
THE UTTER NECESSITY OF A GODLY LIFE:

The Foundation of Pastoral Ministry



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“God saves all kinds of people, even ministers,” wrote John Kershaw, a nineteenth-century Baptist pastor. Kershaw went on to explain that though the ministry is a great vocation for removing a pastor from the attractions of a cursing, sinning world, one of a minister’s greatest dangers is that he handles the sacred so frequently that it becomes banal to him.¹ As ministers, we can handle the Word of God as if it were no more than the words of men. We can take that which is holy for granted even as we live unholy lives. We can exhort others to holiness but, like the Pharisees, not move an inch in that direction ourselves. Charles Spurgeon called this fatal error “ministerialism.”

Regarding such ministerialism, this article addresses questions we need to raise as pastors. Why is a godly life an utter necessity for us? What means or spiritual disciplines can we use to cultivate the sanctification of our own hearts toward God? How should we exercise those disciplines? What ought to motivate us, in dependence on the Spirit, to maintain holy living in the midst of busy and challenging pastorates?

PURSUE GODLINESS

To be godly means to live and be like God (Eph. 5:1-2). Without holiness or godliness, no man—ministers included—will see God,

Hebrews 12:14 says. Perhaps no definition of godliness (or sanctification) matches that of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*: “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness” (Q. 35).

It is impossible to separate vibrant, godly living from a vibrant spiritual life and a God-owned ministry. The sanctification of our own heart is not an ivory-tower topic or experience. It is an absolute necessity—both personally and in relation to our calling as ministers of the Gospel—if we are to live to the glory of God.

Scripture says there should be no disjunction between the heart, character, and life of a man who is called to proclaim God’s Word and the content of the message he proclaims. “Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16).

Jesus condemned the Pharisees and scribes for not being and doing what they proclaimed. They were condemned for carrying on a professional ministry in which a great disparity existed between lip and life, between the doctrine professionally proclaimed and the doctrine assimilated and manifested in daily living.

Professional clerics, more than anyone else, should seriously consider the scathing words of Christ: “The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach” (Matt. 23:2-3). We ministers are called to be as holy in our private relationship with God, in our role as husbands and fathers in our families, and in our ministry as shepherds among our people, as we appear to be in the pulpit. There must be no disjunction between our calling and living, nor between our confession and practice.

Scripture posits a cause-and-effect relationship between the character of a man’s life as a Christian and his fruitfulness as a Christian minister (Matt. 7:17-20). The fruitfulness of a minister’s work is proportional to the sanctification of his heart toward God. We as ministers must therefore seek grace to build the house of God with the hand of sound preaching and doctrine as well as with the hand of a sanctified life. Our doctrine must shape our life, and our life

must adorn our doctrine. “He doth preach most who doth live best,” wrote John Boys. We must be what we preach and teach, not only applying ourselves to our texts but applying our texts to ourselves. Our hearts must be transcripts of our sermons.² Otherwise, as John Owen warned, “If a man teach uprightly and walk crookedly, more will fall down in the night of his life than he built in the day of his doctrine.”

ACQUAINT YOURSELF WITH GOD

The heartbeat of a godly life is personal acquaintance with God. “Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,” Eliphaz says in Job 22:21 (κJV). Though this verse may not mean everything Eliphaz envisioned, it is true that acquaintance with God will not only affect our entire ministry—it will also influence our redeemed humanity spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically. This chapter focuses on the spiritual dimension of a pastor’s life: A healthy spiritual life with God will promote godliness in every area of one’s life.

According to James Stalker, a preacher must possess three aspects of spiritual communion with God: “a large, a varied, and an original life with God.”³ Each aspect is essential to produce freshness, spiritual power, and unction in our preaching and pastoral work from week to week, year after year.

A large acquaintance with God. Peter admonishes us to “grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). Paul describes being changed by the Holy Spirit from one stage of glory to another (2 Cor. 3:18).

The implication is clear: Spiritual life begins in the heart and, as a dynamic reality, is fueled by grace and knowledge. When our hearts as preachers are increasingly sanctified toward God, new hues and subtle nuances will be added to our preaching that will reflect our inner growth. We will be expressing the same eternal truths, but they will be enriched by various dimensions of our growing relationship with God. Though we speak of the same Father, the same Christ, the same Spirit, and the same covenant of grace, with all its attendant

Trinitarian blessings, that we spoke of years ago when we were first ordained into the ministry, those great themes will become richer and deeper as they are punctuated with the freshness of a growing relationship with God.

In a good marriage love is expansive; the partners remain the same, but the relationship is never static. The relationship remains alive and dynamic as husband and wife grow in knowing, loving, and serving each other. If this is true between two finite personalities, how much more of a pastor's relationship with God, in which he explores the depths of God's being and the glory of His salvation.

Preaching is the mirror of a pastor's expanding relationship with God. Woe to the congregation that is lulled to sleep by wooden messages from a pastor who is not growing in acquaintance with his Master.

As ministers, we stand at the edge of the ocean of God's vast being and inscripturated truth. Spurgeon felt that way. He said after years of preaching that his problem was finding too many texts to preach on rather than not enough. The awareness that we are just beginning to know God in Christ and His gracious truths ought to stimulate us to grow. There is so much more to explore and experience. Like Paul, we must press on: "But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14).

