat was held at a retreat center in Dickenson, Texas. Here I began the tradition of praying for every member of the congregation by name. I prayed specifically for their spiritual growth and development. After this retreat I preached a series of sermons called "The Truth Will Set You Free" and even now, four years later, continue to be amazed at how God keeps using that material to help people find freedom in the Lord.
- September 2001. On this retreat, a generous couple at church offered the use of their Galveston condominium. After this time of prayer, I began looking for how God was answering my prayers for the spiritual growth and development of each member in our congregation. Two months after my time away, two of our deacons, on their own initiative, planned a prayer retreat for the elders, ministers, and deacons. There was no agenda for the retreat except to fast and pray. This had never happened before at this congregation and was truly evidence of a deepening desire to know God better and to become spiritual leaders rather than business organizers.
- September 2002. God communicated more clearly at this retreat than ever before in my experience. I spent the week fasting, and God gave me some wonderful direction. Upon my return, I suspended a sermon series I was preaching to preach a special message on faith that I had no plans on preaching before I spent my time alone with the Lord. God communicated so strongly to me that I knew it could not wait. We had a ministry intern working on our staff at his own expense. He was living off his savings and not receiving any compensation from the church. He had been a successful businessman but decided the Lord was calling him to full time ministry and agreed to serve one year as an intern before going to wherever God might lead him next. After a few months as an intern, it was obvious to everyone at Clear Lake that he needed to stay longer than one year. The problem was there was no money in the budget. In fact, like many churches, we had more expenses than contributions! As we were we just beginning to talk about having a planning meeting to discuss raising money, God made it easy on us all. In my sermon that Sunday, I asked the congregation to not do anything for 24 hours except pray, asking God to show each family personally what they needed to do financially to allow this man to come on staff full time. I told them to do whatever they felt God wanted them after they spent time in prayer. There was to be no guilt; if God had not led them to believe they should give anything, then they shouldn't make any financial contribution. Within a month the position was fully funded and today the man is a full time staff member. We never raised a dollar or had any plan to obtain funds other than what I described in that sermon. Truly that was a sermon from the Lord!
- September 2003. On this most recent retreat, I came back with several revelations. The top of my list is the need to get serious about losing about 10-15 lbs. (This was not exactly the word I was wanting to hear!). Secondly, I felt a

pressing burden to write this little booklet about my annual prayer retreats to encourage my fellow ministers to follow the example of Jesus. Thirdly, God opened my eyes to the promises of Jesus to answer prayer found in John chapters 14-16. This is material I have already begun to present to my elders and deacons. I also feel led to facilitate an elder, deacon, and minister retreat. On this retreat we will all pray for every member of the congregation's spiritual development as I have been doing in private since my first prayer retreat. Where all of this will lead I don't know. It's not my job to know the future but to be faithful in the present.

My annual prayer retreat has become so important to me that I begin to eagerly anticipate it toward the end of the summer. I find that they are like an oasis in the desert. They serve as a time of renewal, repentance, refreshing, refilling, recommitting, relaxing, and refueling. (How's that for a sermon outline!)

How to Begin

For some of you, the place to begin might be to take just a night or two and get away to "lonely place." Get away from all the disturbances, distractions, and ministry tasks. Go to a place where you are secluded for time alone with the Lord. Others of you may be ready to take a full week and get away. Don't let the work of ministry be an excuse—follow the example of the Master! As mentioned earlier, he often went to lonely places where he prayed. He did this, not when ministry opportunities were slowing down but when opportunities abounded. If you think you need to do the work of ministry more than taking time for a prolonged period of prayer, you are not following in the footsteps of Jesus. That sounds very black and white, but it's time all of us in ministry took a reality check. None of us (Jesus included) can do the work of ministry without spending time in communion with the Father. Taking a minister's prayer retreat is one way to ensure that you are spending some much needed time with the Father at least once a year.

