

A TASTE TEST SAMPLER

*Uncommon Wisdom
for Greater Ministry Impact*

48

LAWS
OF
SPIRITUAL
POWER

FRANK VIOLA

*Author of *Insurgence**

To order the complete book and listen to interviews with the author, go to 48Laws.com.

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O F
S P I R I T U A L
P O W E R



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*To every person who dared to put their hand to
the plow of God's work—including those yet to be born.*

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PRELUDE

Effective Ministry and Spiritual Power

I wrote this book for two groups of people:

1) Those who regularly preach or teach God's Word. This includes pastors, teachers, missionaries, and church planters, both inside and outside the institutional church.¹

2) All of God's people. Why? Because every true disciple of Jesus is called to be a servant—a minister—in some capacity. Paul reminded the new converts in Thessalonica that they had “turned to God from idols to *serve* the living and true God” (1 Thessalonians 1:9, NKJV, emphasis mine).

Every one of us who knows the Lord can have the glorious privilege of saying of Christ, “He is the One ‘whose I am, and whom I serve’” (Acts 27:23, KJV).

If you are in Christ, your entire life is a “mission trip.”

The word *minister* in the New Testament simply means “servant.”

Paul of Tarsus took the concept a step further when he described his service to God using the term *bondservant* (Romans 1:1, NKJV).

Paul saw himself as a bonds slave of Jesus Christ. His greatest boast was that he belonged to Christ and had the high honor of serving Him.

Unfortunately, many Christians today equate serving the Lord with church activities. But true service, according to the New Testament, is about advancing God's kingdom and destroying the works of the devil.

And these tasks require spiritual power.

I designed this book to set forth 48 laws of obtaining spiritual power for effective ministry.

As Paul put it in his most sublime letter,

I also pray that you will understand the incredible greatness of God's power for us who believe him. This is the same mighty power that raised Christ from the dead and seated him in the place of honor at God's right hand in the heavenly realms.

EPHESIANS 1:19-20, NLT

Spiritual power is another way of describing the dynamic energy of God. We could also call it God's "anointing."

Consider what happened when Samuel anointed David:

So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David.

1 SAMUEL 16:13

Consider also this passage from Isaiah:

The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners.

ISAIAH 61:1

Jesus initially fulfilled this text when John baptized Him in the Jordan River and the Spirit of God came upon Him to launch His incredible ministry.² But the passage also applies to all who are in Christ and who continue His ministry today.³

The word *anointing*, therefore, isn't relegated to the Pentecostals or the charismatics. It's a term used throughout the Bible (Exodus 40:15; Leviticus 8:12; 1 John 2:27; Acts 10:38, etc.).

The Origin of the Laws

One of the most amazing truths in the universe is that God entrusts fallen human beings with His power. T. Austin-Sparks, a former pastor and one of the most Christ-centered and spiritually insightful men who ever lived, put it best when he wrote,

God puts Himself into the hands of men. God is not going to move unless there are those who prevail with Him.⁴

Spiritual power—or God's anointing—can increase or decrease in a person's life.

Robert Greene's bestselling book *The 48 Laws of Power* inspired the title of this volume. Greene's book promotes the leveraging of human power through manipulation and selfishness. By contrast, this book promotes the leveraging of spiritual power through self-denial and the application of divine principles borne out in Scripture.

All the laws I explore either increase spiritual power in one's ministry or reduce it.

I've served the Lord for more than three decades, and I've discovered each of these "laws" either through my own mistakes (my rap sheet of mistakes is about as long as a telephone pole), by observing others put them into effect (for better or worse), or through my own personal labors in the Lord.

I gave an early (and clumsy) rough draft of this book to more than one hundred Christian leaders at an annual mastermind I facilitate.⁵ The group included pastors, seminary professors, Bible teachers, missionaries, and church planters.

Most of these leaders said that the 48 laws were new to them,

despite their theological training. Their encouraging words convinced me to professionally publish this book.

If you and I are to survive and thrive in ministry, we need to know about and apply the laws of God's work.

The Goal

My goal in writing this book is to encourage, inspire, and equip you for greater impact in God's kingdom. I hope, therefore, that you'll reflectively read each chapter with a heart open toward the Holy Spirit. As you do, I pray that He will speak to your heart and take you to new levels of ministry and beyond.

At the end of the book, I provide a web page that contains several never-before-released talks I delivered in pastors conferences and leadership trainings throughout the United States.

In these talks, I drill down on some of the 48 laws and add further observations about God's work.

I've intentionally kept each chapter short, distilling each law to its essence. Whenever I determined a particular law could use further illumination, I provided an illustration or story to demonstrate it in action.

The five codas at the end of the book are just as important as the chapters. (Coda means a concluding section.) If you go to 48Laws.net, you'll find several related audios and six more codas.

Two final words.