A varied acquaintance with God. The Psalms eloquently testify that knowing God and walking with Him on earth is a varied experience. Some people view the Christian life as nothing but joy and victory. But such a view would eliminate nearly half of the Psalms, which describe pain, sorrow, frustration, and loneliness as authentic parts of a theology of Christian experience. We ought, therefore, to look to the Psalms for a more complete understanding of what we will encounter in our walk with God. As Luther says, "If you can't find your life in the Psalms, you have never become a child of God."

Walking with God is a varied experience. A godly person may experience days of ecstatic joy and unspeakable peace followed by days of staggering struggle and groaning heaviness. There are times

when pastors sing with David, praising God “with singing lips” (Ps. 63:5). But there are also times when we must cry out with Asaph, “Will the LORD reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?” (Ps. 77:7-9).

Preaching that does not incorporate large segments of the Word of God because the soul of the preacher is estranged from this varied experience of walking with God is truncated and narrow. Such preaching will not satisfy deeply exercised children of God as Paul’s preaching did. Because Paul knew what anxiety was, he could teach believers how not to be anxious. Because he had personally battled fear and sin and mortification, he could preach to the fears and groanings of other believers (2 Cor. 1:3-7).

This varied walk with God permeates Paul’s pastoral letters. He uses the gentleness of a mother to describe pastoral work in 1 Thessalonians 2:7 (“But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children”), then switches to a more fatherly image of discipline four verses later, saying, “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children” (v. 11). Paul’s shepherding of the Thessalonians reflects his varied acquaintance with God.

Someone who spends a day working with lilies in a greenhouse will come out smelling like a lily. A man who has been alone with God will preach words that are permeated with that communion. Thus Stalker says to preachers:

There are arts of study by which the contents of the Bible can be made available for the edification of others; but this is the best rule: Study God’s Word diligently for your own edification; and then, when it has become more to you than your necessary food and sweeter than honey or the honey-comb, it will be impossible for you to speak of it to others without a glow passing into your words which will betray the delight with which it has inspired yourself.⁴

An original acquaintance with God. God's Word is filled with concepts of solidarity and community. The book of Numbers speaks dozens of times about God working among families. True believers are like leaves that belong to the same tree of life, Scripture teaches.

Yet believers are also individuals; no two leaves on a tree are precisely identical. The purest, noblest form of individualism is manifest in Scripture. For example, Jesus says, "The very hairs of your head are all numbered" (Matt. 10:30). That's astonishing individualism. He also says that He knows all of His sheep by name (cf. John 10:3, 14). What is more individual than a person's name?

If our acquaintance with God is genuine, it will be original. We will not parrot the language or experience of another person, but we will confess with John "what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us" (1 John 1:3).

A. W. Tozer once compared walking with God to crossing an ocean in a ship. One ship does not carve out a path for another to follow. There is a sense in which each one of us must walk alone with God with a sense of pure, holy originality. We must trust God to sanctify us in every experience we are led through in order to make us "competent as ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor. 3:6). He leads us through these experiences to sanctify us in a way that perfectly fits us as individuals. He tailor-makes all our afflictions, joys, and experiences to perfectly fit His will for us.

If we are to be effective preachers and pastors, we must resolve, by God's grace, to be godly or we must leave the ministry. We must have a growing, varied, and original life with God.

USE ORDINARY SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES

How are we as pastors to cultivate godly living? Discouragements and obstacles abound. In our ministries many of us confront much that is disheartening and rubs against our efforts to walk the King's highway of holiness. We often feel frustrated, disappointed, near despair, and often quite unholy. So much of what we are makes us unprofitable and so much of what we do appears to be fruitless. As John Stott

says, “Discouragement is an occupational hazard of the Christian ministry.”

Still, the way to cultivate godly living is surprisingly simple: We are to walk with God in the way of His appointment, diligently using the means of grace and the spiritual disciplines, waiting upon the Holy Spirit for blessing. Note that godly living involves both discipline and the continued grace of the Holy Spirit. This dual emphasis upon duty and grace is fundamental to Puritan thinking on godly living.⁵ As John Flavel wrote, “The duty is ours, though the power be God’s. A natural man has no power, a gracious man hath some, though not sufficient; and that power he hath, depends upon the assisting strength of Christ.”⁶

To this John Owen adds, “It is the Holy Ghost who is the immediate peculiar sanctifier of all believers, and the author of all holiness in them.” The Spirit supplies what we lack so that we may “press toward the mark.” The Spirit enables us as believers to “yield obedience to God . . . by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ.”⁷

The believer then is empowered with “a diligent and constant use and improvement of all holy means and duties, to preserve the soul from sin, and maintain its sweet and free communion with God,” Flavel said.⁸ Taking encouragement from Owen’s wise advice (“If thou meanest to enlarge thy religion do it rather by enlarging thy ordinary devotions than thy extraordinary”), let us examine in more detail what spiritual disciplines or means of grace the preacher may use to enlarge his walk with God.

