

**\*READ Hebrews 4:12,13\***

Deception is certainly one of the evil one's greatest tools in his arsenal that he constantly uses against mankind. From the beginning, he has sought to deceive mankind in every way in an effort to cause us to be at odds with our God and with one another. However, we are reminded from this text in Hebrews that even if we are able to deceive the entire world into thinking we are something which we are not, there is no fooling God. He is well aware of who are at our core, and He will most certainly hold us accountable in the end.

Yet, we would do well to recognize that however clever we think we might be in hiding our evil doings in this life, there is no guarantee we will escape into eternity with our supposed integrity and secrets intact. This has proven to be true of a man named Ravi Zacharias. This man was a very popular public figure on the scene of mainstream Christianity for quite some time, especially in the realm of apologetics. Mr. Zacharias travelled the world for over thirty years addressing questions of about faith, religion, and philosophy. I have watched and benefitted from countless videos and debates involving Mr. Zacharias, and many, self-included, were saddened by his passing in May of last year.

Unfortunately, those feelings were short-lived as accusations quickly surfaced accusing Mr. Zacharias of sexual improprieties. These accusations caused the ministry Mr. Zacharias founded, RZIM, to launch an investigation, and after an additional independent investigation concluded last month, it was determined that there was much fire to the smoke surrounding the secret life lived by Mr. Zacharias. On February 11th, christianitytoday.com wrote:

*"A four-month investigation found the late Ravi Zacharias leveraged his reputation as a world-famous Christian apologist to abuse massage therapists in the United States and abroad over more than a decade while the ministry led by his family members and loyal allies failed to hold him accountable. He used his need for massage and frequent overseas travel to hide his abusive behavior, luring victims by building trust through spiritual conversations and offering funds straight from his ministry."*

The ramifications of this awful story have been widespread throughout the landscape of the mainstream Christian world, but this is far from the first story of such behavior from a person who was well known as a leader and figure within the mainstream Christian world.

- In 2016, **Perry Noble** was forced to resign from his position as lead pastor of the New Spring Church in South Carolina because of issues surrounding alcoholism and neglect of his family. (<https://www.christianpost.com/news/perry-noble-opens-up-double-life-daily-drinking-problem-led-firing-from-newspring-church.html>)
- In 2019, well-known Christian comedian and personality **John Crist** was forced to cancel his 2019 comedy tour after allegations of sexual misconduct were reported and he was forced to make public remarks concerning his improprieties. (<https://www.charismanews.com/us/78703-john-crist-cancels-2019-tour-dates-after-reports-of-sexting-harassment-manipulation>)
- Just last year, **Jerry Falwell Jr.**, president of Liberty University and son of famous Christian leader Jerry Falwell Sr., was forced to resign following allegations and scandal surrounding sexual improprieties in his life. (<https://www.vox.com/2020/8/25/21399954/jerry-falwell-jr-resigns-scandal-liberty>)
- Also in 2020, **Carl Lentz**, pastor of the Hillsong NYC church was fired from his leadership role after an extra-marital affair was uncovered within his private life. (<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/05/us/hillsong-carl-lentz-fired.html>)

- In case anyone thought this is only a recent issue within the religious world, let me take us back to 1988 when **Jimmy Swaggart** of the World Faith Center in Baton Rouge, LA confessed his own sexual deviancies with a prostitute before being involved in another similar scandal in 1991. (<https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1988-02-22-mn-29975-story.html>)

These are just five examples, six including Mr. Zacharias, that could be given of numerous well-known and you might even call them celebrity figures within the Christian community at-large who offered one depiction of their character in public while being an entirely different person behind closed doors and out of the spotlight. We might scoff and say that such would never be true of those within our own fellowship, but I must sadly confess that such has even been true of those within churches of Christ. I know of two cases involving preachers who wreaked havoc upon their local churches through scandals of adultery and even child pornography. This is not something we can simply ignore.

These sad situations have caused an unquantifiable amount of pain among those closest to these situations. Even in the cases where sins were acknowledged and repentance was expressed and exhibited, that pain and heartache remained. In the eyes of many, spiritual giants had fallen, and the consequences were severe and far reaching. This morning, I want to talk about the situations that arise when such takes place. There are three things that I want us to remember and be cognizant of when we see spiritual leaders falter, and then we'll close with two thoughts of application, one for those of us who are leaders and people of greater influence and the other for all of us as we look up to others as our spiritual examples.

To begin with, in the initial moments of shock when we are told of such failures on the part of those we might look up to as spiritual leaders, we need to keep at least these three things in mind as we seek to sort out the mess, pick up the pieces, and begin to make sense of what has taken place...

