

DO NOT GO

IN THERE

5 THINGS I WISH
SOMEONE HAD
TOLD ME
WHEN I STARTED
MINISTRY

2

BY SETH MUSE

INTRODUCTION

When I started the ministry, it was like falling off of a cruise ship. It hurt; it was cold; and no one could hear me scream for help.

But it was my own fault. I fell off the cruise ship because I was convinced that it was just a rowboat and the ocean was just a pond and the sharks were just puppies who wanted me to pet them.

There are few things more dangerous than a confident fool who doesn't know what he doesn't know!

I was a fool because I let my youthfulness, ability to teach the Bible, quick wit, and the constant affirmation from friends and family deceive me into thinking that all I do is win, win, win, no matter what.

I never really had a mentor come along and help me identify doorways to destruction that I should avoid. I was on my own, and many of you may find yourself in a similar boat.

I attended a legit seminary, but along the way, I got dual credit in the Seminary of Hard Knocks. I have the scars to prove it. My goal is to pass on to others what I believe I've learned the hard way before they start swimming with sharks and trying to take one of them home.

Here are five things I wish someone had told me when I started ministry.



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1. THE JOB IS NOT MY IDENTITY

*If our identity is in our work, rather than Christ, success will go to our heads,
and failure will go to our hearts.*

- Tim Keller

I've been in a lot of bands over the years. My love for being on stage and playing rock music has put me in a lot of situations that have allowed me to talk about faith with those whom would normally not darken the door of a church.

Once after a show, a guy was talking to me about our set and he was really impressed. He asked me what I do for a living and I told him I worked in a church as a youth pastor. I will never forget his response.

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After taking a 3 second pause to let what I had just said sink in, he responded with:

“Well, I don’t cuss that much.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. I told him I wasn’t a priest but that I’d put a good word in for him! After that we had a great conversation about Christ and why Scripture can be trusted to be reliable.

We always get to that question, don’t we? “So, what do you do?” As if I can’t really figure you out until you tell me how you spend Monday through Friday from 8am – 5pm.

Our culture likes to self-identify by profession. It should be no surprise, since the reason most of us choose our profession is because it fulfills us in some way. In ministry, that’s a good thing! But it’s not the thing that defines us.

When I started youth ministry, I wanted to be the greatest youth pastor anyone had ever seen. I wanted students from all over to drive several miles just to come to my youth ministry, and they sometimes did!

I told my success stories in attendance numbers instead of conversions. I was so close in age to the students, that I mistakenly treated them like my friends instead of putting up healthy boundaries. My youth ministry existed to impress my friends with how cool and successful I could make it.

Then I was fired.

I struggled because I didn’t know who I was if I wasn’t a youth pastor. How could these idiots fire the greatest youth pastor ever? I grew that ministry from 20 to 100 in less than a year! I was leading Mormons and Methodists to Christ (I kid, I kid)! I was in the process of fixing that broken church and some short-sighted senior adults messed with stuff they didn’t understand and ruined it all!

Now, go back through the last paragraph and count how many times the word “I” is used.

Yep. That was my problem.

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Paul said that he would boast in his weaknesses so that Christ would be lifted high. That was nothing like my attitude then and I still have to keep it in check now. Just who did I think I was? Who do you think you are?

A.W. Tozer said "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."

What came into my mind was that God's purpose was to give me glory. We don't really phrase it that way though. We may say He wants to "bless" us. Here's what it sounds like: "If I get bigger/reach more people/grow in influence/grow in size, then we reach more people and God is glorified."

That's a sentence that could easily be all about your ego, buddy. I'm living proof. Scripture says that one will plant, one will water, but the Lord gives the increase. When I gave up any kind of desire to be famous was when God truly began to use me and bless me, and it didn't look like anything I wanted or expected.

We are light in the darkness. Our responsibility is to GO to the darkness and share the light. Our call is not to be soooo cool that the darkness can't help but come join us in the light. That's what I call "Bat-Signal Ministry." We throw the Bat Symbol up in the air (or maybe the Cross Signal) and Batman comes running. Nope.

Our identity is not to be Commissioner Gordon, responsible for turning on the Bat-Signal. No.