Read Scripture

Pastors will cultivate godly living through the discipline of diligent, systematic, prayerful, and meditative reading of the Holy Scriptures (1 Tim. 4:13; 2 Tim. 2:15). In this they must do the following:

Be diligent. Physical health is profoundly affected by one’s daily diet. Unusual times of feasting or fasting are a factor, of course, but not nearly as important as a daily regimen of eating. In the same way, our spiritual health is affected by our habitual spiritual intake. There are times of great crisis in ministry when we are driven to extraordinary times of prayer, and there are times when we are too

hard-pressed to pray. But these are not the normal times. Similarly, if we are to have an expanding, varied, and original acquaintance with God, we must cultivate the discipline of setting aside a regular time in which we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. Richard Greenham said that we ought to read our Bibles with more diligence than men dig for hidden treasure. Diligence makes rough places plain, the difficult easy, and the unsavory tasty.⁹

Be systematic. We must study the whole range of God's revealed mind from Genesis to Revelation, keeping in mind who God is, who we are, what His relationship is to us as our Creator and Redeemer, and what our relationship is to Him and His world. We must immerse ourselves in the Word of God, not the word of man concerning what God has revealed. Too many ministers are more influenced by what others have told them about the Scriptures than by the Scriptures themselves.

Paul warns us about such a practice in 2 Timothy 3:16-17: "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." In effect he was saying, "Timothy, those Scriptures that your God-fearing mother and grandmother taught to you are adequate in all their richness and fullness to furnish you completely and to produce a godly life."

If all Scripture is given to equip men for the work of ministry, we cannot help but be crippled by neglecting any part of the revealed Word of God. How often must Christ warn us as pastors, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures" (see Matt. 22:29)? The Word of God is the lifeline of our souls, the very heartbeat of our sanctification. We must be able to say with Jeremiah, "When your words came, I ate them; they were my joy and my heart's delight" (Jer. 15:16).

Proper preparation for reading the Bible is critical, however. Without it, our reading will seldom be blessed. Such preparation, according to Richard Greenham, consists of three things:

- 1) We must approach Scripture with a reverential fear of God and his majesty, being "quick to listen, slow to speak"

(James 1:19), and determined like Mary to lay up God's Word in our hearts.

2) We must approach Scripture with faith in Christ, looking on him as the "lion out of the tribe of Judah to whom it is given to open the book of God."

3) We must approach Scripture with a sincere desire to learn about God. We often do not profit from Bible-reading because we come without a heart for divine teaching.¹⁰

For how many of us has the Bible ceased to be a living testimony of personal, devotional relationship to Christ? Yes, we read it, and we prepare sermons from it, but for whom? Only for other people? Is it surprising, then, that our ministries are marked by coldness and doctrinal imbalance when we no longer personally search, love, and live the Scriptures?

Be prayerful and meditative. Ask for the Spirit's light. Stop presuming that knowing the original languages of Scripture and using exegetical tools are sufficient to unlock the mysteries of Holy Scripture. None of us knows Hebrew and Greek like the scribes and Pharisees; yet they searched the Scriptures daily and missed their true meaning. Didn't Jesus say to them, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life" (John 5:39-40)?

We must pray with David, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Ps. 119:18). Only then will the message and spirit of the Scriptures penetrate our minds and conquer our hearts.

We must also ask God for light from the Scriptures to scrutinize our hearts and lives. Ezra 7:10 says, "For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the Lord, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel." Ezra's meditative preparation involved a three-step process: studying, doing, and teaching. That kind of meditative reading of the Scriptures requires us to reflect on what the Scriptures speak to us, that we might more fully worship God in spirit and in truth, both in private and in public.

After reading Scripture, meditation is critical. Reading may give

knowledge, but meditation and study will add depth to that knowledge. The difference between reading and meditation is like the difference between drifting in a boat and rowing toward a destination.

The Puritans spoke often of such meditation. Thomas Hooker defined the art of meditation as “a serious intention of the mind, whereby we come to search out the truth and settle it effectually upon the heart.”¹¹ He and other Puritans suggested the following ways of meditating on Scripture:

1) Pray for the power to harness the mind, to focus the eyes of faith on this task.

2) Read the Scriptures, then select a verse or two or a doctrine upon which to meditate.¹²

3) Memorize the selected verse(s) to stimulate meditation, to strengthen faith, to witness to and counsel others, and to serve as a means of divine guidance.

4) Sing Psalms that relate to your selection. Singing the Word can be immensely helpful to help us look Godward. As Luther said to Melancthon, “Come Philip, let us sing the Word and let the devil do what he will.”¹³

5) Meditate on what you know about your verse(s) or subject. As you meditate, think of applications to your own life. “Take every word as spoken to yourselves,” said Thomas Watson.¹⁴ Take every truth as directed to you.

