

# On Preachers, Depression, And Understanding

I'm writing this with some trepidation. Up front, this is not a scientific or statistical kind of article. I have no numbers in front of me. I was reading an article on reasons why pastors get depressed, and it got me thinking about the problem of depression among preachers. I figured I would get this down while it was on my mind. Again, I have not done any surveys on this, but I seriously doubt that I'm going very far out on a limb here when I surmise that forms of depression among preachers are likely greater than we think.

I've seen a number of articles and posts that deal with depression in general, and this is good. We (the royal "we") have not given it enough attention. When someone is in depression, it does little good to say, "Get over it," or "You're a Christian; you shouldn't be depressed." There is more going on here, often chemically and hormonally, and we cannot merely wave a hand over the problem and think we've done our due diligence in helping someone.

Yet what I have rarely seen or heard much about at all is how depression can affect preachers. After all, "we" are the preachers, the ones who are supposed to be getting it right, the ones who are the examples for others to follow. We are supposed to be happy, good with people, and as problem-free as possible. Is that the way it works in real life? Hardly.

I realize that I cannot speak for all preachers. However, I have been doing this long enough that I'm guessing that most preachers will feel some, if not all, of these struggles throughout their working lives. The article I mentioned (linked in the comments if you wish to read it) gives some of these reasons. I'll adapt those reasons a bit here just to get the sense of it all:

1. We are in a spiritual battle that never ends (Eph. 6:10-18). This is grueling, difficult, and often wears us down emotionally, physically, and spiritually. This is true for all Christians, but the preacher may find himself constantly putting out fires, bearing burdens that few know about, and dealing with his own personal difficulties that make him wonder if he is doing anything right. His own failures will feel magnified in his mind. At the same time, we have concern about the spiritual well-being of many others in a congregation.
2. The reality of what people can really be like is an eye-opener. When you have seen Christians truly bite and devour one another, speaking about each other in the most ungodly ways, and bitterly dividing a congregation, such reality slaps you hard in the face and makes you question why you are doing this work. The first time I saw that made me question everything about preaching. It's not that I lost faith in God, but I lost a lot of faith in people, and coming back from that is a long, gut-wrenching process. Depression becomes a reality when you feel that you have to bear all the weight of such ugliness (even if it's not the case, the preacher will feel that way). Once this happens, it becomes difficult to trust future circumstances. This is why our faith in God must be strong, for our faith in people will not always be such.

3. A sense that you just aren't good enough to do the job. Preachers struggle with their own inadequacies of doing the work — from dealing with people to delivering lessons and teaching classes. They are in front of people all the time, yet constantly second-guessing themselves on how well they are doing. They feel the burden when a congregation is not growing, when members leave, or when they just aren't getting much feedback. They will question whether anyone cares about what they are trying to do or say. They feel a sense of guilt for not being good enough in their work. When supported in their work, they also feel a heavy burden knowing that a little unhappiness in a group can mean having to uproot their family completely for another place that begins in uncertainty.
4. Criticism is a staple of a preacher's life. We cannot please everyone, and our personalities and styles will be well-received by some, though not so much by others. Yet we know that we can become the point of discussion as people depart from assemblies. We hear criticisms, sometimes quite harsh, often second-hand, and usually feel unable to respond. Sometimes a brother or sister will say something directly to us (always preferred), but we know when there is a general unhappiness. This wears a preacher down and we hurt deeply just like anyone else would. We know that we have our off days. We know that we sometimes get it wrong. We know that our speech is often not smooth. And then we beat ourselves up as our own harshest critics. I have laid wide awake through the night after preaching because I know I missed something, messed something up, or did not connect well with the group.
5. The feeling of loneliness for preachers is real. Who among the brethren can we really talk to about our struggles? Yes, we rely on our wives (and the way our wives feel is whole other topic needing to be explored with compassion), but even then we may feel that we cannot share too much with brethren because we typically feel held to that higher standard (right or wrong, true or not, it's how many of us feel). We know we can be vulnerable, but then we can also be chastised for that vulnerability or weakness that we share.

All of this can add up and lead to various levels of depression before we realize it. Brethren, let me plead with you:

1. We need your prayers. Badly. Seriously. We hurt and we cry. We need our names put up before our God daily.
2. We need your support. I'm not talking here about financial support, but rather emotional and spiritual support. Talk to your preacher; don't make him always come to you. Tell him you are praying for him. Encourage him in his work. Help him bear some of the load. Give him a boost of confidence.
3. We need your understanding. We are human. We struggle with temptation. We fall down and need help getting back up. We need compassion just as anyone else. Don't underestimate the weight that a preacher feels in his work, and don't underestimate how much he will appreciate your understanding.

Now, having said all of that, let me end with this: preaching and teaching is the greatest work I can imagine doing. We may fight with our own struggles and issues, but we do what we do because we are firm believers in this necessary work in God's kingdom.

To those who are such ardent supporters (emotionally, spiritually), may God bless you. We love what we are doing, we love you, and together we can love the Lord with all our hearts. "But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7).

Adapted from Doy Moyer