We're Batman.

We go into the darkest places and bring the light of Christ to it because we are sons and daughters of the KING. That MEANS something. That's our true identity.

God thinks enough of us to give us a part in his work. His work. Not ours.



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2. I DON'T DESERVE THIS JOB

True humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.
– C.S. Lewis

In seventeen years of ministry, I've actually been fired twice. Both times had to do with the issue I'm about to discuss with you in this chapter. The first time it happened, I was ignorant and I was hurt. The second time it happened, I was arrogant and I was furious.

The church in my hometown had experienced a split. The previous youth pastor believed the current pastor was unfit to lead and thought himself better suited for the job. Others agreed and when the elder board rejected the idea, he quit his post and started his own church, taking the worship team and several families with him.

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Enter the savior, Seth Muse! That's what I thought. I thought I was really doing them a favor by taking the job. I had wanted to move to Austin to be where cool people live, but God convicted me in the midnight hour that I needed to take this hometown job. It was to be my crucible.

One year later, the elder board decided that a busy youth ministry was a healthy youth ministry. Our group had grown from 20 to 100 in a short time and students from that group went on to be missionaries, worship leaders, and pastors. We were a solid group following Christ in measurably great ways! I was being rewarded, I thought, for faithfulness, but what was really happening was that I was sinking lower and lower into an attitude of entitlement.

When I was fired, I actually had the opportunity to take another role at the same church in media (one I believe, in hindsight, God probably wanted me to take), but instead, I stood on principle and fought for my youth job. After all, in that time, I had led worship for the church, grown a youth ministry, and our pastor was fired, so I had spoken a time or two. I was kiiind of a big deal.

When I refused the demotion, the elders interpreted it as a potential threat, much like what the previous youth pastor had done, so they kicked me to the curb, and it was harsh. I remember yelling at the new pastor as I stormed out of his office. I can't remember exactly what I said to him and the elder who led the charge to fire me, but it was something along the lines of "A plague on both your houses!" When I look back on that moment, I'm utterly mortified that I did that.

Firing me was the right thing to do. A few years later I showed up at the pastor's house to apologize and ask forgiveness and we're on great terms now. We're even Facebook friends, which we all know is the mark of true friendship!

After yelling and storming out of the pastor's office, the story continues on to become a parallel to the story of Jonah. God told me to do something that I found humiliating and I said no, so He put me in the belly of a fish to remind me of my place. My "belly of the fish" was a job as a master control operator for a local TV station where I basically put TV on TV. The last hour of my shift every day was spent ensuring the decline of western society by airing the Jerry Springer talk show.

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I hated it. What's worse, I was getting good at it and it made me even more bitter to know my talent was wasting away in that hole.

I still loved God, but I really resented his people. Friends, that's a low place for a minister to be.

I literally went to a dark, cave-like office full of TV monitors and equipment all alone all day with visual representations of the worst our culture had to offer. When the highlight of your day is an hour of Family Feud, you're low. That's Sheol, baby.

Like Jonah, I eventually found my song of repentance and I realized the same truth that Jonah did:

I don't deserve God's favor and I didn't even deserve that job. Ed Stetzer once said "I don't think you can love Jesus without loving his wife." He's right.

Many young pastors enter the ministry having been raised by a bad pattern present in our world. It is the pattern that teaches that Talent = Trophies. The idea is that just because I am more talented, more knowledgeable, more gifted, more charismatic, more fill-in-the-blank, I should be rewarded regardless of my attitude or character.

And why shouldn't we think that's how the church works? It's pretty much how everything else DOES work. But Jesus says in Matthew 20:26 that if any man wants to be great, he must be humble himself like a servant. He not only says it, but he models it for us.

Pastors and ministers are called to lead from a Christ-like place of humility so that the Lord, not our talent, will be seen as our strength. That is the difference between humility and arrogance: God's glory or our glory. Preach repentance to Ninevites or keep Christ for the elite alone.