6) Pray and sing again and again. Pray through the verse(s) or doctrine.¹⁵

Spurgeon relates how one Puritan, a county magistrate named John Row, occupied himself in meditation. “Sometimes in a morning, before he rose, he would be meditating an hour or two together,” Spurgeon writes. “When he was riding or walking abroad, he would still be in meditation. When he went about his worldly affairs he would contrive them beforehand, and spend what spare time he had in heavenly contemplation. He seldom prayed in secret without preparing himself for it by meditation, saying he preferred a short prayer after long meditation above a long prayer without meditation.”¹⁶

We have lost the art of meditation. We have forgotten that

disciplined meditation on the Scriptures helps us focus on God. Meditation helps us view worship as a discipline to be cultivated. It involves our mind and understanding as well as our heart and affections. It transfuses Scripture through the texture of the soul. David says, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands make me wiser than my enemies, for they are ever with me. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes” (Ps. 119:97-99; cf. Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:2; 104:34; 119:48).

Meditation on Scripture is absolutely crucial for a pastor (1 Tim. 4:13-15). Meditation helps prevent vain and sinful thoughts (Matt. 12:35) and provides inner resources on which to draw (Ps. 77:10-12), including direction for daily life (Prov. 6:21-22). Meditation is a weapon against temptation (Ps. 119:11, 15), provides relief in afflictions (Isa. 49:15-17), benefits others (Ps. 49:3), and glorifies God (Ps. 145:7).

Meditation also enriches public prayer. “Out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks,” says Matthew 12:34. The minister who interacts with God during the week through prayerful, meditative study of the Scriptures—who has tasted new dimensions of the grandeur and majesty of God that week, and new depths of his own indwelling sin and the riches of Christ to atone for him—will not have a cold, dry prayer on Sunday morning but will radiate the presence of the Almighty.

Pray Unceasingly

Men “should always pray and not give up,” Jesus says in Luke 18:1. “Should” means that the obligation of prayer rests upon us at all times regardless of our present frame of mind. Christ knew that “giving up” was one of the greatest hindrances to the habit of prayer; hence His warning not only to pray but also not to give up doing it.

Why is it that we as ministers, unlike other workers, are not required to punch a clock or work a certain number of hours a week, yet are able to receive our livelihood from the Gospel? It is because a precedent was established by the apostles in Acts 6 when they refused to take time away from their calling to do other things, even legitimate acts of mercy to widows. Since to “neglect the ministry of the

word of God in order to wait on tables” was not pleasing to Christ who had commissioned them to preach, they determined to give their attention “to prayer and the ministry of the word” (vv. 2, 4).

Note the order here: first prayer, then ministry. As Charles Bridges once wrote, “Prayer is one half of our ministry; and it gives to the other half all its power and success.”¹⁷ Likewise, Jean Massillon (1663-1742), a famous French preacher, said to a group of ministers:

A pastor who does not pray, who does not love prayer, does not belong to that Church, which “prays without ceasing.” He is a dry and barren tree, which cumpers the Lord’s ground. He is the enemy, and not the father of his people. He is a stranger, who has usurped the pastor’s place, and to whom the salvation of the flock is indifferent. Wherefore, my brethren, be faithful in prayer, and your functions will be more useful, your people more holy; your labors will prove much sweeter, and the Church’s evils will diminish.

Later he added:

That man ceases, if I may use the expression, to be a public Minister from the time he ceases to pray.¹⁸

Our consciences may condemn us here more than in any other part of our ministry. You may admit this, saying, “I have never been careless in the preparation of my sermons, neither in the hard work of exegesis nor in the sweating work of sermonic application. But I am plagued with guilt when I ask, ‘Have I given *myself*—not just time, but myself—to prayer?’”

Part of our problem is that we view prayer as an appendix to our work rather than as our work. Notwithstanding all our failures, we must sustain the habit of secret prayer if we are to live godly lives. The only way to learn the art of sacred wrestling and the art of holy argument with God is to pray. Praying is the only way to turn the promises of God into the horns of His altar by which we lay hold of God Himself. Our preaching about prayer and all the treatises we

read on prayer will be of no help unless we pray with Jacob, “I will not let you go unless you bless me” (Gen. 32:26).

Lack of prayer is the downfall of many ministries. If Thomas Brooks could say, “A family without prayer is like a house without a roof, open and exposed to all the storms of heaven,” should not we add, “And a pastor without prayer is like a church without a roof, open and exposed to all the storms of heaven, earth, and hell”?

If the giants of church history dwarf us today, perhaps it is not because they were more educated, more devout, or more faithful as much as because they were men of prayer, possessed with the Spirit of grace and supplication. They were Daniels in the temple of God. As Owen wrote, “A minister may fill his pews, his communion roll, and the mouths of the public, but what that minister is on his knees in secret before God Almighty, that he is and no more.”

Let us seek grace to be men of prayer, like the great Reformers were. Luther prayed three hours daily. “Meditation, temptation, and prayer make a minister,” he wrote. To Melancthon, Luther once said, “I must rise an hour early tomorrow, for, given all that I need to do, I must spend more time in prayer.”

John Welsh, the son-in-law of John Knox, prayed seven hours a day. “I often wonder how a Christian could lie in his bed all night, and not rise to pray,” he said. Welsh kept his robe at his bedside each night so he wouldn’t catch cold when he rose to supplicate with his God. Once his wife found him weeping on the hard floor after midnight and asked him why he was crying. “Oh, my dear wife,” he said, “I have 3,000 souls to answer for, and I know not how it is with many of them!” On another occasion she heard him pleading in broken sentences, “Lord, wilt Thou not grant me Scotland?”