First, some laws may appear to contradict others, but this is a mark of their truthfulness. Biblical truth is often paradoxical. Jesus is fully God but also fully human. The Bible exhorts us to judge, yet it also tells us to judge not.⁶ And consider these two proverbs that sit right next to each other:

Do not answer a fool according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.

Answer a fool according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

PROVERBS 26:4-5

The laws of spiritual power often follow this paradoxical pattern. In some contexts, a law will apply one way, but in another context, it applies an opposite way. You'll see what I mean as you read.

The point: Aristotelian logic always breaks down in the light of God's eternal truth.

Second, I encourage you to supplement this work with two other resources. One is my landmark book, *Insurgence: Reclaiming the Gospel of the Kingdom*. The other is *Hang On, Let Go: What to Do When Your Dreams Are Shattered and Life Is Falling Apart*.

If you understand the gospel of the kingdom and embrace it, as I explain in *Insurgence*, you will find it easier to implement the 48 laws.

In addition, understand that, as a minister of Jesus Christ, you *will* go through some gut-grinding hardships. Some will be so horrific that they defy description. *Hang On, Let Go* will help you to be developed rather than destroyed by them.

Let's begin.

LAW 2

Do Not Be a People Pleaser

One of the most life-sucking elements in spiritual service is being a people pleaser.

This mindset and attitude, if not ruthlessly dealt with, will end up undermining your ministry and depleting you of spiritual power.

Being a people pleaser will attract damaged people into your life who will end up turning on you and creating havoc in your world.

People pleasers eventually find themselves perpetually defeated and discontented.

Why? Because they have allowed themselves to become slaves to mere mortals rather than to the living God. (You may want to run that sentence by again.)

Listen to these heart-searing words from Paul:

For am I now seeking the approval of man, or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

GALATIANS 1:10, ESV

Point: You can't serve Christ and seek to please humans.

You're Not Pizza

On one of my birthdays, a relative gave me a plaque that reads, "You can't make everyone happy. You're not pizza."

Those words ought to be chiseled on the hearts of all who serve God.

You're not pizza. You can't make everybody happy, and it's a profound mistake to try.

So why not quit while you're ahead (or behind)?

Jesus was kind, gracious, and compassionate, but He was never a people pleaser. He didn't always respond to the needs of mortals.

Instead, He was driven by the leading of His Father. And the two didn't always coincide. The sickness of Lazarus is a case in point.

If Jesus were a people pleaser, He would have dropped everything as soon as Mary and Martha sent Him their desperate plea to visit Bethany when Lazarus became ill.

But Jesus delayed. Intentionally.

Why? Because His Father had other plans, and our Lord's sole ambition was to please His Father rather than us mortals.

The Lord always knows what's needed, and He's always on time. He just doesn't utilize our calculations or yardsticks. In fact, He lives in a completely different time zone.

The Root Behind People Pleasing

Christian leaders often have a penchant to please people. But it's really a symptom of a deeper issue.

People pleasing usually stems from a deficient sense of self-worth. Men and women seek to please others because they want to be accepted and loved.

Very often, people pleasers experienced poor treatment in their childhood. So at some point they subconsciously concluded that in order to be treated well, they must make others happy.

Here are some prominent signs that you are engaging in people pleasing:

- You hide your real opinions and outwardly agree with others.
- You over-apologize, even for things that aren't your fault.
- You feel responsible for how others feel.

- You find it almost impossible to say “no” when you’re asked for something.
- You need people to praise you to feel relaxed and content.
- You abandon your personal values to avoid conflict.

The Antidote to People Pleasing

The antidote for the disease of people pleasing is to have your own Gethsemane with fear—the fear of man.

Fear of man will prove to be a snare,
but whoever trusts in the LORD is kept safe.

PROVERBS 29:25

If you fear God, you don’t have to fear anything else.

Don’t let people call you a traitor for staying true to God. Don’t you panic as so many of your neighbors are doing when they think of Syria and Israel attacking you. Don’t fear anything except the Lord of the armies of heaven! If you fear him, you need fear nothing else.

ISAIAH 8:12-13, TLB

I define the fear of God the same way that A. W. Tozer defined reverence: “the astonished awe that comes to the human heart when God is seen.”¹

Decide now to switch your allegiance from pleasing others to pleasing God.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:3-12, Paul described his own ministry mindset. These were the marks of his ministry to God’s people:

- He had pure motives.
- He didn’t attempt to deceive.
- He felt confident in God’s approval of him as a man entrusted with the gospel.
- He sought to please God, not men.

- He recognized that God tested his heart.
- He didn't use flattery or embrace greed.
- He didn't seek glory from people.
- He didn't exercise his authority as an apostolic worker.
- He shared himself, not just the gospel, with the believing communities.
- He paid his own way so that he wasn't a burden on any church or individual.
- He conducted himself in a holy, righteous, and blameless manner.
- Like a mother caring for her children, he was gentle and affectionate toward the believers.
- Like a father, he exhorted, encouraged, and charged the believers to walk worthy of God.

