

Avoiding the 'Either'/'Or'

Dear Brian,

Socrates said, *The truth is in the mean*. The secret of so much of life is avoiding the extremes. If you want to have a long and prosperous ministry, you would be wise to remember to keep a proper balance in these three important areas of ministry.

First, *avoid the 'either'/'or' regarding tolerance and truth*. One dimension of an effective ministry is the ability to stand for God's Word while at the same time expressing God's love. In Ephesians 4:15 Paul reminded us to *speak the truth in love*. This balance is not easy to maintain. A few years ago, a wealthy business owner in our town pledged a half million dollars to our building program. Then he asked me to perform his wedding—his third. The circumstances of his divorce didn't measure up to the church's guidelines for divorce and remarriage, so I had to tell him I couldn't oversee his wedding, even though it was really tempting to find a way to fudge on our policy *just this once*.

There will always be influential and likeable people you want to accommodate, or even grieving people to whom you want to give hope. But don't give in. Always hold fast to the Word of God.

But don't forget to speak the truth *in love*. A colleague of mine preached his first sermon at his home church while he was still a student in Bible College. Throughout the message he scolded his church for all they'd been doing wrong

the last twenty years! When he was finished his pastor said, *Well, you did fine, Son. But remember, you can't preach the love of God with a clenched fist.*

Second, *avoid the 'either'/'or' regarding ambition and contentment.* A spiritual gift is like a garden tool—it only works if you exert enough effort. I've seen more people fail in ministry because of a lack of discipline than a lack of talent or training. One of the turning points of my ministry came during my first preaching position just after I graduated from Bible College. I was the first full-time minister this church had ever employed. There was no study at the church. My wife left for work at 7:15 a.m. and I was home alone. I had some choices: I could read the paper, watch television, drive down to the donut shop or try to get up a golf game. But I decided that I would dedicate those hours each morning to studying for my Sunday sermon. That discipline has stayed with me to this day.

So, make the most of the gifts that God has given you. Work hard. Proverbs 10:4 says, *Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.* The servant God will use to the fullest is not the most gifted, but the most diligent.

Also, remember, friend, to balance ambition with contentment. A lot of pastors who work hard are discontented, restless, and always on the lookout for what they consider an ideal church. Ambition is a wonderful motivator, but it must be controlled. Develop a sense of satisfaction from simply doing your best. God evaluates His servants not by statistics but by faithfulness.

Third, *avoid the 'either'/'or' regarding your calling and your family.* I'm sure you see your ministry as a calling. And this is a great privilege. However, you can get so caught up in ministry that you neglect your family.

I made the mistake early in my ministry of leaving the house every available evening to go out calling on potential members. My wife was so supportive that she never complained, but she was lonely at times, and that was unfair. Thankfully by the time my children came along I had learned the importance of being home to eat with them, to help put them to bed, and to develop a close relationship with them. One year, my sons were both playing on different basketball teams, and they had games four nights a week. I put the games on my calendar and only missed one or two the entire season. It was amazing to see how God blessed our church during that year. I learned that the church doesn't have to revolve around me.

I've often heard that the best thing a father can do for his children is to love their mother. Similarly, the best thing you can do for your ministry is to love your family. Russ Blowers recently retired after 45 years as the minister of the East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana. Someone asked him what he considered to be his greatest accomplishment. He had been preacher of one of the largest churches in Indiana, chairman of the Billy Graham crusade, and president of a national convention. Yet, he listed none of those accomplishments. He said, *I'm most proud of the fact that I've never had to go into my children's bedroom and try to explain to them why I'd been unfaithful to*

their mother. I'd challenge you likewise to be lovingly faithful to your mate and deeply attentive to your children—this is your first calling.

The answer to life's challenges is often in the mean, so keep your balance, Brian. Speak the truth, but do it in love. Work hard, but be content. And be true to your calling, but remember your family. Then God will honor your ministry, bless your family and bring fruit to your labor.

Your friend in Christ,

Bob Russell

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See that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you.

If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father.

And this is what he promised us^¾ even eternal life.

1 John 2:24-25