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So how do you know when you've fallen to the dark side? Here are some statements and attitudes that serve as red flags so you can check yourself before you wreck yourself:

1. A belief that your training, experience, or the years you've been involved in the church should trump the Elders' or your bosses' decisions.
2. A feeling that more people should listen to you and do what you think is best.
3. A need to tell stories to others in the church about disagreements you've had with your boss or elders that paint you as the smart one and them as the band of babbling baboons.
4. A disregard for protocols, especially when it comes to budgets.
5. Mockery or disregard of other ministries. Taking equipment without asking from other ministries, using space without notification, etc.
6. A long-term lack of motivation at work or keeping an erratic office schedule.

It took me about 10 minutes to come up with that list. All I did was think back to all the things I said during those years about my bosses and elders that now make me cringe.

I wish someone had told me before I started how little I deserved to be in the service of God. That lack of perspective has cost me so much.

What similar, cringe-worthy attitudes have you displayed lately?

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3. GOOD LEADERS ARE GOOD FOLLOWERS FIRST

I contend that if you want to become a great leader, you must first become a great follower.

- Michael Hyatt

At another particular church, there had been some tension between my upper classmen leaders in the youth group and the elder board regarding the previous youth pastor. They were under the impression that he was fired, and even though it was widely known that he left on his own, the students still held the elder board responsible.

Parents, this is why you shouldn't gripe about your church at home in front of your kids.

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I had finally had enough of it, so I called a meeting with them. I let them vent to me and agreed not to defend anyone (even myself) but to simply hear them out and take notes.

At one point in the meeting, one of the seventeen year old leaders of my youth ministry uttered the following statement with a smirk on his face: “We’ve all been in the youth ministry longer than they’ve been elders, so what gives them the right to decide what goes on over here or who our youth pastor is?”

I asked him to repeat it so I could write it down exactly. I knew I had just heard something so blatantly horrible that no one would believe me if I told them about it.

I ended up getting them set up with a meeting with our elder board to voice their concerns. At first, the students agreed, but later declined and decided to leave the church instead. I can’t really blame them. They’re kids. I blame the parents for letting it happen; for teaching their kids that they’re a special snowflake and are exempt from following any leader unless they already agree with the leader.

Do you see how that teaches a kid that the only person they should ever really follow is themselves? If we are teaching that, then how can we expect students to leave high school knowing how to follow Jesus?

Learning to be a great follower should be a prerequisite to leadership, and here are five quick reasons why I think so.

FOLLOWING DEVELOPS HUMILITY

When you must submit to another person's decision-making authority, it teaches you a Christ-like humility. This is what Jesus did in the Garden of Gethsemene when he prayed to the Father “not my will, but yours be done.” Can you submit to decisions from your leaders that you don’t like? It’s a skill in personal fortitude, not a feeling. Feelings are liars; don't trust them.

FOLLOWING DEVELOPS WISDOM AND LEARNING HABITS

As a follower, there will be many opportunities to glean wisdom from your leaders. Whether you agree with them or not, you can learn something from anyone, even if what you learn is what NOT to do.

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Wisdom is the correct application of knowledge, so it is one thing to have the right answer in your head and another to act upon the right answer. Your leader will show you how to find wisdom or he will show you the alternative. Either way, you only gain wisdom by following closely and paying attention.

FOLLOWING DEVELOPS PERSONAL AWARENESS

When you are close to a leader, you begin to see how he thinks and how he makes decisions. You may begin to notice that your way of doing things is different from his. You will begin to take a personal inventory of who you are as a leader. You will begin to see how the process of decision-making could possibly show others more about who you are than the decision itself. How you are perceived by others will become more clear as you interact with those you lead and if you are paying attention, you will become increasingly more aware of who you are.

FOLLOWING DEVELOPS DIPLOMACY AND DECISION-MAKING

As you follow, you will learn how to interact with others. You will learn how to leverage your influence in the correct ways to move God's agenda for your ministry forward. As you see a wise leader make decisions, you become much better at it yourself. You may have an elder board, who clearly knows nothing about communications, dictating to you how to stream the service online. Though frustrating, as you learn to follow their lead, they also will (hopefully) learn to trust you with more decision-making freedom.