It would not be wise for us to suddenly attempt to pray three hours a day, much less seven, but let’s refuse to relinquish the inner prayer chamber, for here true reformation will either be established or broken. Let’s refuse to be content with the shell and husk of religion without the inner core of prayer. When we grow drowsy or sloppy in prayer, let us pray aloud, or write down our prayers, or find a quiet place outside to walk and pray. Just don’t stop praying.

Don’t abandon stated times of prayer, but also pray in response

to the least impulse to do so. Conversing with God through Christ is our most effective antidote to warding off spiritual backsliding and discouragement. Prayerless discouragement is like an open sore ripe for infection, whereas prayerful discouragement is like an open sore that's ripe for the balm of Gilead.

Keep prayer a priority in your personal and official life. As John Bunyan said, "You can do more than pray after you have prayed, but you cannot do more than pray until you have prayed. . . . Pray often, for prayer is a shield to the soul, a sacrifice to God, and a scourge to Satan."¹⁹ Pray before and after every church duty you perform, be it preaching, family visitation, teaching catechism class, or counseling a troubled couple.

Failure to pray unceasingly (1 Thess. 5:17) is the primary reason why there is so little unction in most preaching today. This problem is two-sided to be sure. It is our fault as ministers because we relinquish prayer time too easily, and it is the fault of our people when they make too many demands of us. Too many churches indirectly pressure ministers to abandon prayer time by filling their days with administrative duties, committee meetings, and counseling sessions. Today many pastors are busy studying the problems of the church and providing a smorgasbord of solutions, but where are the Daniels, Luthers, and Welshes who are giving themselves to prayer?

Often we lack genuine communion with our people in preaching because we lack genuine communion with God in our inner closets. How can we preach on heaven and hell without feeling the truths of eternity in our soul throughout the week? M'Cheyne once asked Andrew Bonar what he had preached on the previous day. Bonar answered, "On hell." M'Cheyne replied, "I trust you did it with tears."

Margin notes in some editions of the *King James Version* of James 5:17 say that Elijah "prayed in his prayer." We as ministers ought to be doing that as well. As Spurgeon wrote: "To you as the ambassadors of God, the mercy-seat has a virtue beyond all estimate. The more familiar you are with the court of heaven, the better shall you discharge your heavenly trust. . . . All our libraries and studies are

mere emptiness compared with our closets. We grow, we are mighty, we prevail in private prayer.”²⁰

Read and Listen to Sermons

Sound books that promote godly living are a powerful help to pastors. Read the spiritual classics, letting great writers be your spiritual mentors and friends.

The Puritans excelled in this. “There must scarcely be a sermon, a treatise, a pamphlet, a diary, a history or a biography from a Puritan pen which was not in one way or another aimed at fostering the spiritual life,” said Maurice Roberts.²¹

Read on a diversity of subjects for a diversity of needs. If you would foster godly living by remaining sensitized to sin, read Ralph Venning’s *The Plague of Plagues*, Jeremiah Burroughs’s *The Evil of Evils*, Thomas Watson’s *The Mischief of Sin*, or Thomas Boston’s *Human Nature in Its Fourfold State*.

If you long to be drawn closer to Christ, read Thomas Goodwin’s *Christ Our Mediator*, Alexander Gross’s *Happiness of Enjoying and Making a Speedy Use of Christ*, Isaac Ambrose’s *Looking Unto Jesus*, John Brown’s *Christ: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*, or Friedrich Krummacher’s *The Suffering Savior*.

If you are sorely afflicted, read Samuel Rutherford’s *Letters*, J. W. Alexander’s *Consolation to the Suffering People of God*, James Buchanan’s *Comfort in Affliction*, or Murdoch Campbell’s *In All Their Affliction*. If you are buffeted with temptation, read John Owen’s *Temptation and Sin*. If you want to grow in holiness, read John Flavel’s *Keeping the Heart* or Octavius Winslow’s *Personal Declension and Revival of Religion in the Soul*. Or read J. C. Ryle and Jerry Bridges on holiness.

Since I was fourteen years old, such literature has enriched me. Good books have drawn me closer to God, enlightened me in His Word, and prompted meditation, conviction, and allurements.

Organize your private time so you can read at least thirty minutes each day for your own godliness. When you read, don’t be in a hurry. Look up cited texts. Be content to read some books more slowly than

others. Some books may be tasted, while others should be chewed on before being digested.

Read as an act of worship. Read with the goal of being elevated into the great truths of God, so that you may worship the Trinity in spirit and in truth. Read and meditate and apply. Pray before, during, and after you read; then put into practice what you have read, insofar as it is biblical.

Be selective about what you read. Subject all your reading to the touchstone of Scripture. So much of today's Christian literature is shallow froth, riddled with Arminian theology or secular thinking. Time is too precious to waste on unprofitable reading. Read more for eternity than time, more for spiritual growth than professional advancement. Remember John Trapp's admonition: "As water tastes of the soil it runs through, so does the soul taste of the authors that a man reads."