1. Make the time and find a place. Don't wait to find the time - it'll probably never happen. You must make the time. I try to go in the beginning of fall after the kids have started school. That seems to be a natural time for the beginning of the church year. I pick out the least busy week in September (sometimes late August or early October) and e-mail my elders and ministry co-workers to make sure my time selection works for them. When looking for a place to go, keep in mind that what you really need is quiet and seclusion. I have had retreats in remote cabins where I only saw one or two people the whole week, time share condos that required discipline to not get involved in a vacation mindset, and a Catholic retreat center that offered a package deal with meals along with a quiet place to stay. I recommend that you tell the congregation what you want to do and why. Perhaps one of them will offer you a place to stay.
2. Essential items to take.
Your Bible. I often go with something in mind that I really want to study. One time it was the prayer life of Moses. Another time it was Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees to discover what was important to Jesus verses what was important to

the Pharisees and why they clashed. Other times it has just been to read the Gospels or the Psalms or other books of the Bible.

Your Journal. Any Christian bookstore will have two dozen selections of journals for women and one or two choices for men. If you don't have a journal, go get one. During your time away use this to write reflections of what you are thinking, insights you are getting, ideas for future ministry, and anything else you might want to record for future reference. In my last prayer retreat, I read all of my previous journals and was encouraged to see in black and white the spiritual growth that has taken place in my heart and mind over the years. I don't write in my journal on a daily basis but only when significant things are happening in my life: bad and good.

A Notebook and Ink Pens. I use scratch paper to jot down things that are not defined enough to put in my journal. On one retreat, I had a five sermon series come to me that I scratched out in my notebook. Ideas were coming so rapidly that I had to write fast just to keep up. On my last retreat, I used my notebook to write letters to each of my children telling them things that were close to my heart but might possibly have gone unsaid if I had not taken the time to get away for a significant period of time.

A Hymn Book. I consider this an essential item because worship will be an important part of your time with the Lord. You will be glad you took this book when a certain song comes to mind that you want to sing but can't remember all of the words. There have been times when I have used my book for a long period of singing praises to God one song after another. "My God and I go in the field together, we walk and talk as good friends should and do. We clasp our hands, our voices ring with laughter, My God and I walk thru the meadow's hue." Song verses like this take on all new meaning as you sing them to the Lord when it is just the two of you alone for a long period of time.

3. Other items to consider taking.

I often take my bicycle and walking stick. I make sure to get plenty of physical exercise while I'm away. That is one area of my everyday life that seems to continually be lacking. While away I'll take long hikes in the woods or ride my bike on long rides. These are wonderful times of exercise as well as opportunities to commune with God in the beauty of nature. If there is a swimming pool, I'll take my swim trunks as well. Since I generally try to avoid people I'll go to the pool only if no one else is around.

I sometimes take my fishing rod if there is a place to fish. I wouldn't recommend turning your time into a fishing vacation! This is not the time to rent a boat and fish all day. However, I find it very relaxing to wake up early and fish awhile - not necessarily to catch anything but to give me another opportunity to enjoy God's

creation. I have yet to bring any fish home. I just catch and release and rejoice in the beauty around me.

I also like to take my guitar and play worship songs, as David must have done with his harp during his times of spiritual seclusion with the Lord. I even wrote a song on one retreat (using my notebook paper of course) about how God had changed my life called, "His Love For Me!" I played it at a church banquet later that year. You won't find it on the Christian Top 40 chart, but it is deeply meaningful to me to this day.

I also take a CD player and worship CD's for my time away. While praying I enjoy having soft music playing in the background. Often I will mix worship in with my requests and intercessions as particular songs are played in the background that stir my soul with renewed thoughts of God, his wonder and holiness.

Food is optional. I sometimes fast which makes food planning easy! All I need is liquids. This past retreat I did a modified "Daniel fast" of raw vegetables, fruit and nuts. Sometimes I just eat normally and shop for easy to prepare meals and snacks. I try not to eat out in an effort to stay focused.