FOLLOWING DEVELOPS COURAGE AND TRUST

When you have followed in another leader's footsteps for a while, some decisions become second-nature. There are many decisions that I made when I started that were horrible because I was simply afraid to make the one I knew was correct. As you practice leading alongside a leader or under the guidance of a governing board, you naturally gain confidence and become more trustworthy. #practice.

Getting married, having kids, and earning a degree isn't what gives you authority; it's making a lot of good decisions in a row that cause others want to trust you.

Peter is a great example of why good leaders are good followers first. When he was following Jesus: idiot. When Jesus left him in charge of the church: awesome. His time with Jesus changed him.

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So let's do a little personal assessment and find out if you are being a good follower to the leaders that God himself has put over you.

These attitudes could reveal that you're not that great of a follower right now:

- You agree to your leaders' decisions publicly, but privately do what you think is best even if it is different.
- You often make big decisions without consulting leaders whom you believe might say "no," thus "asking forgiveness rather than permission."
- You've called into question someone's qualification to lead based on educational achievements, age, or professional vocation.
- You plan events without consulting the church calendar.
- You have been handed some guidelines for web, social, and design, but ignore them outright because they don't match your idea of your ministry.

You may have some praying to do. One day, your number is going to be called to lead something. When it is, I hope that you've developed great leadership qualities as a follower so that you can inspire others to follow you into God's will for your ministry.

Be the kind of follower you want following you.



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4. RESPECT IS A TWO-WAY STREET

Show respect even to people who don't deserve it; not as a reflection of their character, but as a reflection of yours.

– Dave Willis

I was once on staff at a megachurch that decided to build and staff its own campground. Many employees were sent out to the camp located 2 hours from our main campus to work and prepare for our student and children's groups to arrive that summer.

In a rush to erect a monument to ourselves, we started camp before the campground was ready for us. The staff had not had enough time to get policies in place nor test those policies, not to mention that much of the campground was still under construction.

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When our inaugural group arrived that summer, the clash between the pastoral staff vision of camp and the camp staff vision of camp became the equivalent of raking fingernails down a dusty chalkboard. Neither side wanted to budge over the smallest of things.

I remember having a conversation with my boss and the camp facilities manager about setting up some bleachers in a field for a big game we were playing every night for the next three weeks. My boss asked him if we could set them up a certain way and the facilities manager responded with “Yeah, we can do whatever you want.”

My reaction must have been pretty obvious because my boss shot me a look that no doubt screamed “Don't speak, I know just what you're thinking” as I was about to release some snarky comment like “Oh, first time for everything.”

I think the whole thing ended up in a room with our senior pastor yelling at my boss and the camp director. Good times.

What I learned that summer was that respect doesn't always depend on the worthiness of someone's cause. If you want respect, you have to give respect. I didn't say you will always gain respect, but you're not responsible for the actions of others. You're responsible for the actions of you. I do know, however, that if you show no respect, there's a much larger chance that you'll receive no respect in return.

I lacked respect for others when I was a young pastor. I thought respect was given because of titles and talent. Nope. I thought once I got married, had kids, bought a house, dressed nicer, earned a degree or two, or even aged a bit more that the respect would come. But it didn't.

Respect is gained when your character outshines your accomplishments. Those two things aren't mutually exclusive, either.

My grandfather used to say that the measure of a man's maturity was in how he treated the elderly. My dad passed those words on to me after my first experience of ministry in a church with many senior citizens in the congregation. I felt I was being disrespected and neglected, when in truth, it was probably because I was being disrespectful and just reaping what I was sowing (something my granny used to say a lot).

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When I was in a band with my brother, our friend Jeremy once introduced us at a show held at a church where many friends came with their parents and even grandparents. His exact words were, “Hey everybody. This is (name-of-the-band) and if it’s too loud, you’re too old!” Then he walked off the stage. Set. Up. For. Failure.

Sometimes we can’t do anything to shape how others treat us. Jesus told us to love our enemies, and then he modeled the proper response to disrespect on the cross. “Father forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.”

Wow. Suddenly the disrespect I felt from others was snapped into perspective by my King.