Ask of each book: Would Christ approve of this book? Does this book increase my love for the Word of God, help me to kill sin, impart abiding wisdom, and prepare me for the life to come? Could I better spend my time by reading another book?

Speak to others about the best of what you read. Godly conversation upon godly reading promotes godly living. And in all your reading, aim for the psalmist's petition: "Teach me your way, O LORD, and I will walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart, that I may fear your name" (Ps. 86:11).

Some people prefer listening to reading. Do both to live a godly life. Listen to great preachers, either in person or on tape, who will enrich your spiritual welfare. Select those preachers who encourage your sanctification. Today there are a wealth of excellent sermon and conference tapes available.

Listen to sermon tapes in the car—on your way to pastoral calls, for example. What a boon such preaching can be for one's ministry! Here are some suggestions on how to listen to such tapes:

- 1) Prepare your soul with prayer.
- 2) Listen with a holy appetite and a tender, teachable heart. Avoid a critical spirit.

3) Be attentive to what is preached, receiving with meekness the engrafted Word (Jas. 1:21), mingling it with faith (Heb. 4:2).

4) Retain and pray over what you hear. As Joseph Alleine advised, “Come from your knees to the sermon, and come from the sermon to your knees.”

5) Live out the sermons you hear, remembering that doers of the Word are the best hearers (Jas. 1:22-25). Speak to your closest friends about what you hear.²²

Celebrate the Sacraments

God’s sacraments complement His Word. They point us away from ourselves. Each sign—water, bread, and wine—directs us to believe in Christ and His sacrifice on the cross as the source for godly living. The sacraments are visible means through which Christ invisibly communes with us and we with Him. They spur us to Christlikeness and therefore to holiness.

Grace received through the sacraments is not different from that received through the Word. Both convey the same Christ. But as Robert Bruce put it, “While we do not get a better Christ in the sacraments than in the Word, sometimes we get Christ better.”²³

Fellowship Regularly with Believers

“As the communion of saints is in our creed, so it should be in our company,” wrote Thomas Watson. That’s good advice. Pastors who would be godly should seek fellowship in the church and associate with mentors in godly living (1 Cor. 11:1; Eph. 4:12-13), especially fellow pastors in various denominations who will keep confidences.

The church ought to be a fellowship of caring and a community of prayer (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 12:7). So converse and pray with fellow believers whose godly walk you admire (Col. 3:16). Association promotes assimilation. A Christian who tries to live in isolation from other believers will be defective; likewise, a pastor who does not commune with others usually will remain spiritually immature.²⁴

Keep a Journal

The ministry can be a lonely occupation. Recently *U.S. News and World Report* did a study of 100 occupations in relation to loneliness. Pastoral ministry ranked No. 2 on the list, right after night watchman.

As a minister you should take care not to divulge too many of your feelings to office-bearers or church members. Such words could be used against you. Some people in the congregation may even become jealous if you become a close friend with others. You must use caution concerning in whom to confide. Journaling or diary-keeping can help take the edge off your loneliness by helping you express thoughts to God and to yourself that otherwise remain buried. Journaling can serve numerous benefits that promote godliness, including assisting you in meditating and praying, in remembering the Lord's works and faithfulness, in understanding and evaluating yourself, in monitoring your goals and priorities, and in maintaining other spiritual disciplines.²⁵

Cultivate Other Disciplines

Cultivate godly living through other disciplines, ascertaining over time which profit you the most. Add your own disciplines to this list.

Sabbath-keeping, or sanctifying the Lord's Day. This can greatly improve personal spirituality. Pastors need a weekly, extended private time with God, either on Sunday or another designated day. Though we must be careful not to bind ourselves with legalistic observances for our pastoral Sabbath, secular matters should not be allowed to infringe upon this time. We ought to view this time as a joyful privilege, not a tedious burden, in which our private worship of God and use of spiritual disciplines can be sustained without interruption. As J. I. Packer says, "We are to rest from the business of our earthly calling in order to prosecute the business of our heavenly calling."²⁶

Stewardship of time and money. Time is short and must be used wisely, for the days are evil (Eph. 5:15-16). The godly pastor uses time to prepare himself, his family, and his congregation for eternity (2 Cor. 6:2).

The disciplined use of money is rooted in the principle that

God owns everything we have (1 Cor. 10:26). Giving reflects faith in God's provision (Mark 12:41-44) and is an act of worship (Phil. 4:18). Giving should be sacrificial and generous (2 Cor. 8:1-5) and motivated by love, thankfulness, and cheerfulness (2 Cor. 9:7). Giving reaps bountiful blessing (Luke 6:38). The godly man experiences the words of the Lord Jesus that "it is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:35).

Evangelizing and serving others. Christ expects us to evangelize and serve others (Matt. 28:19-20; Heb. 9:14). We are to be motivated in this discipline by obedience (Deut. 13:4), gratitude (1 Sam. 12:24), gladness (Ps. 100:2), humility (John 13:15-16), and love (Gal. 5:13). Serving is often hard work, but we are called to use every spiritual gift God has granted us (see Rom. 12:4-8; 1 Cor. 12:6-11; Eph. 4:7-13).²⁷ As pastors, one of our greatest rewards is serving people. To see people drawn closer to Christ through the Spirit's blessing upon God's Word and the use of our gifts is a profoundly humbling experience. It also draws us closer to God.

