

Why Not Caring is a Mark of Great Leadership

Great pastors care about a lot of things and a lot of people. But with the non-stop opportunity to minister to peoples' never ending needs, every pastor must eventually face a crazy question: ***"Is it possible to care too much?"***

An essay I read as a young pastor marked a pivot point in my life. It was an essay by [Eugene Peterson](#) entitled, "Teach us to Care and Not to Care" in his book [Subversive Spirituality](#) (The essay title is taken from a line in the poem by T.S. Eliot, [Ash Wednesday](#).) **The big idea is that we must let God be God and not take too much personal responsibility for the spiritual growth of others.** God is the one who causes the growth, not any man's skill as an evangelist, teacher or shepherd. Great pastors must learn not to care too much. It was a classic call to repent of the the "messiah complex." Jesus is the only true rescuer.

The timing of a provocative article like this is everything. **A a few years earlier in ministry journey, and the essay would not have made much sense.** But at that time I was overwhelmed as a spiritual formation pastor with several thousand congregants in our church. I was feeling the increasing weight, week after week, of disappointing people by trying to do too much for too many. Peterson's exhortation "not to care" was useful in breaking my spirit of self-importance.

This important essay would expand in its meaning over the years. Not only would the words "not to care" help me learn humility, they would remind me to focus my calling. Today, I remind myself not to care in at least four ways. I will repeat Eugene Peterson's phrase to keep the boldness of "not caring" anchored in a fundamental call to grace and kindness.

#1 - Great pastors don't let anything but the gospel become the power center for life change. Teach me to care and ***not to care*** if I think my personal presence in any way becomes a source of transformation for other people.

#2 - Great pastors don't let success in ministry distract from their presence at home. Teach me to care and ***not to care*** if my ministry career is keeping me from coming home on time.

#3 - Great pastors don't try to help everyone personally in their sphere of influence; they look long-term to multiply their ministry by investing in a few. Teach me to care and ***not to care*** about doing the work myself when God is calling me to develop others who will multiply the work.

#4 - Great pastors don't let the flood of trivial tasks distract from their core calling. Teach me to care and ***not to care*** until I have given my best energy and effort every day to my most vital responsibilities.

Warning: One way that "not to care" will backfire.

Years ago, church consultant [Lyle Schaller](#) used an important idea to describe the pastor's foundational work. **He said a pastor must "pay the rent" when it comes to the basic expectations of the church board and congregation.** Showing up to preach a good sermon is paying the rent. Showing up on time at the elders meeting is paying the rent. Doing the funeral only you can do is paying the rent.

I think that the "paying the rent" work of ministry is always important to care about. **If my "not caring" ever becomes lethargy or laziness, then I have crossed a dangerous line.** "Not caring" cannot justify sloppiness or slothfulness

Be passionate, work hard, and stay focused by not caring too much.

> [Read more from Will.](#)