



UNDERSTANDING
our CALLING *and* WORK

ON BEING A
PASTOR

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Foreword by AL MOHLER





LIFE AND CHARACTER

You may be tempted to bypass this chapter, because you know what it is likely to say. You may excuse this reaction by suggesting that your concern is to get down quickly to the practicalities of the ministry.

But there can be—sadly—a difference between knowledge and action. We need reminding of the most important things even though we know them already (cf. 2 Peter 1:12–15). What is more, nothing is more practical and down-to-earth than the people we are. It is the subtle enemy of our souls who tries to make us think that God’s requirements concerning our life and character are either unimportant or altogether too familiar. Robert Murray M’Cheyne—the godly Dundee minister who died when only twenty-nine—puts our subject into proper perspective in two of his most telling statements about a minister’s personal life: First, “My people’s greatest need is my personal holiness”; and second, “How awful a weapon in the hand of God is a holy minister.” It was appropriate for Hensley Henson, a Bishop of Durham, to say in an ordination charge, “We are pledged to a consecrated life not merely to the pursuit of a profession.” Paul rightly appeals to Timothy, the young shepherd and teacher, as a “man of God” (1 Timothy 6:11).

THE PRIORITY OF EXAMPLE

Whatever else a shepherd and teacher provides for God's people, he is to give them an example to follow. God's people require examples if they are to be effectively shepherded and taught. Robert Trail (1642–1716) asked a pertinent question: "Doth not always the spirit of the ministers propagate itself amongst the people? A lively ministry, and lively Christians."¹ John Thornton, a wealthy Christian merchant and benefactor of good causes in England in the early nineteenth century, wrote to Charles Simeon at the beginning of his ministry: "Watch continually over your own spirit, and do all in love; we must grow downwards in humility to soar heavenward. I should recommend your having a watchful eye over yourself, for generally speaking as is the minister so are the people."² Following proper examples is part of God's provision to help His people obey the gospel's message (2 Thessalonians 3:6–7).

What is more, the example we are to provide is to be maintained all our life. Paul expressed his concern to the Corinthians that he should never himself be disqualified from the prize after having preached to others that they should strive after it (1 Corinthians 9:26–27).

The New Testament places as great a stress upon character as a qualification for spiritual leadership as upon gifting—in fact, probably more upon character. In the qualifications Paul lists for "overseers" and "deacons" in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 and Titus 1:6–9, the whole emphasis is upon personal qualities, apart from the requirement that the overseer must be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2) and to "encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it" (Titus 1:9). The fruit of the Spirit is as important as the gifts of the Spirit in the life of a shepherd and teacher, as for any Christian. No rivalry exists between the two: Both are important and necessary. But the gifts of the Spirit cannot be exercised in a God-glorifying manner—which is their whole purpose (1 Peter 4:11)—if the character of the user of the gift is not also God-glorifying (cf. 1 Peter

4:7–9). The preacher’s gift proves its value to the body of Christ as his character demonstrates the truth of what he declares.

THE KEY EXAMPLE

The key example is our Lord Jesus Christ. A foremost purpose of the apostles’ three years of training was that they might receive His unique teaching and observe His example. They both heard and saw how things should be done. Our Lord Jesus drew attention to this purpose and on no occasion more powerfully than after He had taken His disciples by surprise in the Upper Room by washing their feet, when it would seem they had declined to wash one another’s feet as they had come into the room. Pointedly He asked them, “Do you understand what I have done for you?” Then He made sure that they did. “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them” (John 13:12–17).

Our Lord Jesus’ example is a constant reference point in the New Testament. He is the outstanding example of humility and of not looking to our own interests but to the interests of others (Philippians 2:1–11). He is the example of living not to please ourselves but to please our neighbor for his good, to build him up (Romans 15:2–3). He is the example of how we should accept one another (Romans 15:7). He is the example of generosity in costly self-giving (2 Corinthians 8:9). He is the example of how we should behave when we suffer for doing good (1 Peter 2:21). He is the example of the life of love we are to live (Ephesians 5:2). These are some of the many references to His example.

A PROPER RESPONSE TO CHRIST'S EXAMPLE

All Christians are called to follow Christ's example—that is a basic truth of discipleship. Shepherds and teachers in particular are called to follow that example so that others following them will find themselves following Christ better. Having urged the Philippians to follow after whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy, Paul exhorts them, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you" (4:9). At first sight Paul's words may seem rather presumptuous or even proud. But they are not. He recognized that one of his primary tasks was to follow Christ so closely and uncompromisingly that he provided a clear example for his fellow believers to follow.