Finally, *the ministry of the Word* is itself a spiritual discipline that promotes godliness. Often the best times of communion with God occur when one is preaching or writing on a spiritual subject. One of the ministry's profoundest joys are those rare occasions when we sense from the beginning to the end of our sermon that we are God's mouthpiece. During such times God rushes before us, and we have all we can do to keep up with Him. Inevitably we realize that we are preaching to ourselves as well as to the people. Afterwards we yearn to be alone with God to savor the sacredness of renewed communion with Him.

For some ministers, writing is an obligation rather than a pleasure. Some find writing difficult but rewarding and pregnant with blessing. When one is granted the Spirit's freedom in writing, the heart is drawn inexpressibly close to God and His Word. Sacred truth then enlarges the soul, and the fingers cannot fly over the keys fast enough.

Writing is also a blessing because it is so lasting; what is written now may be blessed by the Spirit to someone next week or fifty or 100 years from now. Even a short article may be used to save

or profit a soul. As M'Cheyne said, "The smallest tract may be the stone in David's sling. In the hands of Christ it may bring down a giant's soul." Writing promotes scriptural truth and wages war on the forces of evil. "We must throw the printer's inkpot at the devil," Luther said.

Studying, learning, and teaching on various levels can also promote godliness. As ministers, we profit most when we work on three levels. It is good for our spiritual life when we teach something that compels us to move beyond our present level of knowledge, something that stretches us both intellectually and spiritually. That is often true of seminary teaching or lecturing at ministers' conferences. But it is also good to teach gospel truths at an elementary level, such as catechizing or evangelizing neighborhood children. Such simplicity can enhance appreciation for the Gospel. Then, too, teaching near or slightly below our level, as in preaching, reinforces truth that is most edifying for our souls.

CONCLUSION

Ministers must live godly lives. Reading, singing, memorizing, and meditating upon Scripture; engaging in secret prayer; reading orthodox literature; listening to the preached Word; using the sacraments; pursuing spiritual fellowship; journaling; sanctifying the Lord's Day; exercising stewardship; serving others for Christ's sake; preaching, teaching, and writing—these are the spiritual disciplines that, if diligently pursued in dependence upon God's gracious Spirit, will greatly sanctify our hearts toward God. That in turn will work two great benefits:

- 1) *It will promote godly living in every area of our life.* The call to holiness and godly living is a comprehensive call. By cultivating the spiritual disciplines in private with God, we will cultivate godly living in our homes as fathers and family worship leaders; in our preaching and teaching as well as relating to ministerial peers, office-bearers, staff, and church members; in the pleasures of social friendship; and in relationships with our unevangelized neighbors and the world's hungry and unemployed. As Horatius Bonar wrote: "Holiness . . .

extends to every part of our life, influences everything we are, or do, or think, or speak, or plan, small or great, outward or inward, negative or positive, our loving, our hating, our sorrowing, our rejoicing, our recreations, our business, our friendships, our relationships, our silence, our speech, our reading, our writing, our going out and our coming in—our whole man in every movement of spirit, soul, and body.”²⁸

Godly living is a daily task. It is the core of religious faith and practice. Our entire lives, Calvin said, “must be an exercise in piety.”²⁹ In short, the call to godly living is a lifetime commitment of faith to live “through Christ before God” (2 Cor. 3:4), to be set apart to the saviorhood and lordship of Jesus Christ.

Holiness begins in our minds with a present-tense, total commitment to God and works outward in our actions through all of life (Phil. 2:12-13).³⁰ As Thomas Boston said, “Holiness is a constellation of graces.” Through the Spirit’s blessing upon the spiritual disciplines and as we experience gratitude to God, we are called to cultivate the fruits of holiness, such as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).³¹

2) *A life of godliness will promote and sustain an effective ministry.* The people we serve will have a model to emulate and, by God’s grace, will do so.

The level of godliness in our personal lives does more to influence people than all of our busyness. M’Cheyne scarcely exaggerated when he said, “My people’s greatest need is for my own holiness.” Our lives are our visible rhetoric.

When hearing or reading sermons from ministers used greatly by God, such as Whitefield, Boston, M’Cheyne, and Spurgeon, some ask, “Why were they so blessed?” The sermons of these writers are excellent, but their content is not unlike that of many others who were not so signally used. Is this difference only because of God’s sovereignty? The answer is that these men lived exemplary lives of piety. Spurgeon even dared to say that he would be willing to write his entire life in an open sky for all to read.

Richard Cecil, a close friend of John Newton, once wrote: “Example is more forceful than precept. People look at me six days

a week to see what I mean on the seventh day.” William Burkitt put it more quaintly: “The minister’s life is the people’s looking-glass by which they usually dress themselves.”

Many evangelicals have forgotten the central truth that piety is the pastor’s greatest weapon for reformation. As M’Cheyne said, “A minister’s life is the life of his ministry. . . . In great measure, according to the purity and perfections of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents that God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.”