You'll never get far in the kingdom of God if you constantly seek to make people happy.

Pilate, the man who had Jesus crucified, did so to "satisfy the crowd" (Mark 15:11-15, ESV). Don't make the mistake of walking in his footsteps.

Here's a simple assignment:

- Make a list of your core values. Then make a ruthless commitment to never violate them, no matter the cost.²
- Begin practicing the art of saying "no" with grace. A simple "I'd like to, but I'm just not able to swing it right now" or "I have a previous commitment, so I'm unable to" will suffice.

It can't hurt to post the following three verses somewhere you will see them daily as a reminder:

Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.

COLOSSIANS 3:23, NLT

Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people.

EPHESIANS 6:7

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

I CORINTHIANS 10:31

Responding to every need brought to you leads to ministry burn-out, compromise, and depression—and eventually, blistering defeat.

Therefore, stop making decisions based on the needs, requests, desires, and appeals of human beings.

Instead, discover what, when, and where the Holy Spirit is leading you.

And then perhaps you, too, may see “the glory of God” (John 11:4, ESV).

In short, you’ll never reach the goals God has given you if you try to be all things to everyone. You’ll also lose spiritual power.

So don’t be a people pleaser.

LAW 4

It Takes One to Make One

This next law is etched in the fiber of the spheres. It's unwavering.

It can be summed up in one sentence: *It takes one to make one.*

Put another way, you can't give to people what you aren't yourself. And people will follow what you *are* more than what you *say*.

Consequently, if you want the husbands to whom you minister to lay down their lives for their wives, then you've just volunteered to lay down *your* life for *your* wife.

If you want to see the women in your fellowship avoid becoming gossips, then you must avoid being a gossip.

If you want the people you teach to be gentle, generous, and not cave in to worry, anxiety, or anger, then you must be that type of person.

If you want to see your fellowship pray more, share Christ more, and read Scripture more, then you have just volunteered yourself to pray more, share Christ more, and read Scripture more.

If you want to see the people to whom you minister be less harsh and judgmental, then you must do likewise.

Many of God's people suffer from guilt and shame. Thinking, *I'm not doing enough* is guilt. Thinking, *I am not enough* is shame.

Sadly, many Christian leaders struggle with these twin enemies too. (Thankfully, there's an antidote for it.)¹

Do you want to see the people to whom you minister freed from guilt and shame? If so, then you yourself must be free from both.

Unfortunately, many ministers have been criticized so often that

they've internalized this negative narrative, coming to believe they are inherently deficient.

I've met pastors who've heard so much moaning and bellyaching about their preaching and leadership style that they came dangerously close to putting their heads in an oven.

In this light, the greatest ingredient to your impact as a servant of God is your own transformation. This includes refusing to embrace false negative words.

The idea that the key ingredient to effective ministry is personal transformation smacks in the face of virtually all pastors seminars and leadership conferences, where the emphasis is put on strategies, techniques, higher education, style, etc.

I'm sorry, but all that pales in comparison to your own transformation.

Why? Because you will produce in others what you *are* rather than what you *teach*.

The Greatest Hindrance

In his marvelous book *The Release of the Spirit*, Watchman Nee writes,

Anyone who serves God will discover sooner or later that the great hindrance to his work is not others, but himself.²

The Lord's worker is always more important than the work. This is because you can't separate the worker from his work. The work will always bear the imprint of the person responsible for it—for better or worse.

Consequently, the worker's spiritual condition will always influence his or her work.

Arrogant workers produce arrogant people.

Leaders with the tongues of sailors will produce people who use profanity.

Backstabbers will produce people who backstab others.

Someone who lies like a pile carpet will produce disingenuous people.

Harsh, critical, and judgmental leaders produce people just like them.

Experienced marketers tell us that successful entrepreneurs spend 80 percent of their time promoting their existing products and 20 percent creating new ones.

If you wish to be effective as a minister of Christ, spend at least 80 percent of your time working on your own transformation—which includes getting to know your Lord and becoming more like Him—and 20 percent of your time improving as a speaker, leader, church builder, or administrator.

A man can take others only as far as he himself has gone. And whatever you are is what the people to whom you minister will be.

A related point: Never send your troops anywhere you yourself haven't gone. The first guy through the wall gets bloody. That's the price of leadership.

It takes one to make one. This is a paramount law—a principle of the universe.

LAW 7

Leave the Results with God

Ministers of God's Word often wonder how their words were received after they've preached or taught.

It's perfectly normal to want to know the kind of impact you've had. But most preachers, in my observation, concern themselves too much with it.

I'm sure you're familiar with these questions:

"Who was moved? Who was touched? Who was illuminated? Who was transformed? How many *really* turned to Jesus? Do I still have my fastball?"

But here's the thing: You will never know the full extent of your influence. So it's a mistake to fixate on it.

After you minister, simply rest and leave the results with God.

Though sometimes the Lord will give you a small peek into the fruit of your ministry, most of the time He will not.

