

## Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – *Self-Acceptance*

*Self-acceptance, n. the state of receiving yourself favorably as God made you; the acknowledgment of God's grace and goodness in your design and the contentment that goes with it.*

Self-acceptance is critical to the long-term health of your ministry. It is critical to your vocational happiness, yet ministry leaders often struggle with self-acceptance. Many of us are needy for lots of positive strokes for our fragile self-esteem. I am convinced that for most ministry leaders self-acceptance does not come naturally. It is a learned soft skill. It is something we cultivate and develop under the tutelage of the Holy Spirit. If we do not develop it, living out a ministry calling will be unbearable. We will be people-pleasers who are constantly worried that someone is not happy with us.

Before we explore self-acceptance, we first should clarify what it does *not* mean. We are not talking about a lack of awareness concerning our own temptations and shortcomings. We are not talking about making excuses for our sinful tendencies, as in, "Oh, that's just how God made me." We are not talking about being deaf to the counsel of other people who have experience and wisdom they can speak into our lives. We are not providing an excuse to be obnoxious and run roughshod over others, and we are certainly not talking about being lazy and just coasting in your work.

So what are we talking about? Ministry leaders who have developed self-acceptance have certain characteristics. Here are six of them. These characteristics will give us clues about how to develop a healthy self-acceptance in our lives and ministries.

1. *They have a clear understanding of their calling.* This is critical. A "mist" here will cause a "fog" throughout your ministry. As Jeff Iorg points out in his helpful book, *Is God Calling Me?*, there are numerous calls a ministry leader receives. Among them are the call to Christ (salvation), the call to ministry leadership (ministry vocation in general), the call to a specific type of ministry leadership (preaching, youth ministry, academia, missions, etc.), and the call to a specific role in a specific place (pastor of XYZ Baptist Church, for instance). All of these are important to have clear in your mind, but I am thinking specifically of the last one. As a ministry leader, you need a clear understanding of your present assignment. What is your calling in the place you are in right now? What are the main tasks God has given you to do there? If you have not gotten specific about this, then focus here until you have a clear understanding of that calling. Pray it out, write it out, and refer to it often. Don't hesitate to get the help of a good ministry coach or mentor in bringing clarity to your calling.

2. *They have a biblical definition of success.* Once you know what it is you're supposed to do, then you must define what it means to be successful at it. Be very careful here! We live in a culture obsessed with celebrity and numerical measures of success. Often we bring these secular definitions of success into kingdom work. Your definition of success should have a biblical grounding, should focus on things you can control (under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, of course), and should not be dependent on how other people respond to your ministry. I believe the only appropriate definition for success in

ministry, therefore, is *faithfulness*. By faithfulness I mean *doing what God has called you to do in a way that honors him while trusting him to accomplish his purposes through you*. It is about falling into the ground and dying where God has planted you (see John 12:24ff). If you start adding codicils and qualifiers, you will inevitably move into things that are beyond your control. That means you are giving other people the power to determine whether or not you are a success. That is a bad idea. Focus on faithfulness in your ministry calling.

3. *They are comfortable in their own skin*. In leaders with self-acceptance there is a lack of anxiety about how people are going to respond to them. There isn't an emotional neediness for affirmation. Now we all like positive strokes. They make us feel good. They give us a "shot in the arm." However, ministry leaders who have developed the skill of self-acceptance are able to rest in the inevitably mixed results of ministry because their personal significance and self-worth are grounded in Christ. At Calvary, the Lord has eternally revealed how he feels about us. Our value as individual persons is in Him, not in what we accomplish or in how other human beings respond to our ministries. Focus on abiding in the Christ who has spoken loudly and clearly about how valuable you are.

4. *They do not play the comparison game*. I often hear ministry leaders, especially younger ones, talk about having a "bigger platform" for their ministries. They wonder why Pastor So-and-So has a bigger platform (church, ministry) than they do. They express disappointment in the size of their own platform or the slow rate of their advancement. I get it. The bigger stage is alluring. We tend to rate ourselves in comparison to others. However, I don't see ministry leaders who have developed self-acceptance doing this. They tend not to compare themselves to others (which should not be confused with the positive trait of *learning* from others). They tend toward gratitude about where God has placed them and what he has given them to do. The comparison game inevitably leads to pride or depression about our ministries. I don't see leaders who are marked by self-acceptance worrying too much about what other people are doing.

5. *They are not threatened by other viewpoints*. Squarely grounded in Christ, we can freely admit we don't have all the answers. We don't have to look "omni-competent" to everyone. We can objectively evaluate our ministry endeavors without feeling threatened. We can listen to the viewpoints of others even when - *especially when* - they don't agree with ours. Leaders with self-acceptance are marked by a noted lack of defensiveness. Of course they have opinions and passions, but they aren't threatened by opinions and passions that differ from their own.

6. *They are teachable learners*. If you are not worried about impressing other people, then you can have a relaxed, open mind and a teachable heart. You can be quiet and listen. You can seek counsel and make appropriate changes in your life and ministry. You can learn from people who are different than you. You can be at peace with your own imperfection. If you find yourself needing to be "right" or to offer an opinion about everything, it may be a sign that you have not learned to receive yourself favorably as God made you. Self-acceptance allows a ministry leader to live with humble dependence on the Lord, taking all the nourishment and grace and learning opportunities that the Lord provides.

Dear brothers and sisters, may your ministries be marked by the acknowledgment of God's grace and goodness in your design and the contentment that goes with it. The peace of Christ to you.