Let us remember that a ministerial calling will not save an unholy man. Let us remember that Satan strives after us more than after others, knowing that there are many who will see every act of unkindness or ungodliness that we do. Let us be moved by the glory of God, the honor of our calling as His heralds and ambassadors, love for our people, and the brevity of life to seek the Spirit’s grace to live godly in the midst of God’s church and in this present evil world. As 1 Thessalonians 5:22-23 says, “Avoid every kind of evil. May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Finally, let us remember that as we fight the good fight of faith and wrestle for greater sanctification of heart, we have Jesus Christ, the best of generals, to help us. We have the Holy Spirit, the best of advocates, to console us. We have the best of assurances to comfort us—the promises of the Father. And we have the best guarantee for eternal results: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28).

However hard the task is to strive for godliness, let us not forget that godliness is ultimately God’s work, blessing the exercise of spiritual disciplines as He has promised to do. The *Shorter Catechism* is right: “Sanctification is God’s work of grace in us.” God preserves his servants in holiness, saving us *from*, not *in*, our sins. He promises eternal salvation by the only path that will get us to heaven—the King’s highway of holiness.³² What a blessing that the outcome of the task of godliness doesn’t depend on us! It rests with the King of kings who

sanctified himself so that He might sanctify His people (Heb. 2:9-11). And He that sanctifies and they that are sanctified are one. This provides unspeakable peace and freedom to fulfill in some measure the chief goal of our lives: “To glorify God and enjoy Him forever.”

NOTES

- 1 *John Kershaw: The Autobiography of an Eminent Lancashire Preacher* (Sheffield, England: Gospel Tidings Publications, reprint 1968), p. 112ff.
- 2 Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1986), p. 154.
- 3 *The Preacher and His Models* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1891), lecture 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, pp. 53-54.
- 5 Daniel Webber, “Sanctifying the Inner Life,” in *Aspects of Sanctification*, 1981 Westminster Conference Papers (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 44-45.
- 6 *The Works of John Flavel*, Vol. 5 (London: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1968), p. 424.
- 7 *The Works of John Owen*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1976), pp. 385-386.
- 8 *Works of John Flavel*, Vol. 5, p. 423.
- 9 *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, ed. H[enry] H[olland] (London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599), p. 390.
- 10 *Ibid.*, pp. 392-393.
- 11 *The Application of Redemption by the Effectual Work of the Word and Spirit of Christ, for the Bringing Home of Lost Sinners to God*, Vol. 2 (London: Peter Cole, 1659), p. 210.
- 12 For a list of profitable subjects for meditation, see *The Works of Stephen Charnock*, Vol. 3 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), p. 307.
- 13 Cf. Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning, “The Transforming Power of Scripture,” in Don Kistler, ed., *Sola Scriptura!: The Protestant Position on the Bible* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995), pp. 258-260.
- 14 Thomas Watson, “How We May Read the Scriptures with Most Spiritual Profit,” in *Heaven Taken by Storm*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Pittsburgh: Soli Deo Gloria, 1992), pp. 113-129.
- 15 See Nathanael Ranew, *Solitude Improved by Divine Meditation, or A Treatise Proving the Duty, and Demonstrating the Necessity, Excellency, Usefulness, Natures, Kinds, and Requisites of Divine Meditation* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, reprint 1995).
- 16 Charles Spurgeon, “How a Puritan Lived,” *Banner of Truth* (U.K.), No. 92, May 1971, p. 24.
- 17 *The Christian Ministry* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1967), p. 148.

- 18 Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 147-148.
- 19 John Bunyan, *Prayer* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, reprint 1999), p. 23ff.
- 20 Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1881), p. 41.
- 21 “Visible Saints: The Puritans as a Godly People,” in *Aspects of Sanctification*, 1981 Westminster Conference Papers (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 1-2.
- 22 Watson, *Heaven Taken by Storm*, pp. 16-18, and *A Body of Divinity* (London: Banner of Truth Trust), pp. 377-379. Cf. Joel R. Beeke and Ray B. Lanning, “Reading and Hearing the Word in a Puritan Way,” *Reformation & Revival* 5:2 (1996), pp. 67-76.
- 23 Read frequently *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Questions 161-175, for how to use the sacraments properly.
- 24 Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991), pp. 407-408.
- 25 Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), pp. 196-210.
- 26 J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), p. 239; Errol Hulse, “Sanctifying the Lord’s Day: Reformed and Puritan Attitudes,” in *Aspects of Sanctification*, 1981 Westminster Conference Papers (Hertfordshire, England: Evangelical Press, 1982), pp. 78-102.
- 27 Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines*, p. 93ff.
- 28 Horatius Bonar, *God’s Way of Holiness* (Pensacola, FL: Mount Zion Publications, reprint 1994), p. 16.
- 29 Quoted in Donald G. Bloesch, *Essentials of Evangelical Theology*, Vol. 2 (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), p. 31.
- 30 Joel R. Beeke, *Holiness: God’s Call to Sanctification* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), p. 21.
- 31 Joel R. Beeke, “Cultivating Holiness,” *Reformation & Revival* 4:2 (1995), pp. 83-84.
- 32 *Works of Owen*, Vol. 11, p. 254ff.; Joel R. Beeke, *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), pp. 170-171.