The Oracles of God

Of course, I base all of this on the assumption that what you minister comes from the Lord. God has promised that when we proclaim His Word, it will not return void:

So is my word that goes out from my mouth:

It will not return to me empty,

but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

ISAIAH 55:11

In this connection, consider two texts:

We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. If your gift is prophesying, then prophesy in accordance with your faith.

ROMANS 12:6

If anyone speaks, they should do so as one who speaks the very words of God.

1 PETER 4:11

In the first text, Paul says that God gives us gifts by His grace, and when we prophesy (speak in the Lord's name), we do so according to the measure of faith that we have.

Peter echoes the point, saying that when we speak, we ought to speak "the very words of God."

The NKJV puts it this way: "If anyone speaks, let him speak as the oracles of God."

In other words, before you stand up to speak, it's vital that you have the confidence (the faith) that God has given you the message and He is enabling you to deliver it.

If you don't have such faith when you speak, then you're not ready for prime time. You may want to lay down your ministry for a while until you get clear on the specifics of God's calling on your life. (Has He called you to pastor, or preach, or teach, or something else?)

I've met many pastors who admitted privately that they weren't sure if God called them to pastor a church.

If you believe, "God may have dialed the wrong number if He called me to [fill in the blank]," that may be a good indication that you've misread your calling.

There's a big difference between those who are *sent* and those who *went*. Those who went don't have God's blessing.

Unfortunately, when someone feels called of God today, they are typically given only three options: Be a pastor, a missionary, or a music minister.

But the New Testament has a far more expansive view of ministry.¹

Lacking the kind of faith for speaking that Peter describes could also mean you've neglected your first pursuit: knowing the Lord and hearing His voice.²

A Card That Made Me Weep

Years ago, before I spoke at an event, a young woman handed me a card. When my wife and I got to our hotel room, we opened and read it. The card brought tears to my eyes.

The young woman wrote that she had read my book *From Eternity to Here* a few years before.

One of the chapters saved her from suicide. She described how reading the book forever changed her life. She was “full of joy” because she could enjoy her life with her son.

After I read the card, I sensed the Lord saying to me that most people who have been impacted by my work in similar ways will never let me know. Even this young woman waited years before she told me what took place. If both of us hadn't attended that event, I probably would have never known.

At that same event, another speaker opened her talk by saying that when she had hit rock bottom several years earlier, she had searched the Internet for how God views women.

In her search, she stumbled upon my article “God's View of a Woman,” and it changed her life.³

I had no idea.

Let me assure you that if you're serving the Lord by His power, you are impacting more people than you can imagine. But you'll never know the extent.

Your task is to be faithful. God's task is to handle the results.

Let Go of the Outcome

I've met too many ministers who exerted all their natural powers to engineer an outcome when things didn't appear to be “working” in their ministries. (I used to be one of them!)

Doug was one such individual.

Doug had a forceful personality. He was stubborn and overconfident in his opinions.

If you disagreed with him, Doug refused to let it go. The practice of “agreeing to disagree” sounded like blasphemy to him.

Doug lived by the philosophy, “We need to find the truth!” But for him, that meant, “I’m right, you’re wrong, and I’ll wear you down until you stop being a stubborn imbecile and yield.”

For this reason, few people could get along with him.

When Doug felt that God had given him a “word” or some divinely inspired piece of advice for a fellow Christian, he would move heaven and earth to see that the person received it. If they didn’t, he would push, prod, harangue, and even harass.

Doug had no qualms about frightening the gizzard out of people who didn’t act the way he believed complied with God’s will.

One of the mysteries of God’s kingdom is that humans can resist it. Though the kingdom is available to all, it doesn’t overtake or overcome anyone who refuses to receive it.

Jesus’ exchange with the rich young ruler is a case study in how the Lord let go of outcomes.

Interestingly, we are told that Jesus had a special kind of affection for the young ruler. The Gospel tells us, “Jesus . . . loved him,” which is an uncommon description.⁴

Jesus looked at him and loved him.

MARK 10:21

Perhaps the Lord foresaw that the young man would be called to become one of the seventy that He would later send out. Perhaps He felt that the young ruler was destined to become a pillar in the first ekklesia soon to be born in Jerusalem.

We don’t know, but something special about this man drew unique affection from Jesus.

When the man resisted the Lord’s challenge to sell all and follow

Him, Jesus didn't chase after him. He didn't try to persuade him about his misguided choice. He didn't badger him or try to terrify him into the kingdom.

Jesus let him go, trusting the outcome to His Father.

Two Bowlers

Imagine two men bowling with a group of friends.

The first bowler throws his bowling ball and watches it roll as it explodes into the pins. He then asks his friends what they thought about his technique. He's never bowled a 300, so he feels insecure about his method.

As soon as the second bowler throws his ball, he immediately turns around and walks toward the door of the bowling alley. He leaves the building and never looks back. He doesn't worry about how many pins he knocked down. He's perfectly content to have simply thrown the ball.

