

## **5 Moral Fences**

**James MacDonald**

### **Questions:**

**1) Is MacDonald over or under stating his point about this danger area?**

**2) What can we do to protect ourselves from sexual temptation?**

**3) How will you know if you are 'in trouble' in the area of sexual temptation?**

## Artizo Discussion Paper

### 5 Moral Fences

July 1, 1999

Fact: Some kids like to play "near the edge," and some kids don't. I always did! Whether the "edge" was rock jumping into a cool mountain lake or "bumper jumping" moving cars to slide along an icy winter street, the potential of peril invigorated me.

But "when I became a man, I put away childish things" (1 Cor. 13:11). I was a pastor and in seminary when the moral failures of the late '80's hit the news. In addition to the big names, I heard a shocking number of similar tragedies from my own circle of pastor/friends.

One Sunday night in 1987 I remember crying all the way to church. I was terrified. I asked over and over, "How does this happen? Could this happen to me? How can I protect myself, my family, and my ministry from the devastation a moral failure would cause? How can I keep myself pure when men better than me are falling like flies?"

As I prayed it through, I figured that those who fell morally must have disregarded the warning signs. They didn't go from Spirit-led to stepping off the cliff in one day. They must have crashed some social barriers before their slippage became sexual.

Where is that line? I wondered, And how can I make sure I never cross it? I knew I had to make my decisions early and my standards public so that others would know when I was "playing near the edge." I was determined that, by God's grace, I would not take the plunge. So I set some boundaries of behavior.

I remembered an incident back in Bible college when the college president would not give my (young, beautiful) fiancée a ride to our church almost two hours away when he came to speak. At first that seemed odd; now I was beginning to understand why.

Sexual temptation is  
where we are held least  
accountable and where  
we can fall fastest.

I began to form my list of moral fences:

1. I will not, under any circumstances, ride alone in a car with a female other than my wife or an immediate family member. No lifts home for a church secretary, no baby sitters driven home late at night, no rides for teen girls in my student ministry, more recently no personal pickups for my daughter's girlfriends, no exceptions.

Recently while speaking out of town, I had to explain to my pastor friend why it would not work out for his wife to meet me and drive me over there. It has been awkward at times, but it's a beneficial discipline.

2. I do not counsel a woman in a closed room or more than once. No matter what the issue, counseling is an intimate activity, and when the subject matter itself becomes intimate, counseling the opposite sex is like playing with fire.

When our church was smaller, keeping this standard meant that some women had to seek counsel elsewhere and two or three left our church over my "fence." I was hurt at first, but it blessed my wife.

My time was better spent training a team of men and women to do the lighter counseling and then referring those with more complex issues to biblical counseling centers outside our church.

When I cannot avoid a second session with a woman in our church, I have my wife or another pastor join us. Pretty hard to commit adultery with someone you never spend time alone with.

3. I do not stay alone in a hotel overnight. I did my doctoral thesis on increasing the incidents of self-disclosure of sin among men. I have heard more confessions of addiction to various forms of sexual sin than any one pastor should have to hear, and it has changed me. It has left me deeply persuaded that "there but for the grace of God (and some moral fences), go I." I know myself too well.

Lengthy, unaccountable hours with manifold temptations available is a recipe for failure. Romans 13:14 instructs us to "make no provision for the flesh." Do I sound weak? I am! And when I forget that weakness, I cease to know God's strength (1 Cor. 12:10).

When I travel, I travel with someone. When that is impossible, I stay with a friend. When that is impossible I do not go. Period.

Early in my ministry, that meant there were things I missed out on. Recently our elders have agreed to help fund a travel partner for me. If an outside ministry opportunity is deemed worthwhile, and the ministry cannot afford a second airfare, our church pays for me to take another pastor or elder, or best of all, my wife!

4. I speak often and publicly of my affection for my wife, when she's present and when she's not. Marriages that are failing often become silent in public before they become loudly negative. If a pastor neglects publicly affirming his wife, it may reveal a private deterioration of that relationship.

I have tried to develop close friends who consistently monitor the way I refer to and interact with my wife. I know some men in our church feel the heat because I am so publicly wild about my wife of 16 years, but maybe that's good for them.