### **What To Remember When Spiritual Leaders Falter**

#### **A. Skeptics & opponents of Christianity will use these failures to attack the faith.**

1. Many who are skeptics and opponents of Christianity often accuse people of faith as being nothing more than self-righteous jerks who want to show themselves as being better than those around them who do not hold to faith as they do. With this being a reality, there are few things that bring such people more joy than when it is revealed that the very leaders of the Christian world have been at best weak and flawed in their character and at worst nothing but frauds and hypocrites. These type of situations are exactly what opponents of Christianity want to see because it fills them with validation that people of faith are nothing more than self-righteous frauds who undeservingly take up the moral high ground above all others. They want to prove people of faith as being frauds and hypocrites and these exact situations provide them with the fodder to make such accusations. Yet, this is not a new problem for God's people have been rebuked for giving such fodder to non-believers in times past. Two instances of such can be seen in **Isaiah 52:5** & **Ezekiel 36:20** where the pagan nations are ridiculing, blaspheming, and profaning God's name on account of His rebellious people. Even going back to the Exodus we can see Moses seeking to persuade God not to destroy rebellious Israel so the Egyptians couldn't ridicule Him for bringing them out of bondage just to destroy them Himself (**Exodus 32:11,12**). Paul also picks up on this in **Romans 2:24** as he rebukes the Jews for boasting in the Law when they were breaking it and giving the Gentiles an opportunity to blaspheme God.
2. It is for this very reason that Peter writes the admonitions he does in **1 Peter 3:8-17**:  
*"Finally, all of you be like-minded and sympathetic, love one another, and be compassionate and humble, not paying back evil for evil or insult for insult but, on the contrary, giving a blessing, since you were called for this, so that you may inherit a blessing.*

***For the one who wants to love life and to see good days, let him keep his tongue from evil and his lips from speaking deceit, and let him turn away from evil and do what is good. Let him seek peace and pursue it, because the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do what is evil.***

*Who then will harm you if you are devoted to what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear or be intimidated, but in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you. Yet do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that when you are accused, those who disparage your good conduct in Christ will be put to shame. For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil."*

3. This context can be traced all the way back to the beginning of **I Peter 2** where the Apostle is giving a description of what God's people ought to look like as *"a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for His possession..." (I Peter 2:9)* He specifically addresses the expected behaviors of people in the roles of earthly citizens, slaves, wives, and husbands before giving these general instructions for the way all people of God ought to live. Notice his instructions, including his quotation of **Psalm 34:12-16**, all revolve around making sure that our behavior is such that we can answer people's questions regarding our faith, that we can keep a clear conscience, and that we will not give anyone a reason to shame the name of Christ. If people want to disparage us simply because they do not like what we stand for then fine, but may we never allow them to have legitimate reason to speak ill of Christ or His people because they are looking and hoping for a reason to do so. Such instances as we have discussed this morning give them the opportunity and we need to be ready for it.

#### **B. These failings can cause Christians to be discouraged in their faiths.**

1. We also need to be ready for those who are people of faith to struggle with the reality of the failures of those they look up to as examples of spiritual strength and maturity. Serious issues of doubt and discouragement can happen when we look at those we view as spiritual strong and mature failing in various ways. It can easily cause the new disciple to doubt whether he or she is strong enough in their own faith to withstand the attacks of the evil one. *"If this great stalwart of faith can fall...what real hope do I have to stand?"* These doubts can and are often very real in the lives of those who are left devastated by the failures of their spiritual heroes.
2. Doubt can also arise from the standpoint of the immoral behavior of these leaders causing others to think that such is behavior really isn't that big of a deal. This is something that comes to mind, especially when I think about the issue Paul has to deal with in **Galatians 2:11-14** concerning the hypocritical behavior of the Apostle Peter. If we back up in the text to **2:9**, we find Paul referring to Peter as a pillar of the faith, but this pillar shows itself to have lost some of its integrity in regard to the way he played favorites depending on who was in his company. If the Apostle behaving poorly wasn't bad enough, let's notice that Barnabas, the son of encouragement himself, was also swept up in the hypocrisy. Such behavior caused Paul to oppose Peter to his face for his failure and causing the faith of another to stumble. The failures of spiritual leaders can lead to devastating harm upon the faiths of others.

These two issues that often arise alongside the revelation of the failures of spiritual leaders are problematic in an other themselves. We obviously don't want the enemies of the cross to have a reason to ridicule the faith as being fake or our God as being powerless, and we certainly do not

want for the faithful to stumble in their own faiths in one way or another. This leads us to our final thing that we must remember and keep in mind as we navigate these difficult waters.