Whenever you minister God's Word, be like the second bowler.

Your mission is to live for the Lord and serve Him faithfully. The results are His domain.

Consider the following two texts. One is from Jesus, the other from Paul.

He [Jesus] also said, "This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. All by itself the soil produces grain—first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come."

MARK 4:26-29

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things

grow. The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:6-8

In the first parable, all the farmer does is scatter seed. His task is then finished. The soil, “all by itself,” yields the product of the seed.

In the second parable, God produces the results. Our task is simply to plant or water the seed. Both methods require patience. Seeds, even when planted in good soil, don’t grow overnight.

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

LUKE 8:15, ESV

The Aroma of Life or Death

If you are ministering Jesus Christ, your spoken words will carry the aroma of the Lord, something that can be detected beyond words.

That aroma will be death to some and life to others—it all depends on the hearts of your listeners. As Paul put it to the Corinthians,

But thanks be to God, who always leads us as captives in Christ’s triumphal procession and uses us to spread the aroma of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are to God the pleasing aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are an aroma that brings death; to the other, an aroma that brings life. And who is equal to such a task?

2 CORINTHIANS 2:14-16

When you preach or teach under God’s anointing, the hearts of those listening can be opened or closed, receptive or hardened.⁵ The impact of God’s Word, then, is determined by two things: the

quality of your ministry and the condition of the hearts of those who hear you.

One of my favorite stories is about a man who prepared long and hard for an important speech. After the speech, his wife called him and asked, “How did the speech go, honey?”

“Which one?” the man answered. “The one I spent three weeks preparing for? The one I actually delivered? Or the brilliant one I preached to myself on the way home?”

Are you focused on whether your speaking and/or writing impacts others? If so, give it up for Lent. Make your only concentration your own experience of what you teach and write. Then, quietly and confidently, leave the results of your ministry in God’s good and loving hands.

Fully believe that your words will bear fruit. And trust Him with the outcome. He has promised that His Word will not return void (see Isaiah 55:11, NKJV).

This is another path to spiritual power.

LAW 8

Overcome Discouragement

As a minister of Jesus Christ, you cannot avoid discouragement. It's woven into the warp and woof of all authentic ministry.

I will shamelessly admit that I hold an Olympic record in discouragement.

If God has truly called you to labor in His kingdom, at times you will find yourself a spider's hair away from throwing in the towel.

You'll have days when you're hanging on by your fingernails and periods when you've completely dried out.

What kind of things discourage God's servants?

- You deliver a unique, stunning message under God's anointing on a topic that you've never heard anyone address. The jaws of many in the audience go slack. You hear from only one person afterward, who tells you, "I'm so excited! My pastor just preached on this same thing at our church last week. Thank you for the reminder!" Out of curiosity, you check out the pastor's sermon, and you're gobsmacked. His sermon was *nothing* like yours.
- You pour out your heart, trying to lead a backslidden person to Christ. Your words flow with the Spirit of God and the person appears visibly shaken. You pray for them, and they tell you they've repented and are turning over a new leaf. Two weeks later, they are back in the world, serving false gods just as they were before.

- You launch a new project that you feel confident God has led you to create. The first month, people favorably respond. But over the next two years, it grows at a snail's pace.
- You spend years discipling someone, investing tons of time, energy, and money to strengthen the person spiritually. He tells you and others more than once, "I'll never stop following Jesus, even if it means losing all my friends." Time passes and the individual chooses to make friends with unbelievers, who quickly corrupt him. You feel that all your ministry to this person has been in vain.

Any of those things ever happened to you?

Yeah, me neither.

Seriously, though, I've met countless ministers who felt so discouraged in ministry that the following self-dialogue often played out in their heads.

It's just not worth it. Should I just quit and try something else? But how do I quit? What could I do instead? Do I keep going? Then what? My goodness, make it stop! Where's my iPhone!?

Events like the ones listed above tempt many ministers to quit and take up fishing.

The Inevitability of Discouragement

On some days, ministry feels like lighting matches on a windy day while someone pours water over your shoulder.

Discouragement will come, but if it ever leads to despair, you're finished. You will have spiritually flatlined.

Discouragement is par for the course. Despair is spiritual suicide because it means you've lost hope. But being on the ropes isn't the same as bleeding out.

Read 2 Corinthians, and you will observe an apostle who fought the depths of discouragement. He even despaired for a time, and yet he survived. Listen to him:

For we do not want you to be unaware, brothers, of the affliction we experienced in Asia. For we were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself. Indeed, we felt that we had received the sentence of death. But that was to make us rely not on ourselves but on God who raises the dead. He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.

2 CORINTHIANS 1:8-10, ESV

Those of us who serve God must learn to joust with discouragement, or it will devolve into despair. And then the curtains close and we become another casualty of the ministry.

Fatigue, frustration, failure, fear, and loneliness all bring discouragement.

