

On Sunday, Pastor John delivered a sermon after days of meticulous preparation and fighting anxiety. The emotional and physical toll was significant. Come Monday morning, an email from Sarah, a long-standing and well-respected member of the congregation, appeared in his inbox:

**\*\*Subject: About Yesterday's Sermon\*\***

> Dear Pastor John,

>

> I trust you're recovering well from yesterday's sermon. I wanted to share some thoughts about the topics discussed. While your dedication and passion were evident, I fear that certain issues raised might have been distressing for some of our congregation due to their sensitive nature.

>

> I hope we can handle these subjects carefully to maintain comfort for everyone.

>

> Warm regards,

>

> Sarah

John's initial sense of fulfillment quickly gave way to disappointment and a hint of shame. He felt weary, and Sarah's email stoked his anxieties. As he started drafting a reply, he found himself responding defensively, but he pushed it back, it was important to be gospel clear:

**\*\*Subject: RE: About Yesterday's Sermon\*\***

> Dear Sarah,

>

> I appreciate your feedback and understand your concerns. However, given the truth of what the passage had to say, and the importance of staying faithful to the text, it's not always possible to cater to every individual's sensitivities, legitimate as they may be. Preparing sermons can be a demanding process, and while I strive to be faithful to the text, it can occasionally touch on sensitive issues.

>

> Your continued engagement and understanding are invaluable. Perhaps this is something you could encourage others to join a growth group could provide a platform to further discuss and unpack the themes raised during sermons in a more personalised and sensitive way.

>

> Thank you for your continued support.

>

> Best,

>

> Pastor John

Sarah replies ...

**\*\*Subject: RE: RE: About Yesterday's Sermon\*\***

> Dear Pastor John,

>

> I fully understand the tremendous pressure of sermon preparation. Please know my feedback was offered out of care for you and our congregation, not as criticism.

>

> I agree that joining a growth group could foster deeper understanding and dialogue. My main aim, however, was to convey the potential impact of sensitive topics on some of our members.

>

> Always remember, Pastor John, that you have a supportive congregation behind you, including myself. We appreciate your dedication.

>

> Take care,

>

> Sarah

Pastor John, feeling the weight of his role is annoyed by Sarah's words, composes a reply:

**\*\*Subject: RE: RE: RE: About Yesterday's Sermon\*\***

> Dear Sarah,

>

> Thank you for your email. It's comforting to know that the congregation is understanding. However, it's important to remember the purpose of sermons is not to comfort, but to enlighten and sometimes challenge us.

>

> It can be tricky to balance being faithful to the biblical text while also managing the emotional comfort of the congregation. I'll take your feedback into consideration, but I hope you and the other members can appreciate the difficulty of this task.

>

> Thank you, Sarah, for your support and care.

>

> Best,

>

> Pastor John

Reflect on this continued exchange. Can you identify how Pastor John's defensive SHIELD is in place in his response? Can you spot when he continues to REACT? Consider how these behaviours might affect Sarah and her initial intent of providing supportive feedback. What might this do their relationship and ultimately his sense of belonging?

## **Pastor John REFLECTS**

After Sunday service, Pastor John returned home with a sense of accomplishment and exhaustion. The sermon had gone well, and the church members seemed engaged. However, when he opened his email the next morning, he found an email from Sarah, a long-time congregant, expressing her concerns about the sermon.

John's initial reaction was a rush of frustration and defensiveness. He started typing a reply right away, suggesting that Sarah attend the growth groups to discuss her concerns. However, before pressing 'send', he stopped.

### **REFLECT process**

**R - Recognize Emotions:** John acknowledged that he was feeling defensive and frustrated. He was also a little hurt that his hard work on the sermon was not fully appreciated.

**E - Examine Triggers:** He realized that his reaction was due to the criticism of his sermon, but it was heightened by his fatigue and the stress he had been under lately.

**F - Feel the Emotion:** John allowed himself to sit with these emotions. Instead of responding immediately, he closed his laptop and took some time to acknowledge and process these feelings.

**L - Look for Patterns:** This wasn't the first time he had reacted defensively when his work was criticized. He noted a pattern of such behavior when he was under stress or feeling fatigued.

**E - Evaluate Responses:** He recognized that his initial response was defensive and not constructive. It was not reflective of the pastoral care he wanted to provide to his congregants.

**C - Consider Alternatives:** John took a moment to consider Sarah as a whole person - her years of loyal attendance at the church, her contributions to the community, her own personal struggles. He remembered her consistent support and how she was usually appreciative of his work. This recollection calmed him and he realized that her feedback wasn't an attack, but a genuine expression of concern. He thought about acknowledging Sarah's concerns and thanking her for her feedback. He also considered sharing his own challenges and asking for understanding and patience.

**T - Take Action:** After considering Sarah's perspective and his own reactions, he decided to take a break, rest, and then revisit the email. After a few hours, he opened Sarah's email again. With a fresh perspective, he was able to compose a more thoughtful, empathetic response. He thanked Sarah for her feedback, acknowledged her feelings, and shared a little about his own challenges. He also suggested that they discuss the issue further in person, opening a door for dialogue rather than shutting it with a defensive response.

## **Pastor John's Personal Support Action Plan**

In the wake of the email exchange with Sarah, Pastor John came to a painful but necessary realization: he was burning out. His relentless dedication to his pastoral duties, coupled with personal stresses and the added weight of his congregation's expectations, had left him feeling exhausted, anxious, and increasingly unable to handle difficult situations with the clarity and grace he aspired to.

He knew something had to change. This was a marathon, not a sprint, and he had to start treating his mental and emotional health with the same reverence he extended to his spiritual duties.

Action Plan:

**Therapy:** Amid growing anxiety and restlessness, John made the decision to seek therapy. He understood that these feelings were signs of deeper issues that needed professional help.

**Pastoral Supervision:** Pastor John decided to start monthly pastoral supervision. Given he was operating under some blind spots, he recognized that having a safe space to unpack, reflect on, and gain insight into his ministry practice was crucial.

**Mentoring:** Recognising he was struggling within his marriage, and was feeling increasingly lonely he thought he needed a space to be and belong. Someone who had been there before, where he could share his internal struggles with alcohol, his family and feeling like he was letting God and the congregation down.

**Coaching:** Lastly, he saw value in specific leadership coaching in how to approach this situation with Sarah. He had not found a way to manage his time and energy so that he could respond thoughtfully to such instances. He thought he might get some input into leadership skills for conflict, communication and time management.