4. Things to Avoid.

My objective is to be in the Lord's presence, to hear his voice, and receive from him anything he desires to give. Therefore I find it necessary to avoid as much outside interference as possible. Television, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines, etc. will not help me accomplish my objective; therefore, I have a total media fast! On two retreats I had to break away for a Wednesday night teaching appointment but work hard to not do that anymore. It is an interruption to stop to minister to others when my purpose is for the Lord to minister to me. My ultimate objective is to be able to minister to others out of the fullness and direction the Lord provides which comes through such times of solitude. Therefore, I recommend not breaking up your retreat to do teaching, visiting, counseling, or other ministry activities. Most of these (with very few exceptions) can wait until you come "down from the mountain."

I have taken some spiritual books along with me on some retreats. However, lately I'm thinking that since my purpose in getting away is to hear from God without any distractions that in my future retreats, I'll leave them for another time. On my last retreat I only took my Bible, hymnbook, and past journals to read. It is certainly appropriate to read the insights of others, but to hear clearly from the Lord, I think it's best to give direct, focused attention to his Word exclusively during this time.

Hearing from God

I used to cringe when someone began a sentence with, "God told me" It was disturbing to me that a person might think that God would communicate with them in such a clear way that they could characterize it as "God told me" However, as I

have grown in my prayer life, and especially in having long periods of solitude, God has indeed made some specific things very clear to me. I have never heard the audible voice of God but have heard a voice "in my head." It is difficult to describe this "voice in my head" as it might be some mixture of thoughts, mental pictures, feelings, words, sentences, and/or circumstances. I have begun using the word, "impressions" to describe what I believe to be the leading of God's Holy Spirit.

Many of these impressions have been words of encouragement given to me for my own personal benefit. I often write them in my journal for later reflection. Nearing the end of a week long fast this is what I wrote in my journal on September 9, 1999:

"The Lord gave me these words after a long period of singing prayer songs from the song book. 'Don't be afraid of what's ahead. You have chosen what is best. Although many may not understand stay with me. Worship me! Sing praises to my name. Depend upon me in prayer. I will lead you where you should go.'"

This was a time of great uncertainty and anxiety in my life. I was out of work and had no idea what the future held for my family or me. It was the perfect word for me in my situation. But, some of you are no doubt asking, how do you know it's the voice of God? A very good question. It could be the Devil or just my own imagination. Just because I have a thought or a "voice in my head" does not mean God gave it to me.

Reading the Bible we discover that God has always desired to make his will known to his people. Creation certainly teaches us many things about God and his will and Scripture makes known his general will for all time in all situations. But does God sometimes make his specific will known? He does throughout both Testaments from Abraham to the Apostle Paul and many, many people in between. He does not answer every question we ask but reveals himself in such a way that we can know the direction and leading he wants us to follow. But we return to the question: How can one know it's God speaking and not some deception? There are several guidelines I follow that help me discern God's specific will:

- **God Never Contradicts His Scriptures.** To paraphrase Paul, "Even if an apostle or an angel from heaven should tell you something that contradicts the Gospel of Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, it is not to be believed nor followed." Properly interpreted the Scriptures become our standard to measure anything that one might think is a word from the Lord or a leading of the Holy Spirit. I say "properly interpreted" because God has no problem contradicting Scriptures that are not being used correctly. Just ask the Pharisees.
- **God Often Works Out of Community.** Whatever you think God might be telling you needs to be tested (See 1 Thess. 5:19-22 and 1 John 4:1). In a family, it needs to be tested by talking to your spouse and perhaps your children. What has God been doing in their lives? I continue to be amazed to find that when discussing with my

wife what God is telling me she will often confirm the word by her own experiences. In the church there is a much larger community to consider which would include other recognized leaders but should also include what is happening in the lives of those not in leadership. God desires us to work together in unity and will often communicate in such a way that unity is needed to properly discern his leading.