The good news is that discouragement is curable.

Elijah is not alone among the servants of God who felt like giving up because so few are willing to follow the Lord beyond the superficial.

The spiritual shallowness of our time, the lack of people who put more value on connection than “stuff,” and the rarity of finding those who desire to co-labor with others can inflict tremendous discouragement on a servant of God.

David, the man after God’s own heart (see 1 Samuel 13:14), had many first-class battles with discouragement. (Just read the Psalms.)

In 1 Samuel 30, we discover that David lost a major fight. As a result, enemies took captive his family as well as the wives and children of his men. David’s soldiers felt so distressed that they considered stoning David.

Under the weight of all this, the Scripture says,

David was greatly distressed. . . . But David encouraged himself in the LORD his God.

1 SAMUEL 30:6, KJV

A Prescription

In *Hang On, Let Go*, I offered a practical prescription on how I've encouraged myself in the Lord over the years:

- Taking a walk and pouring my heart out to God.
- Listening to worship music and singing to the Lord through tears.
- Erupting in bitter weeping to God.
- Turning the Psalms about God's faithfulness into prayer.
- Repeating to myself various words of encouragement given to me by others.
- Reflecting on how God has taken care of me in the past and thanking Him for it.
- Reading some of my favorite authors who have written powerfully on the subject of suffering and faith. (In this regard, T. Austin-Sparks and Frank Laubach have been my closest companions.)¹

In addition, I remind myself that I'm involved in God's work, not mine.

Consequently, if that which discourages me is going to change, the Lord is responsible for changing it. So I transfer the burden to His shoulders and come out from underneath it.

After a day or so, the discouragement usually dissipates. And God's anointing and strength begin to bubble up again, causing me to rise and continue.

Faith is unnerving. Risky, even, because it means we have to let go. But the sea parts only after we place our feet into the water.

Faith is seeing the future in the present, and it is faith that overcomes discouragement.

At the end of the day, realize that most of the obstacles that come your way in ministry are designed to be speed bumps, not flat tires. And your reaction will determine which they become.

Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

GALATIANS 6:9

I'd be remiss if I did not mention something else.

The work of God is simply too painful and difficult if done without a genuine calling. The deep waters you'll pass through will be incalculable.

Continuing in a ministry to which God hasn't called you is a recipe for misery. It's simply not worth it to continue.

It *must* be a calling.

Yet you won't know if God has truly called you to His work until your ministry is on the chopping block, your work fails, and you get blamed for it.

If you can bounce back after staring death in the face, there's an excellent chance that you're a true worker in the Lord's kingdom.

The litmus test is this: Can you lose and fail and rise again?

Of course, God may be calling you to His work, just not to your current role. This has proven true for many institutional church pastors.² But that's another conversation.

LAW 38

Watch Your Vocabulary

From the title, you might guess I'm talking about profanity. Well, I am. Partially. But I want to address much more than that.

Cussing Christians

Let's begin by briefly discussing profanity (since you ventured a guess about it). I've known ministers who, when not in the spotlight, would cuss until the air turned blue. And for reasons that I don't understand, their consciences didn't seem fazed.

Let me be clear. You can't engage in profanity and not suffer spiritual loss. Several passages in the New Testament make God's mind clear on the matter, including two from a single book:

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.

EPHESIANS 4:29

Nor should there be obscenity, foolish talk or coarse joking, which are out of place, but rather thanksgiving.

EPHESIANS 5:4

Before you feel tempted to cuss me out, take a deep breath and remember that Paul wrote those words, not I.

I realize that some have tried to justify profanity with Philippians 3:8, saying that the Greek term *skubalon* is the equivalent of *sh*—today. But that’s highly debatable.

Skubalon has a much broader range of meaning. According to the *Bible Dictionary of Ancient Greek*, the word means “useless” or “undesirable material subject to disposal.” Refuse, garbage, excrement, manure, garbage, rubbish, swill, and scraps are all synonyms. And none are cuss words.

Others have argued that Paul allows just about everything in his statement, “Everything is permissible for me, but not all things are beneficial” (1 Corinthians 6:12, AMP).

Most scholars agree, however, that the phrase “everything is permissible” was a slogan that the Corinthians cited to justify their carnality. Paul quotes them, and then responds, “But not all things are beneficial.”

A cuss word is simply an abused word that conveys a vulgar concept or image.

If you want to know what constitutes a cuss word, the answer is simple. If it can’t be said on public radio or network television (without someone getting fired or reprimanded), if a teacher can’t use it in the classroom without blowback, and if you don’t want your small children using those terms, it’s profanity.

Forsaking profanity is a basic issue in the Christian walk. The Lord often begins with His children by having them clean up their language.¹

The way people speak reflects their culture. Our speech, therefore, ought to reflect the culture of heaven, especially since a keen connection exists between the heart and the mouth (Luke 6:45).

It’s a little-known fact that people who admire you will imitate your weaknesses and eccentricities far more than your strengths.