What I CAN do is decide how I’m going to be known. I can decide to treat others with respect no matter what. Maybe they will reciprocate, maybe they won’t, but I’ll know that I followed in the footsteps of Jesus and that’s a good path to walk. That’s the only way we can understand how to “turn the other cheek.”

Ministry leaders cannot let what the devil whispers in our ears become our perception of reality. He’s a liar. Just like your feelings and your favorite politician. (zing!)

I wish someone had told me that respect was a two-way street early on in my ministry. After that first experience, things changed for me. I began to see the wisdom in the elderly and even meet with a coach now who I think is in his 70s! His guidance and wisdom is invaluable to me and I am glad to call him a friend!

Where do you feel disrespected? Is there any area of your life that you could stand to be a little more respectful?

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5. LEARN TO DELEGATE YOUR WEAKNESSES

*It's better to get ten men to do the work than to do the work of ten men.
- DL Moody*

I hate doing anything that requires even the simplest form of math. From very early on in my life, I realized I was going to be more of a creative type and would not need math beyond passing a few tests in school to prove I could do it given enough time and a calculator.

If I can get someone else to do the math for me, in most cases, I'm going to delegate that task, often to my good friends at Texas Instruments.

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Every burned out ministry leader I talk to has a story of being overworked and underpaid and it is often a result of bad delegation. Either the leader feels they are expected to do it all, they don't know how to delegate tasks well, or they truly have no one to delegate tasks to.

I think that something can be done to answer all three of these issues when it comes to delegation. If you feel you are expected to do everything yourself, then talk to your boss about healthy rhythms and get a clear job description in writing. You can also still delegate tasks to others and relieve your workload more than you probably realize. You may just have to get creative.

For those who think they have no one to delegate to, that could very well be true. Let's not pity party about it, though. How can we fix it? Is it possible that your standard is too high and you simply do not trust anyone else? Let's wrestle those demons. Are there volunteers available that you just haven't asked? Call them up!

If your standard requires someone to read your mind and do things exactly like you would do them, then yes, you're on your own. However, I bet if you shake the trees enough, you can find some help somewhere as long as you are willing to quit the dictator act. Is there room in your budget to farm out some graphic work or web help? Do it. That's a wise investment. Join a Facebook group or hit up Pinterest for ideas. As long as you have Google and YouTube, you're not alone, my friend.

It is also possible that you have not been trained on how to delegate responsibility well. You can learn how to do this just as I have. I learned the hard way and still need reminders. My default mode is to put my head down and work work work work work work!

At the end of the day, the harsh truth is that as the leader, you are responsible for your ministry. Of course I know that it's all in God's hands, but there is a responsibility for the ministry that He has given to you, the leader. If you are not willing to accept this truth, then you are not ready to accept a leadership position; and that's ok because leadership isn't for everyone.

Andy Stanley says, "The primary reason we do too much is that we have never taken the time to discover the portion of what WE do that makes the biggest difference." We have to "slow down to go faster," as they say. So let's slow down for a second and talk about great delegation so that you can go faster.

5 STEPS TO GREAT DELEGATION

“Leadership isn’t making all the decisions. It’s making sure the right decisions are made.” Andy Stanley

Have you determined my man-crush yet? Andy Stanley is a great source for leadership wisdom and everyone should be listening to his leadership podcast! In this quote, he isn’t proposing micro-management, but the opposite.

There are two ways to make sure the right decisions are made: 1) delegate them well, or 2) hover over the shoulder of every employee or volunteer until they quit on you. So, before you hug them to death, here are your 5 steps to great delegation!

GIVE AWAY MEANINGFUL TASKS

Real delegation doesn’t begin until you’ve given away the power to make a decision. Asking people to run out and fetch information so that you can make a decision isn’t real delegation; it’s still micromanagement and everything still bottle-necks at you.

If you feel you cannot trust your people to make good decisions, then I would question how well you’ve trained them. Sometimes you may find yourself in a culture without policies and procedures and it is very difficult to train your people. If that is the case, you have your work cut out for you, but if you will slow down and train quality employees or volunteers, then you will exponentially expand your reach and influence. It’s just math.....again.

