

HOW PASTORS CAN CULTIVATE OUR SHAPING VIRTUES IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

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As a new dad, I was shocked and dismayed when my baby boy growled in response to a greeting from a sweet lady in the grocery store. She strode up and fawned over my son's fiery red hair and exclaimed, "How are you, sweetie?"

He came out with a guttural sound from deep within, "GRRRRRRR."

She fixed her shocked dinner-plate-sized eyes and said, "Is he growling at me?"

All I could do was say, "Yes, yes, he is. Sorry."

"Where did he learn that?" was the pressing question that throbbed in my head. Why is my precious boy growling at innocent, sweet old ladies in the cereal aisle? A few days later, I was "wrestling" with him. (He was about six months old and it was mostly me turning him over and over and making him laugh.) While we "wrestled," I heard myself growling. My son had learned to growl from me. What?! Not only did I have no idea that I growled when we wrestled, but my infant son had copied me and was now growling at others. My hyper-attentive son was following my example.

The churches we serve are hyper-attentive to the example their pastors set. As we think about cultivating our Shaping Virtues, we pastors must lead by example. Teaching about these virtues is good. But we must realize that they are more often "caught than taught." Dr. D.A. Carson states,

If I have learned anything in 35 or 40 years of teaching, it is that students don't learn everything I teach them. What they learn is what I am excited about, the kinds of things I emphasize again and again and again and again.³⁸

³⁸ Justin Taylor. "Carson: People Don't Learn What I Teach Them; They Learn What I'm Excited About." The Gospel Coalition. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blog/justin-taylor>

Our people are watching.

Paul knew this as well and directed the church at Corinth, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Can you say this? If our people imitate our example, what will they resemble? Genuine gospel virtues are infectious. If you are excited and emphasize these virtues, your church will embody these virtues. You can emphasize these virtues to your watching church in two primary ways: personally and publicly.

Our Personal Example

When the gospel of Jesus Christ masters us, a torrent of gospel virtues will gush forth from our lives. It would be too mechanical and hypocritical if we just put on a show of modeling these virtues. Pastors are called not merely to act these virtues out, but to take the lead in applying them to ourselves. In Sovereign Grace, we must continue to be a company of pastors who tend to our souls because we know our souls do not tend to themselves. The Scottish pastor, Robert Murray M’Cheyne, said, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness.”³⁹ He understood that our people will resemble their leaders.

When we apply these virtues to our own lives, the lives of our people will change. When you respond to an angry email with humility, you set an example. When you express joy in the Lord on a dreary Tuesday afternoon, you set an example. When you pour forth gratefulness upon the sound technician, you set an example. When you are more precise with your encouragement than your correction, you set an example. When you generously give your time to a seasoned saint who is shut-in, you set an example. When you call someone who got a cancer diagnosis to pray for them, you set an example. When you mow the lawn of a single mom, you set an example. Paul expressed the same sentiment when he said, “Keep a close watch on yourself and the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). Humanly speaking, the people we serve depend on the example we set. They will become what we model. What are you modeling personally?

Our Public Example

Every Sunday, when we gather to join our voices with the throng of heaven, pray in the name of the risen Jesus, and preach Christ by the power of the Spirit, we are providing an example. Any pastor who has public responsibility on Sunday has a weekly opportunity to exemplify these virtues. Our people studiously observe what we celebrate and encourage, who we honor and recognize, and how we do both. We can teach the church to be generous, but we make a more significant impact if we show them generosity.

A couple of years ago, we erected a new church sign on our property. Not two weeks later, I was summoned outside on a sweltering Saturday afternoon because a young man was throwing large rocks at the sign. Our sparkling new sign had more craters than the moon by the time I arrived. As I started talking to the young man, it was clear that some sort of mental illness dogged him. He told me that he was angry at God because

³⁹ Robert Murray M’Cheyne: quoted in Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), 80.

he could not get any relief. Consequently, he took out his frustrations on our church sign because it reminded him of his disappointment in God. Our pastoral team decided not to press charges but instead paid for him to get professional help for his condition. The man received treatment and started to improve.

When I shared this story with our church, many people said they were so grateful to be a part of such a generous church. Did our team do anything unique? Unprecedented? No, we all know what it is like to be the recipient of the generosity of our Father. All we did was share it with someone else. That story had a more significant impact than any teaching on generosity we have given.

Our people are studying our public examples. Even something as pedestrian as announcements is an invitation to impart one of these Shaping Virtues. We cannot afford just to pass along information. Still, announcements can be a means of transformation if we model these virtues. It may be a valuable exercise to examine every public communication and ask, “Which of the Shaping Virtues are we modeling for our people?” When we speak publicly, we are modeling something for our people.

James Clear adapted the famous adage, “Rome wasn’t built in a day, but they were laying bricks every hour.”⁴⁰ What was true for Rome is true for our churches. Our people are always watching, studying, and learning from our examples, growling and all. If we rush to try and slap on these virtues all at once, people will be confused, overwhelmed, and disoriented. But if we lay shaping-virtues bricks one at a time in each personal and public interaction, we will build something of lasting import.

⁴⁰ James Clear, “Rome Wasn’t Built in a Day, But They Were Laying Bricks Every Hour.” <https://jamesclear.com/lay-a-brick>