

Principles for “Distancing”

Or: When Do I Stop Ministering to That Person?

By [Jason Cherry](#)

Readers of John Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* will remember when Christian and Hopeful encounter Atheist. Mockingly, Atheist says, “I laugh to see what ignorant persons you are, to take upon you so tedious a journey, and yet are like to have nothing but your Travel for your pains.” After trying to convince Atheist of the error of his ways, Christian and Hopeful make the excruciating decision to leave Atheist behind, reasoning, “As for this man, I know that he is blinded by the God of this world. Let thee and I go on, knowing that we have belief of the Truth, and no Lie is of the truth.” Bunyan then writes, “So they turned away from the man; and he laughing at them, went his way.”¹

At some point, most Christians find themselves in the same place as Christian and Hopeful, trying to decide if they should continue to pursue an unrepentant sinner whose heart is hardened. Such decisions lead to some of life’s greatest grief. Christians often find themselves on the front line of ministry, living as lights in a dark world, unsure how much of themselves they should sacrifice for the sake of ministering to an unbelieving friend.

Each situation is different. There is no silver bullet. There is no cookie-cutter advice, no single bible verse that simplifies the decision. Life’s hard questions are not solved by bullet-pointed lists, abstract designs, plans, and outlines. Instead, at least on the question of “distancing,” the Bible provides a series of principles that help Christians decide when to distance from certain ministerial relationships. While I’ve attempted to package the principles into clean prose, their application is far from clean or easy, indeed more like a headlong stumbling through painful valleys.

Principle #1: With obstinate sinners, there comes a time for separation

1 Cor. 5:2b > “Let him who has done this be removed from among you.”

1 Cor. 5:5 > “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.”

¹ Bunyan, J. (2005). *The Pilgrim’s Progress*. Banner of Truth.

2 Thess. 3:6 > “Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.”

2 Thess. 3:14 > “If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed.”

2 Tim. 3:5b-7 > “Avoid such people. For among them are those who creep into households and capture weak women, burdened with sins and led astray by various passions, ⁷ always learning and never able to arrive at a knowledge of the truth.”

The first thing to establish is that Christians are never given permanent obligations to minister to all persons, especially when dealing with someone who was once a professing Christian. Nowhere in Scripture are Christians called to absolute permanency in ministry relationships. The context of these passages aside, at the very least we see a clear and broad principle that says in the context of ministry relationships, there may come a time for separation.

Principle #2: The priority of spiritual self-preservation

1 Tim. 4:16 > “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

1 Tim. 4:10 > “For to this end we toil and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe.”

2 Cor. 13:5 > “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”

Paul tells the young pastor Timothy to “keep a close watch on yourself.” Why? Because by doing so Timothy “will save both yourself and your hearers.” It’s not that Timothy might lose his salvation in the midst of doing ministry. It’s that the Lord does not expect his children to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their hearers. He expects his children to “keep a close watch on yourself.” Paul has a thought experiment in Rom. 9:3, saying, “For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh.” But Paul does no more than “wish.” Nowhere in Scripture is such a “wish” turned into a mandate. Therefore, Christians should have a heart for others, yet remember the priority of spiritual self-preservation.

One objects and says, “Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor” (1 Cor. 10:24). This verse is often abused, especially when Paul’s

command is turned into an absolute. First Cor. 10:24 doesn't contradict the principle of spiritual self-preservation. Is the act of eating seeking your own good? Is the act of breathing seeking your own good? Yes! Does God forbid eating and breathing? Obviously not. Thus, not seeking "his own good" is not absolute.

Not seeking "his own good" is modified by the principle of spiritual self-preservation. The principle of spiritual self-preservation says this: (1) When your faith begins to waver because of a ministerial relationship (Rom. 16:17f), or (2) when your future perseverance of faith is compromised by a ministerial relationship (Col. 2:4-8), or (3) when your ministerial toiling and striving is no longer accompanied by a sure hope of the living God (1 Tim. 4:10), then you need to consider distancing from that relationship.