Also, if your people know that you never ask them to decide anything important, it may communicate that their role is not important. That’s when they suddenly “feel God’s call” to another ministry area. Delegate important tasks to those whom you have trained well.

GIVE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

So, you’ve given away an important task? Good! Now set them up to succeed. Tell them what you expect it to look like when the task is done correctly. Give them a deadline and any guidelines that you want them to follow. This gives them a sense of trust because you have given them something important.

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You're done, right? Nope! Remember, this task is still on you! Give them suggestions on how to accomplish the task well. Tell them the names of those who can help them and how to contact them. Set them up to succeed by giving them access to all the resources that you would have!

GIVE SPACE BUT INVESTIGATE

Now get out of the way and let them work. They are going to go about the task in the way that God has wired them and you need to let them do this. It may look ridiculous to you, but remember, you may be a hand and they are a gastrocnemius (what? It's a real body part!). Give them the space to work, but investigate too.

Also, when you lay out the expectations for the task, let them know that you are going to check in. You might even give them the dates and times that you will expect an update if the project takes a significant amount of time to complete (like a video or a graphic). This helps eliminate procrastination and allows you to give good feedback along the way. Speaking of feedback...

GIVE GREAT FEEDBACK

To be clear, saying you like or don't like something is only technically feedback, but it isn't great feedback. That's Facebook. The "like" thing is Facebook.

Great feedback is an encouraging yet honest and critical assessment and usually goes down smoother as a question. It sounds like this:

- Ok, youth pastor, let's say we did fire a confetti cannon into the crowd on July 4. What do you think our crowd will do: appreciate it or not appreciate it? I don't think our senior members will get the joke, so would that work better in your youth service? Could we ask the students to sit in one section of the audience and we can fire it on just them? Is there anyone in our church who is a paramedic in case it scares an elderly person?

- Worship leader, I'm so glad to have you on staff researching new songs to take our congregation deeper into worship with God. However, I'm not sure that this song about open-mouth kissing Jesus is appropriate for our congregation, especially the men. Can we find another song that's more in line with our vision of the Sunday morning experience we want everyone to have here?

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- Hey, Communications Director, I thought the video was really great! However, It was a little too long. Is there anything we can edit out of it? Maybe we should cut out the time he sneezes?

Feedback without direction is just an opinion, and high-caliber leaders will take opinions either personally, negatively, or as a license to do what they want because you never said otherwise.

GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

When you've delegated a task, it is ultimately your responsibility to see it succeed. However, if it does succeed, it is also your responsibility to make sure that the person who did all the legwork gets the credit for it.

Just because you give the green light on a project does not mean that that person is going to take it as a compliment. What I mean is that you need to tell people that they have done a good job when they do a good job and make it clear that that's what you're doing!

Don't you want that too? Recognition of a job well done goes a long way in building relationships with your volunteers or staff. The next time you hand them a project, I would be willing to bet monopoly money that they are going to be more inclined to do their best work again.

So, a few final thoughts from this section:

When we delegate purposefully, we are more effective personally. It allows us to "only do what ony we can do." (More great quotes from Andy Stanley). When we specialize, which is what delegation allows us to do, we can have greater impact.

Delegation can feel like you're not doing very much nor being very productive. That's actually a good sign! The ability to delegate well is why they pay you the big bucks! Just don't spend those tens of dollars all at Starbucks!

Being in ministry is one of the toughest, yet most rewarding vocations you could choose. Well, let's be honest, you don't choose it, it chooses you.

There are so many things I've done in ministry that I regret because I just didn't know better. Some of those experiences have led to great learning as well as great pain. If I could take the learning without the pain, though, I would.

Some of them have led to incredible joy and friendship too! The last piece of advice I must leave with you is this:

Laugh.

Though we deal with serious matters, we must find a way to laugh at ourselves. I always say, "If you can't laugh at yourself, it's probably because you're not funny."

I would love to hear some of your "I can't believe I did that" stories too. Please share those with me and everyone else by going to my website, www.sethmuse.com, and commenting on a blog with a story of your own.

Thanks for reading this far! Look for my next eBook: *Don't Go In There Either: 5 More Things I Wish Someone Had Told Me When I Started Ministry!*

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