

Shortly before my 38th birthday, after more than eleven years of full-time pastoral ministry, I commissioned as an active-duty chaplain in the United States Navy. I possessed no prior military experience but had always desired to serve. For various reasons, the time seemed right for me and my family. So, after shedding thirty pounds I completed basic training, attended a military school for new chaplains, and reported for duty aboard Marine Corps Recruit Depot, Parris Island, South Carolina.

Young men and women suffer through “boot camp” on Parris Island, enduring sweltering humidity, biting sand fleas, and indomitable drill instructors, who spare no effort to transform raw civilians into warriors befitting the title, “United States Marine.” Across the island’s main road stretches an enormous banner that proudly declares, “We Make Marines.”

During my time on Parris Island I ran, I hiked, and I did “side straddle hops,” a Marine Corps euphemism for jumping jacks. I learned that a ceiling is an “overhead,” a floor is a “deck,” and a wall is a “bulkhead.” I came to understand that my right hand existed for saluting, and I dared not run into a superior officer while using it to clutch a bag of groceries.

I discovered that “Vitamin M” is Motrin, which comprises a major part of a Marine Corps diet. I learned the difference between a “medium reg,” a “high reg,” and the most honored of all Marine Corps haircuts, the “high and tight.” I found that complaining represents both a love language and a keen form of bonding.

But I also learned a great deal about leadership, and I want to share with you some of the leadership lessons I learned from the Marine Corps, and how I have applied them to pastoral ministry. Three brief lessons follow, each springing from a commonly used Marine Corps saying. I’ll explain the saying as the Marines use it and then apply it to pastoral leadership.

Saying #1: “Every Marine a rifleman.”

All Marines do jobs. Some Marines serve in front-line infantry positions. Affectionately called a “grunt” or an “oh three eleven,” an infantry Marine shoots things and blows up stuff - all that you might imagine a Marine does. But many more Marines serve in supporting roles, everything from communications to aviation maintenance to linguists. But *every* Marine is a rifleman.

Marines began as shipboard personnel during the age of sail. They protected the naval officers from the (often lawless) crew, and, during ship-to-ship combat, Marines ascended the ship’s rigging into the “fighting tops” - a crow’s nest of sorts. From these heights, Marines, who boasted expert marksmanship skills, fought the pitch and swell of the ocean to rain down a hail of rifle fire on their enemies. While Marines therefore held many roles, every Marine was, first and foremost, a keen rifleman. Still today, every Marine must prove his or her rifle marksmanship regularly. Deadly precision with a rifle represents *the* defining characteristic of a United States Marine.

Lesson #1: “Every preacher a shepherd.”

If every Marine is, at his or her core, a rifleman, then every preacher is, and must be, a shepherd. You might serve as a Senior Pastor, an Assistant Pastor, a Youth Pastor, or a College Pastor, but if you’re a minister of the Word in almost any capacity, you’re also a shepherd. The Scripture never divorces the two.

Even the apostles served as pastors and shepherds of churches. Paul, the preacher, missionary, and scholar, not only preached, but also suffered a “daily pressure” of “anxiety for all the churches” (2 Corinthians 11:28). During his years in Ephesus, Paul “lived among” his sheep, and “did not shrink from declaring to [them] anything that was profitable,” teaching “in public and from house to house” (Acts 20:18-20). In fact, Paul reminded the believers at Thessalonica that while he was among them, he and his fellow missionaries had shared with them “not only the gospel of God, but our own selves” (1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Likewise Peter, who preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41), in Solomon’s Colonnade (Acts 3:11-26), and before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4:8-12; 19-20; 5:29-32), nevertheless called himself a “fellow elder,” and exhorted all elders everywhere to “shepherd the flock of God that is among you” (1 Peter 5:1-2). Although some elders labor specially “in preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17), no preacher can shun the work of pastoral shepherding.

In my younger years of ministry, I imagined that exemplary preaching could grow independently of shepherding care, and I acted as though good sermons earned me the right to neglect careful shepherding of the flock. How foolish of me! The shepherding work of a pastor among the flock tunes the ears of the sheep to their preacher’s voice in a way that no eloquence can, and no amount of eloquence ever overcomes pastoral neglect.

Jesus says to every preacher, “Tend my sheep” (John 21:16), for careful shepherding *of* Christ’s flock goes hand-in-hand with careful preaching *to* Christ’s flock, and the wise pastor pursues fidelity in both.

If every Marine is a rifleman, then surely every preacher is, and must strive to be, a shepherd.

Saying #2: “Pain is weakness leaving the body.”

You will not walk far on a Marine Corps installation before seeing a fit body wearing a black t-shirt that declares, “Pain is weakness leaving the body.”

Especially in the mind of a “grunt,” a Marine is and must be the deadliest weapon on the face of the earth. Yes, Marines train with rifles, mortars, and machine guns, but a Marine sees him or herself as the primary weapon. Marines therefore practice mixed marital arts, honing their bodies and minds through rigorous hand-to-hand combat. They likewise pursue relentless physical training, endure long, arduous hikes (which Marines lovingly call a “hump”), and suffer hard work in miserable conditions, purposefully creating pain for themselves.