And they’ll use you as an excuse to justify their boorish behavior.

So unless you want to see all the people you’ve influenced have mouths as foul as Jonah Hill and Samuel L. Jackson, you’d be wise to deal with the Lord on the matter.

If you can't control your words, you have a bigger problem at stake. James directly applies a believer's lack of control over their tongue to leaders. If you can't control your tongue, he says, you can't control much else about yourself (see James 3:1-12).

But there's much more to this law than avoiding profanity.

Phrases to Watch

Many ministers use the phrase, "He came up to me," or "She came up to me," when talking about their preaching sessions.

Like it or not, this phrase communicates that you are above others. (I realize that thought may have never crossed your conscious mind, but it conveys arrogance.)

"I preached this great sermon last night, and one of the poor, miserable laymen had to climb up to me to ask their question."

Yes, the plebes must always ascend to you.

Ahem.

But why, pray tell, do people have to *come up* to you?

Yes, I know, ministers don't usually mean what I'm suggesting, but that's the image conveyed.

And how about the phrase "my people"?

"I don't think my people would go for a longer sermon. They enjoy the twenty-minute sermonettes I deliver every Sunday."

"The other day, I told my people to kick up their giving a few notches."

Excuse me—"your people"?

I thought they were the Lord's people.

Regardless of the motive, those words smell of dictatorship. They also communicate an ownership that's neither scriptural nor healthy.

Another phrase to remove from your vocabulary is this: "If I'm being honest," or "Let me be honest."

Those words imply that you're not always honest. If you're never dishonest, there's no need to qualify your words like this. It's like

saying, “Hey, man, I’m going to be honest right now, which isn’t always the case, so listen really well.”

Yet another phrase to remove from your verbal lexicon is exemplified by a well-known minister whom I once heard say, “We should sometimes allow the laypeople to [such and such].”

Pardon me, but who made you lord and king? Only Jesus Christ has the right to “allow” and “prohibit” God’s people with respect to action.

Also, the words *laypeople*, *layperson*, *laymen*, and *laity* should be forever evicted from your vocabulary when referring to God’s people. Whatever you think about Karl Barth’s theology, he was on the money when he said, “The term ‘laity’ is one of the worst in the vocabulary of religion and ought to be banished from the Christian conversation.”²

Respected scholar James D. G. Dunn agreed, stating that the clergy-laity tradition has done more to undermine New Testament authority than most heresies.³

There’s also the problem of Christianese, which I’ve addressed elsewhere.⁴ Consider one brief example.

The universal answer to every request that a Christian doesn’t want to grant is “Let me pray about it.” That’s usually code language for “no way!”

I’m not suggesting you shouldn’t pray over opportunities and requests. But in most cases, if you’re in touch with your spiritual instincts, you’ll have an answer quickly.

One more thing. A negative word is twenty times more powerful than a positive word. Every positive word can melt in a day under the weight of a few negatives. I’m especially speaking of negative talk to or about another person.

A number of the churches that Paul of Tarsus planted were damaged by negative words. Consider what he wrote to the Galatians:

But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another.

GALATIANS 5:15, ESV

The mouth is the part of the human body that bites. Therefore, Paul is warning against destroying one another with words.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue,
And those who love it will eat its fruit.

PROVERBS 18:21, NASB

Point: Our vocabulary exposes us in a second. And it's all too possible to dig your own grave with your tongue (see James 3). If you're a leader, people are listening and observing.

So watch your vocabulary.

CODA I

The Danger of God's Power

There is a dark side of ministry that is rarely discussed. And if you're not careful, you could succumb to it.

When God gives His power to someone, it exposes them. It humbles one person and destroys another.

Consider two recent converts. Both are young men who seek to be "endued" with God's power.

The Lord graciously grants both their requests.

The first man begins using God's power for his own ends. His original prayer was fueled by the desire to draw large crowds, zap demons, and do great wonders.

He shares space with the uber-ambitious Simon, who offered to pay Peter good money to harness God's power (Acts 8:9-24).

The second man wants to magnify his Lord and advance God's kingdom. He realizes he can't accomplish either without being endued with God's power. So he prays accordingly.

When God's Power Becomes Unsafe

There is a sober stewardship attached to the power of God.

Miraculous power operates by gift, not character.

A Christian walking in the flesh, therefore, can still operate in the miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit.

A carnal believer can speak in tongues, perform healings, and even receive spiritual insight. If you don't believe me, just read 1 Corinthians 14.

The Corinthian believers lived in massive carnality (chapters 1 to 12), yet they continued to operate abundantly in spiritual gifts.

Paul makes it clear that a person can speak in tongues and even receive spiritual understanding and prophetic utterance yet lack love—the supreme mark of spiritual character:

If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-2

I grew up in a movement in which many Christians got drunk on God's power. They chased power more than they chased Jesus. They were so obsessed with the miraculous that they lost sight of Christ.