- If Something is Important to God, He Will Repeat it. The most important things in scripture are what God says many times in many ways: his love for all humans, the need for humankind to love him in return, his desire for justice, the essentiality of holiness before one can approach God, and on and on. It is the same when God is calling one to do something specific. Look for confirmation. God has a way of making things abundantly clear to those paying attention when it's something of great importance.
- Not Everything One Thinks is From God. Humility is a virtue. Pride is a vice. Arrogance destroys the work of God. Don't think that everyone should do whatever you say because you claim it is a word from the Lord. Maybe it is and maybe it's not. But if it involves other people in any way, you must be humble enough to allow for God's discernment and God's timing. Submission to your church leaders is not just a good idea it's God's way. If you cannot convince your fellow leaders to follow through with what you believe is God's leading you need to continue to pray about the matter, drop it or wait for another time. Give God time to work in the heart of members of your congregation, in the hearts of your fellow leaders, and in your own heart as well.

To illustrate the guidelines listed above consider an event that happened to me just a few years ago. It began the day before leaving for my personal retreat in August 1999. I received a call from a new Christian who was in terrible turmoil. She was a single mother raising two teenagers. She supported her family by working as a checker at Wal-Mart. Her only car had become undrivable, and she had no way to get to work. Her car was not repairable, and she couldn't afford to buy another one. My wife and I had known with her long enough to know that she worked hard to make a living so that she would not be dependent upon handouts. However, she had reached the end of her rope and had no idea how she could solve her problem.

I was two days into a week long fast and was in a time of personal transition. After my year long Sabbatical, I was convinced that God was calling me back into full time ministry. However, I didn't know where or exactly what kind of ministry he might be calling me into. I had thought it would all be settled by August since I wanted to be located to a new place before the children started school. Since it was now the end of August, I reluctantly realized that God had made no such guarantee! So after getting the children's schooling issues settled for the fall, I was going away to seek God's face and gain insight for our future. The woman with the crisis was a serious interruption to my plans! As I talked to her on the phone, I told her to not worry but take her concerns to God in prayer and that I would do the same.

As I drove home that night I prayed for her and her situation. During that prayer God brought a scripture to mind, Isaiah 58. I knew the chapter was something about how true fasting is related to helping the less fortunate. I asked the Lord if I was to buy Debbie a car. The answer came into my head quickly, "Yes!" I dismissed it as just my imagination, but couldn't dismiss it completely. I talked to my wife about it without telling her I thought the Lord had told me to buy the car. I just said that I thought we should help her in some way. My wife said we should do whatever was necessary to help our friend, even if it meant buying a car for her! I decided later that evening that I would at least help her shop for a car and loan her enough money to buy it.

Later, while reading the scriptures my heart was laid open and I knew that God was truly telling me to buy her the car with no strings attached. I opened first to Isaiah 58.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?
Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.
Then you will call, and the Lord will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I."

How could I go before God in the humility of fasting asking for his help if I didn't help this new Christian? I'll continue with the story as it is recorded in my journal. The underlined portion is exactly how I wrote it in my journal.

"... this afternoon it became clear that I don't need to loan her the money I need to buy her a car. I was reading 2 Corinthians and found this instruction in 9:10-11: 'Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.' When we were in need the [family name] purchased a car for us. We were not expecting it nor had we asked for it. We considered it a blessing from the Lord. I have been marveling the past couple of days over how much money we have in our church account [money given by supporters for my work as a ministry intern director]. God has truly given us an abundance. Now he is

calling on us to pass a blessing on to [the new Christian]. May our generosity help her understand how God supplies all her needs and may she thank him and praise him for taking care of her."

The end of the story was that God led me to an unbelievable deal on an old car at a mechanic's shop. It was a '79 Chevy Malibu with only 83,000 original miles on it. He sold it to us for \$700 and my friend's old junker (Lest you misunderstand, seven hundred dollars is a lot of money for an out-of-work preacher with an uncertain future!) The mechanic also did a number of small repairs and gave the car a valid safety inspection and emissions test. As I paid for the car, my friend was in tears and I asked her if she had prayed like I told her to when we were talking on the phone. She said, "All I could get out was, 'help!'" I smiled and told her that the Lord had heard her cry for help and had actually told me to buy her the car. I said, "You can thank me for buying the car, but the one you really need to thank is God because he put me up to it."