Principle #3: The priority of growing in godliness

1 Tim. 4:6-8 > "If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed.⁷ Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness;⁸ for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

Gal. 2:1 > "Then after fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along with me."

In 1 Timothy, Paul is writing to a pastor, and yet Paul still instructs Timothy to "train yourself for godliness." This shows us that the pursuit of godliness never stops, even for a pastor. When dealing with a draining ministry relationship, this priority needs to be remembered.

The principle is this: A Christian's requirement to keep training in godliness is inversely proportional to their maturity, experience, and history of perseverance during hard times. Thus, the more mature a Christian is, the less continued training is required (but note, this "training" never completely stops). The less mature and experienced the Christian, the more time is to be devoted to training in godliness. The apostle Paul even trained for fourteen years before beginning major ministry (Gal. 2:1).

John Owen said, "It is important that all our duties remain subservient to our regard of God and his holiness."² A young and growing Christian should be cautious before committing full throttle to an overly draining ministry relationship.

² Owen, J. (1983), *Sin and Temptation: The Challenge to Personal Godliness*. Multnomah Press.

Principle #4: The test of whether or not they are listening

Mt. 10:11-15 > “And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it and stay there until you depart. As you enter the house, greet it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly, I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.”

Mt. 18:15-17 > “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”

Titus 3:10 > “As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.”

Again, we need to observe that as Jesus sends out the seventy-two on a mission (Mt. 10) he never gives them instructions for absolute permanency in ministry relationships. Rather, he tells them that if the person(s) to whom they are ministering prove themselves “not worthy” (vs. 13) then the disciples should distance. What makes someone “not worthy”? “If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words” (vs. 14).

Jesus later instructs the disciples that when a professing believer is in sin but refuses to listen, there comes a time when the obstinate sinner is to be treated as “a Gentile,” that is, treated with distance. Peter Kreeft asks, “How should we describe someone who won’t bother to lift the key to the lock and see whether it opens?” His answer: This is “proof of the insanity of indifference to Heaven.”³

Similarly, Paul instructs Titus that when he is dealing with a particular divisive person, no more than two warnings are required before distancing (Titus 3:10). Paul models distancing in Acts 19:9 when it says, “But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him.” The broader idea seems to be that irrespective of the specific sin, there can be limits to the number of times to warn someone before distancing.

The test of whether or not they are listening says this: If you have patiently and repeatedly (Phil. 3:1) given them the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), you have done a good thing. But over time, if they do not take your advice or follow your warnings,

³ Kreeft, P. (1993) *Christianity for Modern Pagans*, St. Ignatius Press.

if they stubbornly continue in unbelief, you should consider distancing from that relationship.

Principle #5: Ultimately, all ministry is God's job.

1 Cor. 3:5-9 > “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building.”

When dealing with a frustrating ministry relationship, well-intentioned Christians can overwater. What does the overwatering reveal? It may reveal they don't trust God. God uses means to accomplish his purpose. To maintain the analogy, our job is to water. But you can't water all day, every day, day after day.

Overwatering kills plants. So, we water, then we pray to the one who can cause life (1 Pt. 1:3-4). God just might have other people down the road to water that plant. Be careful not to misconstrue responsibility for effect (Acts 17:24-25) by playing the role of savior to a friend who needs a Savior. Without God, your effect is nothing.

Principle #6: Understanding God's design for distancing

1 John 2:19 > “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us.”

Even though it can be hard to distance from a friend who is obstinate in their unbelief, don't forget that God's purpose is irrevocable (Rom. 11:29). In the case of persistent unbelief, God's purpose is to make a “plain” distinction about who the real Christians are. And it is not uncommon that distance from the covenant community is part of God's long term plan to work salvation in their heart, “You are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord” (1 Cor. 5:5). In the parable of the Prodigal son, the Father didn't run after the son. He let the son go. He gave some distance, and eventually, the son returned.

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