### **C. The faithlessness of spiritual leaders does not nullify the faithfulness of God.**

1. Both of these responses we have already looked at can be narrowed down to the idea that the behavior of these leaders have in some way harmed God's reputation. Because of what these people have done, God's power has shown itself to not be as strong as was thought. The Gospel is not seen as being as influential as was believed. The Holy Spirit is shown to not be as transformative as was taught. These claimed to be spiritual men who were seen as leaders and the example to follow...and yet God, the Gospel, or the Holy Spirit failed them in some way. These are possible conclusions that some people come to.
2. However, I would strongly like to remind us all that the failures of men are not representative of anything lacking on God's part. This is Paul's argument concerning the advantages of the Jew over the Gentile in regard to understanding God's Law since the time of Moses. In **Romans 3:1-4**, Paul asked what advantage the Jew might have in understanding the Gospel. He first states that they have the advantage by having faith in God first revealed to them through the Law. He then counters with a supposed objection about how that was working out for them since they were unfaithful in many ways. Yet, Paul very much wants them to understand any failures on the part of the Jews does not equate to a failure on God's part. *"If some were unfaithful, will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness? Absolutely not!"* He then goes on to quote David from **Psalms 51:4** concerning his own failures before God with Bathsheba and Uriah. Just as David acknowledged God as God and right in being justified in His displeasure with David so is God still God and justified in His displeasure towards the Jews in their unfaithfulness. His faithfulness remains sure and perfect in every way.
3. Any failures we or others experience in this life are a result of failing on our end to allow God as the Potter to do as He would desire to do with us as the clay in shaping up, transforming us, and sanctifying us to live holy and righteous lives before Him. Let's pay careful attention to what is said in **I Corinthians 10:13** concerning temptation and our way of escape.

*"No temptation has come upon you except what is common to humanity. **But God is faithful; He will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation He will also provide a way out so that you may be able to bear it.**"*

Did you catch where Paul puts the power in regard to our ability to escape temptation? It is totally a product of God's faithfulness in providing a way of escape every single time we are faced with temptation. There is never a moment in our lives when God has not provided us with the ability to rely upon His strength and guidance to lead us out of the temptation and avoid sin. His faithfulness remains in every situation. On that we can be sure. The question is whether or not we will rely upon Him to guide us out or will we neglect His deliverance and seek to satisfy our own selfish desires? If we neglect God's deliverance then we must be honest and acknowledge the weakness isn't on God's end but our own. Paul states this well in **II Timothy 2:8-13**:

*"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead and descended from David, according to my gospel, for which I suffer to the point of being bound like a criminal. But the word of God is not bound. This is why I endure all things for the elect: so that they also may obtain salvation, which is in Christ Jesus, with eternal glory. This saying is trustworthy: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; if we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He will also deny us; **if we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.**"*

## Application Thoughts

### 1. As a leader, I need to recognize the weight on my shoulders of setting a proper example for others.

- a) As I think upon the failures of much more well known and popular figureheads in the Christian world, I must be reminded of the importance in making sure that I am setting the proper example for my own much smaller sphere of influence. Although we all must be striving to live lives of holiness and righteousness before God, I must recognize the influence I have as a public figure within the church. I must recognize that my own personal failures can have a major impact on those outside and inside the church. We often think of **James 3:1** simply in terms of teachers being held to a stricter judgment based upon what we teach given the context being that of the tongue, but I believe there is an even broader principle we need to recognize from the standpoint of teachers. We are in the role of a Peter in the fact that people look up to us, and we must take seriously the reality that our example influences others. We must make sure that we are guarding our behavior in order to not cause others to stumble (**Mark 9:42**).
- b) We must also acknowledge that we are fallible people just like anyone else. We are susceptible to faltering just like anyone else. This isn't to excuse any failure we might commit, but just as we should set the standard for righteous behavior, we should also set the standard of repentance when we falter. Pridefully digging in our heels, not admitting our faults, and failing to change our ways will only lead to further harm being done to the Kingdom and her citizens.

### 2. As one who looks up to leaders, I need to remember that my faith isn't dependent upon them.

- a) At the same time, I must remember that my faith in God...is actually founded in Him, His faithfulness, and what He has done for me. While more mature and experienced Christians can be powerful tools used by God to accomplish His will in this life, we cannot see them as the true reason and substance for our faith. We might think that we would never think in such a way, but do we begin to question God, His Spirit, or the Gospel when we see the failures of spiritual leaders?
- b) It is vitally important to remember, as Paul states in **I Corinthians 1:13**, *"Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name?"* Our faith must be founded entirely in the One who gave His life to redeem us from our sins. If we will put our confidence in Him alone then we will never be disappointed! This isn't to say that we shouldn't love and appreciate those who have influenced us, but it is a reminder that people are susceptible to failure when our God and our Savior Jesus are not. They will never fail us in any way. *"Let us hold on to the confession of our hope without wavering, since He who promised is faithful."* (**Hebrews 10:23**)

**Main Point/Conclusion:** *Our faith must be founded upon the perfect faithfulness of God and not upon the fallible nature of men.*

There is no doubt that we are saddened when we hear of well-known Christian leaders who have faltered in their moral integrity in one way or another. We are frustrated when skeptics and opponents of the cross pounce on such opportunities to try to smear and speak negatively of God and the church. We are disappointed when fellow disciples allow such failures to cause their own faiths to waver in one way or another. Yet, may we remember that the failures of men do represent any failure on God's part. May the failures of those we might look up to only push us closer to God and cause us to trust in His perfect faithfulness all the more.