The best part of the story is what happened next. I went back to my office feeling just great about how everything had worked out. As I checked my mail I found an envelope from a supporter of mine that I had not heard from in months. Inside was a check for \$750. They had not sent any contributions since January and wanted to make up for everything they would have sent if they had stayed up to date. To this day, tears come into my eyes when I think about how God knew all along that I could afford to buy the car. He taught me a lesson I never want to forget. God really can supply all of my needs. What he wants from me is faith.

I am convinced that God wants to communicate to us and give us leading and direction in our lives when we are submissive, humble, and quiet before him. The purpose of a minister's retreat is NOT to hear a word from the Lord but to give him the opportunity to reveal to us whatever he chooses. In the stillness and quiet of my personal prayer retreats, God has often exposed sinful attitudes in my heart and called me to change. In my latest retreat, for instance, he called my attention to the phrase, "the least of these" in Jesus' parable of the Sheep and the Goats. Who are "the least of these" in my ministry? As I prayed through my directory I prayed for people who are burdensome, seemingly always in trouble and often seeking my help. They are the people that wear me down. It occurred to me that they are "the least of these." Jesus said whatever I do for the "least of these brothers of mine" I have done for him. What a perspective! I now have a renewed zeal to serve these who formerly were seen as burdens as if they were Christ himself – because they are.

As you go away to a lonely place to pray, be open to whatever the Lord wants to communicate to you. It may be a word of personal encouragement, or it could be a direction you need to pursue in ministry. Whatever it is, take the necessary steps to confirm that it's from the Lord and then be obedient. God has called me to do some things that I thought might make me appear foolish (and they have in the eyes of some), but the end result has always been good. God honors faithful obedience.

A Word for Elders

As you know, ministry is hard work. Most ministers make many sacrifices to do their work well. This is because they believe so strongly in what they do. Even if I have succeeded in convincing your minister to take a personal prayer retreat he will be reluctant to do so unless he has your blessing. As spiritual shepherds, I appeal to you to encourage your preacher to follow the example of Jesus in this matter of withdrawing to a lonely place to pray. Your co-worker in ministry will return with fresh perspective and renewed zeal for ministry. He will be an even greater force for good after spending this time away. To help encourage him, I would recommend you do the following:

- Have the church pay for his lodging and meals while away. This is not a vacation and should not be viewed as one. Consider this part of his preparation for ministry, and treat it as you would a seminar or enrichment class.
- Offer to take over any responsibilities he will be leaving behind for the week. On my last retreat, two of my shepherds taught my Wednesday night class. Ask your minister how you can help make it possible for him to get away. It might include hospital visitation or some other ministry activity you could do for him.
- Look after his wife and children while he is gone. There may be some special needs at home that will make it difficult for him to get away. Find out what those might be, if any, and see to it that everything is taken care of.
- Pray for him while he is away. If I were ranking these in order of importance, this would be number one. Pray for his spirit to be refreshed and renewed. Pray for him to hear a word from the Lord clearly. Pray for his retreat to be used by God to continue to refine him and make him a better servant and spiritual leader.

Conclusion

When Jesus withdrew to lonely places for prayer he would leave the work of ministry for a time of solitude with his Father. He would then leave the "lonely place" and return to ministry with direction and purpose for the work God had called him to accomplish. What a marvelous example Jesus has set for everyone who ministers in his name. How desperately we need time alone with the Father! How can we think we can do anything of lasting worth without seeking the Father to know his direction and leading? How much the Father wants to give us. How eagerly he wants to guide us. How he waits for us to realize how much we need him and make the time to seek him by withdrawing to lonely places for prayer.