Even worse, some in the leadership were power hungry, trying to harness God's power to meet their own ends.

I could singe your ears with stories of men who had impressive displays of miraculous power but who engaged in all sorts of perversions and drug/alcohol abuse behind closed doors.

These men lived on the edge of hell as they preached victory and performed signs and wonders.

As a student of history, I marvel at the stories of the great American evangelists during the post-World War II era. Many of them were the most powerfully gifted men of their time, but they destroyed their ministries by making foolish decisions. (Billy Graham was a rare exception.)

Samson, King Saul, and Balaam are not alone in the long trail of souls who operated in powerful, miraculous gifts, but who woefully lacked character.

Saul could prophesy by the Spirit of God while at the same time holding murder in his heart—and even acting on it (see 1 Samuel 19).

Though God gives His gifts by grace, and as a general rule they cannot be revoked (Romans 11:29), in some cases the Lord removes His anointing from a servant because of persistent disobedience.

This is a tragic state known as an “Ichabod” situation.¹ The flow stops, the brook dries up, the anointing lifts, the well quits giving water, and the power evaporates. The glory departs.

Here’s a word of warning: If you try to harness God’s power for your own aims, you’re dealing with the wrong God. In the words of C. S. Lewis, Jesus Christ is not a tame lion.² He will not be harnessed nor controlled.

Where Power Is Safe

God never gives His power to you or me to wield as individuals. He gives His power to the bride of Christ, the ekklesia.

Whenever I see men wielding God’s power as isolated individuals, I immediately see imminent destruction. The power of God on an individual will destroy him. It’s safe only when that person remains properly connected to other members of the body.

In every case I can think of when an individual abused God’s power, that person was disconnected from the body of Christ. Yes, they may have attended church services. In fact, they may have even regularly preached in them.

But that’s not the same as having a living experience of the body of Christ, where close-knit relationships are forged and members temper one another.

I’m also impressed that Jesus didn’t try to gain fame through His signs and wonders. Have you ever noticed that the Lord never made a production out of healing the sick? When Jesus performed a healing, He virtually always told that person not to tell anyone.³ We see a certain modesty in Christ whenever He exercised His power.

God’s power is available to accomplish His will, but it’s so easy to corrupt, pervert, and make cheap and common.

But wait, it gets even worse.

Malignant Narcissism

Spiritual power causes some people, perhaps many, to believe they can handle everything on their own. These befuddled souls are marked by titanic arrogance mixed with paranoia. They are erratic narcissists and serial liars who have an unwarranted confidence in their own sagacity. They are rude, crude, insensitive, judgmental, and as crooked as a dog's hind leg.

They are also prone to violate Proverbs 27:2, regularly lathering themselves up with praise.

In some twisted way, they believe they have a right to such self-indulgence because they carry God's anointing.

The same thing happens when individuals acquire political power. Many of them turn into insufferable human beings. Privilege has a toxic influence on most humans. How ironic that those gifted with God's power slip into the same temptations. Unfortunately, malignant narcissism abounds in both the political and religious worlds.

But a major fall awaits such people. They will move from a powerful place to a place of deep weakness. This is God's generous grace, because power is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9), and only the weak and poor in spirit can heal the broken and needy.

It was said of Jesus that He would not break a bruised reed nor snuff out a smoldering wick (Matthew 12:20). In the ancient world, smoldering wicks signaled that they should be extinguished and replaced with new ones. Bruised reeds couldn't measure accurately, so they too had to be discarded and replaced.

Strikingly, Jesus didn't discard or replace the damaged, the weak, and the broken.

He healed them.

As the One gentle and lowly in heart (Matthew 11:29), our Lord consistently helped the least, the lost, and the lowest.

By contrast, those who take God's power for granted not only discard the broken; they run over them.

With weakness comes the power to heal the weak. Without weakness, God's power becomes a dangerous thing. So be careful.

A Most Dangerous Prayer

Coming back to the beginning of this chapter, one of the most dangerous prayers a Christian can utter is the request for God's power.

Very often, what lies hidden behind such prayers is the unspoken ambition for fame and the desire to be regarded as a "spiritual giant" admired by many.⁴

But before you can be safe to God's people, it's critical that you become aware of the dark intentions lurking in your heart. You must first slay the monster of human ambition.

Personally, I tremble when I hear young people ask God for power.

If the Lord is merciful enough to answer your prayer, I have one word of advice: *Duck!*

The Lord will arrange your circumstances in such a way that you will be leveled to the ground, broken but fit for the Master's use.

God's Spirit will take you through deep waters to accomplish this.

The earth does not need more outwardly powerful people. It needs inwardly transformed people. And only the latter can be trusted with God's power.

If you have an unhealthy appetite for power, you'll experience serious indigestion and worse.

Let us be careful stewards of the holy things of God, broken and humble vessels properly coordinated with other members of the body of Christ.

The power of God in an unbroken vessel is a toxic thing.

Never forget that.