



# Thrive in Ministry

## Cultivating Self-Compassion

### Three Questions:

What are some of the “unrealistic expectations” that can shape the way you do ministry?

How will practicing self-compassion help push back against feelings of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization?

What would be the negative or downside of practicing self-compassion as a pastor?

God’s compassionate nature is central to Christian theology. The church confesses in word and actions that God is gracious and merciful. God was gracious with Peter and with Paul. God was merciful with John Mark. God was slow to anger with Judah. Even though God sent Judah into exile, God sought to purify their heart. God acted out of his mercy and compassion. “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.” Psalm 145:8-9

Pastors proclaim God’s mercy to their people. They teach it from the pulpit and seek to live it in their ministry. Pastors will seek out those wandering sheep that God has entrusted to their care. Research shows that the hardest people for pastors to have compassion for is themselves. (Muse, Love, & Christensen, 2016, p. 148)

Solo pastors of churches often find themselves isolated from their congregation and other pastors. They take on a high level of responsibility



**But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. 2 Cor. 4:7**

for the functioning of the church. They take on roles that in theory belong to leaders in the congregation because they are the one who gets paid or because lay leaders fail to step up. Pastors often strive for excellence in all that they do in ministry, but realize that they simply run out of time to do everything. (Jones & Armstrong, 2006, p. 5) Too often they feel shame and guilt if our church is not growing or if a sermon or service falls flat. Too often, these pastors beat themselves up emotionally. They hear the most

negative voices from their churches. These feelings lead to a growing sense of emotional exhaustion.

### What Is Self-Compassion

Self-compassion is the ability to be nurturing to self instead of harshly judgmental (rejecting that negative script of a judgmental parent, coach, or congregation). Self-compassion enables pastors to accept that they are human. In their humanity, they

can accept that they will make mistakes, fail to live up to their own ideals, and will feel inadequate at times. Self-compassion allows them to reflect on events and failures without ruminating excessively and remaining stuck in guilt and shame. (Yarnell & Neff, 2013, pp. 146–147) Self-compassion is not apathy, excuse making, or fatalism. It is practicing self-awareness enough to not lie to oneself or to others.

## Steps to Self-Compassion

Since self-compassion is rarely a first response for most people, especially pastors who are called to a high purpose, pastors must intentionally change the way they view and respond to expectations from others and from themselves.

**Shedding Unrealistic Expectations:** Too many pastors live under the burden trying to satisfy many voices and expectations in their lives. Pastors often develop a “Good Soldier Syndrome” response to these expectations, subjugating their own needs for the good of the community. (Muse et al., 2016, pp. 151–152) Pastors often sacrifice their health, their family, and their own mental health for their calling or at least to please those with influence. Self-compassion calls on pastors to intentionally reflect on the expectations and choose how to respond. They will not always have the ability to choose, but they can be more intentional.

**Accepting Personal Disappointments:** The story of Peter’s restoration in John 21 is a powerful story of coming to grips with one’s disappointment with self. Jesus invited Peter back into his role as disciple. Peter was able to live into that calling instead of only seeing himself as a betrayer.

**Living in Grace:** Self-compassion reminds pastors that they need to live by grace as much as any person in their church. The guilt and shame that comes from unrealistic expectations, failures, or even negative scripts will lead to emotional exhaustion. (Barnard & Curry, 2011, pp. 150–151) Self-compassion allows pastors to own and accept their mistakes, rather than living in denial or hiding from others. In accepting their mistakes, they are able to take greater responsibility for these failures and disappointments. Pastors can accept

their failures without being defined by them. (Yarnell & Neff, 2013, p. 147)

**Staying Connected to God:** Self-compassion allows us to stay connected to God in a healthier way. Hall reminds his readers that it is more important that a pastor has experienced and continues to experience the grace of forgiveness than to be an exceptional leader or an unparalleled pastoral counselor. (Hall, 2012, p. xvi) Pastors are able to live into God’s forgiveness instead of God’s judgement. It is a clear statement, that pastors hold the gospel not in their own purity, but in clay jars and that the power comes from God, not the pastor. (2 Cor. 4:7)

## Practicing Self-Compassion

As pastors practice self-compassion, they will live and lead from a place of greater authenticity. They will not have to hide or deny our mistakes. (Yarnell & Neff, 2013, p. 152) Practicing self-compassion will help to lower their level of stress and emotional exhaustion. (Muse et al., 2016, p. 150) Finally, it will enable them to better understand others’ journeys and struggles. They can grant them mercy and compassion because it comes out of their authentic self instead of out of the pastoral role or façade.

### Journaling Assignment:

Your pastor is struggling with unrealistic expectations. How do you coach your pastor to be self-compassionate? What does this compassion look like?