

## Managing Success by Syler Thomas

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During my first full year in youth ministry, it was success, not failure, that almost did me in. I had taken the position as I was finishing seminary, thinking it would be a good temporary job until I found something else. Surprisingly, I soon fell in love with the ministry, the students, and the thrill of seeing them come to faith and grow in their passion for God. Unfortunately, my wife was less in love with it all. In fact, with a one-year-old child and a baby on the way, living in a new community and going to a new church where she knew almost no one, she was rapidly beginning to feel forgotten and marginalized.

I certainly thought I was being a good husband and a good minister of the gospel. I believed with all of my heart that God had led us to this church. I made the mistake, however, of sharing that with her during our discussions about how she wasn't happy. "But God called us here, honey," I would say, unknowingly laying down an unfair trump card that left her feeling powerless to respond. That summer, after just three years of marriage, she shared during one particularly emotional conversation that there was a part of her that just wanted to run away from it all. I didn't understand what was wrong. What was happening was that *she* was feeling ignored, and *I* was feeling threatened. So whenever she tried to voice her concerns, I thought she was trying to take away the thing in my life that I felt God had made me to do. So out came the trump card; God's call always wins, right?

Wrong. I'm not sure what changed, but at some point, I finally "got it." In *Surprised by Joy*, C.S. Lewis tells the story that when he left for the zoo he didn't believe Jesus was the Son of God, but by the time he got there, he did, but he wasn't sure exactly how it happened. In the same way, Heidi and I lay in bed talking one night that summer, I got up to lock the front door, and when I came back to lie down again, I saw things in a different way and I said: "You know what, I'm sorry. I've been selfish and have been thinking only about myself and my ministry, and I've totally been ignoring your feelings." That began a process where I finally realized that if God was truly calling us to this church, then *she* would feel the call as well. I realized that while she was trying to honor Ephesians 5 by submitting to me, I too needed to follow the instructions by loving her as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her. I needed to give myself and my ministry up for my wife.

So I did a very difficult thing. I looked her in the eye and I said: Heidi, if your experience here doesn't improve in six months, if you don't feel like you also have a call to be here, I will lead us away from this church. We won't leave because you don't like it; we'll leave because it wasn't the right place for us as a family. It meant a lot to Heidi that I would make that sacrifice for her. So I went to my senior pastor and in as humble a manner as possible, I let him know that my wife was having a hard time and that we were praying about whether this was the right place for us or not. I told him I wasn't threatening to leave by any means, but I just wanted to keep him in the loop.

It was scary to do what I did, because it meant sacrificing what I loved for the sake of my wife. But this thought occurred to me that I couldn't ignore. To paraphrase Jesus' words: what does it profit a youth pastor to gain a successful youth ministry and lose his wife? I realized that these students that I was sacrificing for would be going to college in four years, but my wife would still be around. Students come and go, but our spouse and children remain.

The end of the story is a happy one. By the end of that six months, Heidi felt a better connection to the church, and felt encouraged that this was in fact the place for us to be. Part of me wonders if the real change wasn't necessarily that things at church got better, but that Heidi knew that I was really listening and was genuinely willing to sacrifice for her sake.

I heard a very successful pastor recently tell a conference of pastors that at a critical moment during his ministry career, he made a promise to his wife and to God that he would never cheat his family to do church work. He pointed out that Jesus tells Peter that *he* (Jesus) will build his church. And Paul says that *Christ* loves the church, and *we* are to love our wives. It's especially easy for us to get this mixed up because there's always so much to do. You're never really "done" at the end of any day, right? So we have to have the maturity to know when our role as youth worker ends and our unique role as parent and spouse begins.