5. Compliment the character or the conduct, not the coiffure or the clothing. I'm still working on this one. As our church has grown, and I don't know everybody personally, the power of a compliment has become a problem. As pastors we love people and want to be an encouragement. Formerly, if I noticed that Shelly had a new dress or Susan had changed her hair I would compliment her on that. I felt it was harmless. If it seemed to meet a need and I meant it sincerely, I thought, No harm done.

But more recently I have seen that this seemingly innocent gesture can have far more impact than I ever intended. Now I'm trying to restrict my compliments to character and conduct. I get to use my gift of encouragement, but I focus on the things God is doing in a person's life and not the externals that are so easily misunderstood.

Make the fences public

The fence is useless if I can take it down any time my sinful heart desires. To make it work, those around me must understand the fences and be willing to tell me if they see one broken down. I periodically weave the fences into a sermon.

My most recent example was a message on "Meeting God in Moral Failure." When the message came to the "how to prevent" part, I simply explained my five moral fences.

At the staff level, we require the fences to be maintained. From pastors to ministry leaders, custodians to bookstore personnel, every paid staff member is held to this standard. A former singles

pastor found it very difficult not to have lunch alone with women in his ministry, claiming he "forgot." Eventually we told him we would "forget" to pay him if he "forgot" again. Isn't this legalism?

This is not legalism. Legalism is when we judge another's spirituality based on man-made rules. We are not judging anyone's heart for the Lord. We are simply reasoning together how we can remain pure and faithful in our commitments to God and family.

Of course, Christian morality involves far more than righteous sexuality. Money and power have often been observed to destroy ministers and ministries. However, decisions about money and power are more public. People see the kind of car I drive, the clothes I wear, the vacations I take, and the home I live in.

People also observe the ways I use my influence over others. If I become powerdriven rather than servant-oriented, if I lord my authority over others and abuse my position, people will "vote with their feet."

With both money and power, there is a broad public accountability that is a "fence" of sorts. Beyond that most of us have elders and/or deacons who monitor the way we use power and money in the church. I account regularly for the way I use my influence and am excluded almost completely from the money matters of ministry.

Yet none of these co-leaders can monitor my sexual purity. It stands alone as a purely private matter capable of instantly destroying my ministry.

Moral fences are most needed in the area of sexual temptation because it is here we are held least accountable and it is here we can fall fastest.

What about solo sexual sin?

The fiercest battle for sexual purity is fought in the mind, what I look at, and what I think about. Moral fences may protect me from the act of adultery, but what protects a minister from the mental/emotional infidelity Jesus warns of (Matt. 5:28)?

My resume in these matters is certainly not spotless, but I have found great help in weekly accountability from my men's small group, which asks specific questions about Internet usage, television/movies viewed, and magazines read.

Knowing that within days my brothers will ask me point blank, "Have you set anything unclean before your eyes this week?" (Ps. 101:3) has been a strong deterrent.

Above reproach

In both Timothy and Titus, Paul instructs leaders in Christ's church to be above reproach. That is, our conduct must be such that it would be difficult, even for those who oppose our ministry, to bring an accusation against us. Many a pastor has had his ministry destroyed over accusations that could not be proven false, though they were.

Our congregation is comforted in knowing that our ministry team is seeking to protect themselves and the church from moral failure. By identifying the behaviors that lead to moral problems and avoiding them, we embrace the wisdom of Proverbs 4:26 to "ponder the path of your feet and let all your ways be established."

Of course, the standards themselves are not in any way righteous. They are only a protection against potentially overwhelming temptation.

Last summer on our family vacation, we drove through some very high, single lane, mountain passes. The road was narrow and the drop-off immense. I drove slowly and hugged the mountain! I kept my eyes on the road and refused to look down, but I'm still glad the guard rails were there.

*James MacDonald is founding pastor of  
Harvest Bible Chapel  
800 Rohlwing Road  
Rolling Meadows IL 60008*

*Copyright © 1999 by the author or Christianity Today  
International/Leadership Journal.*

#### **Questions:**

- 1) Is MacDonald over or under stating his point about this danger area?**
- 2) What can we do to protect ourselves from sexual temptation?**
- 3) How will you know if you are 'in trouble' in the area of sexual temptation?**