To encourage one another when the going gets tough, Marines remind each other that a higher design undergirds their pain. Pain drives out weakness, and a Marine in pain becomes just that much deadlier for having endured it. If a Marine wants to continue fighting and to complete the mission, all while enduring enormous suffering, physical agony, or deprivation, then weakness *must* leave, and if the average Marine has anything to say about it, it will.

Lesson #2: “Pain is dross leaving the preacher.”

Just as each Marine diligently pursues physical fitness, so also every pastor ought to pursue *spiritual* fitness. And spiritual fitness requires willingness to endure discomfort, scorn, affliction, trials, and even persecution, for your Savior uses these fires to refine you by burning away your dross (Isaiah 1:25;

Malachi 3:2b-3).

Are you regularly training yourself for spiritual fitness? Just as Marines are physical warriors, so also pastors are spiritual warriors, who fight not “against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph. 6:12). If a Marine purposefully equips himself for worldly warfare, should you not in like manner to “take up the whole armor of God” (Ephesians 6:13), wielding “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Ephesians 6:17), such that you purposefully strive to present yourself the fittest weapon in the hands of the Holy Spirit that you are able to become (Eph. 6:18-19)?

Can you imagine a Marine in a combat unit who turns away from hardship, who pursues a life of ease, who refuses to train for war, and who expects the Marine Corps to provide him with a life of peace? He would not long remain a Marine, and you might rightly ask, “What did you expect when you joined the Corps?” But I often see a similar set of expectations among God’s warriors - His shepherds. Too many pastors shun hard work, complain about the trials of ministry, and look at affliction as a curse rather than as a means that Christ uses to burn away your dross.

What did you expect when you became a pastor? Charles Spurgeon insightfully noted, “The Lord gets his best soldiers out of the highlands of affliction.” So far from promising you peace and ease or health and wealth, Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Matt. 16:24). It isn’t easy. It’s not supposed to be. You *will* face trials and endure afflictions. But will you not ask Christ to sanctify your afflictions by using them to make you more fit for his service? To burn away your dross?

If every Marine strives for physical fitness, every preacher must all the more strive for spiritual fitness, for the combat to which God calls us involves spiritual powers and eternal consequences.

Saying #3: “No excuse, sir”

Marines hold each other accountable. You can get the job done or not, but don’t make an excuse about it. When a superior officer or enlisted leader questions a Marine about a plan or a procedure, he or she expects an answer. But if you’re asked about why you failed at something, only one reply cuts the mustard: “No excuse, sir.”

Shortly after I reported to Parris Island, I arrived late for a battalion staff meeting, and by saying that I was “late,” I mean that I was *only* five minutes early. Marines quickly learn that if you’re ten minutes early for a meeting, you’re already five minutes late. Why? The meeting begins not when the clock on the wall hits a certain mark, but when the Commanding Officer (CO) arrives. If you arrive after the CO, no matter how early he or she has arrived, *you* bear the blame.

So, when I rushed to the door of a meeting “late,” I found my Executive Officer, looking anxious, a bit frantic, and not at all happy, waiting for me. She barked, “Chaplain! Why are you late?” To which I replied, “No excuse, Ma’am.” Not realizing that I had already learned the expected response, she could not suppress the grin that spread across her face, and she replied, “Don’t let it happen again.”

Lesson #3: “No excuse, Lord.”

If a Marine greets his or her failure with, “No excuse, Sir,”

how much more ought the Lord’s shepherds take responsibility for our failures in ministry?

The Heidelberg Catechism asks, “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” And it answers in part, “That I am not my own but belong, body and soul, in life and in death, to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ.” The truth that Christ purchased me with his blood (1 Pet. 1:18-19) offers me profound comfort. I am not my own, for I have been bought with a price (1 Cor. 6:19b-20). But that same truth comes also with profound responsibility. I represent my Master, whose interests I must serve (Luke 17:10), and whose character I must emulate (1 Cor. 11:1). Moreover, James 3:1 cautions, “Not many of you should become- teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.”

So, how do you respond when you fail? When your words wound your spouse? When you lose your temper with a frustrating congregant? When you know in your conscience you gave that sermon only half the effort you should have: Do you make excuses? Shift the blame? That’s what comes naturally to sinners like you and me.

When the LORD asked Adam about his sin in the- Garden of Eden, Adam blamed Eve, saying, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I ate.” And when the LORD asked Eve, she blamed the serpent, saying, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” Even though such blame shifting comes naturally to all of us, shouldn’t you, as a Christian leader, set a better example?

If you say, “I make no excuse. I sinned. Please forgive me,” you honor the Lord and His people by taking responsibility for your words and actions. You demonstrate before their eyes that your salvation comes from Christ’s perfection, not yours. You need not make an excuse or gloss over your failures, for Christ’s blood covers you. When you take responsibility, you point your people to Jesus, magnifying His strength by being honest about your weakness, and exalting His mercy by being honest about your sin.

If a Marine greets his or her failure with, “No excuse, Sir,” how much more should the Lord’s servants say, “No excuse, Lord.”

Shepherd your sheep, strive to sanctify your afflictions, and take responsibility for your failures. You can take the man out of the Marines, but you cannot take the Marines out of the man. These Marine Corps leadership lessons have served me well in pastoral ministry in the decade since I left Parris Island, and I pray that as you apply them to your ministry Christ will be honored and His sheep will be blessed. ❖



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