The duty of all Christians is to be an example to one another—by that means we spur one another on to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24). But Christian leaders have an unequalled responsibility in this respect. In most spheres of life, people are expected to put into practice what they say to others—but none more than those who profess to follow the Lord of glory. Christian leaders are not perfect, and they are not called upon to pretend that they are. But that does not preclude their providing the example God's people need since Christ's power and grace are available to this end.

When any Christian falls into sin, he hurts others. When a Christian leader falls into sin, he hurts many others. A big tree cannot fall without lots of smaller trees falling with it. This sobering consideration explains why people should never be allowed to rush into leadership responsibilities or be pushed too quickly into them. For this reason, an elder should not be a recent convert "or he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" (1 Timothy 3:6). Similarly, we should not be hasty in laying hands upon a man and giving him leadership responsibilities before the right time (1 Timothy 5:22).

The priority of example is reflected elsewhere in the New Tes-

tament. James warns against becoming a teacher without due thought “because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (3:1)—that is to say, according to how far we have been examples of what we ourselves have taught. Peter teaches that elders’ principal task is to be “examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). Only then may they anticipate receiving “the crown of glory that will never fade away” (verse 4).

THE PRACTICALITIES OF EXAMPLE SETTING

In what spheres is the spiritual leader—the shepherd and teacher—to be an example? In every sphere! Although different ways of expressing the practicalities of example setting are found in the New Testament, the teaching is identical and consistent. The obvious place to go is Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus, because they are addressed to men whose function it was to shepherd and teach. Paul gives directions concerning their ministry and guidance as to what they were to look for in those prepared by God for Christian leadership.

A foundational statement is 1 Timothy 4:12, where Paul urges Timothy, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.” The best way to interpret these five requirements is by means of the qualifications Paul laid down for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 and Titus 1:5–9.

Speech

To function as shepherds and teachers we use our tongues a great deal—in private exhortation, public teaching, and preaching. It often falls to us to chair the discussions of God’s people, whether in leaders’ meetings or general church meetings, where the use of our tongues is inevitable. We all sin more readily with our tongues than with any other part of our bodies.

Our speech as shepherds and teachers must be restrained and

moderate (1 Timothy 3:2), especially when that of others is the opposite. We should never be quick-tempered or quarrelsome (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7). Rather our speech should be thoughtful. We should try to think carefully before we speak on issues that are delicate or capable of misunderstanding. Our speech should never be frivolous. That is not to deny the important place of humor and fun. But we must avoid the snare of making fun of things that really matter and that may be debased by foolish speech. What we say should be healing and not bruising. In any conversation or debate we should be like lubricating oil that keeps all the pieces of machinery running smoothly together.

This is a high standard, but nothing less is required of us, because more damage is done to the well-being of individuals and of the whole body of Christ by the tongue than any other member of our body. The positive side is that the tongue also has the potential for the greatest good if well used. To guard our speech we have to guard our hearts, for “out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks” (Matthew 12:34). If we would say the right things, we must first think them. When our tongues let us down, it is because we have not first watched over our hearts and thoughts.

Lifestyle

Our lifestyle itself is to be an example for others to follow—a lifestyle, first and foremost, of holiness and uprightness (Titus 1:8). We are to be like God our heavenly Father in holiness. The manner in which He is entirely separate from all that is unholy and unrighteous is to be reflected in our behavior. Shepherds and teachers are not to be professional Christians, doing the right things only when in the public eye. In fulfilling our tasks as shepherds and teachers, we ourselves are to be pursuing our Christian privilege and duty of knowing God better and becoming more like Him. As others observe our conduct, they ought to be able to see that we are upright, in that we do not deviate from what is right; and that we are blameless (Titus 1:7), in that no censure can be placed at our

door from our failure to fulfill our responsibilities to our neighbor. Busyness with the concerns of God's people must not be an excuse for neglecting our neighbor—this was the priest's and the Levite's mistake in the familiar story of the Good Samaritan.

As shepherds and teachers we should stand out as those who love what is good (Titus 1:8). Our approach to life is to be essentially positive. We know that we live in God's world, and that all His gifts are good; it is man's abuse of God's gifts that is the problem, not the gifts themselves. Whether it is a matter of sport, or what is on television, we are to love what is good and to set an example in this respect.

Our lifestyle should bear the evidences of our heavenly citizenship (Philippians 3:20), in that it indicates where our treasure is. While on the one hand we are to be marked by the willingness to work hard (2 Thessalonians 3:7–10), it is to be equally clear that the love of money is not our motivation (1 Timothy 3:3), and that we want nothing to do with dishonest gain (Titus 1:7). Although it may be a hard path to follow, we should accept whatever salary God's people choose to give, leaving it to others to act on our behalf.

As well as being examples in our daily work, our home life is to be exemplary. That constitutes a challenge to any parent! Every family has its battles to fight in learning to live together as it ought. Most parents undertake parenthood without having the opportunity to practice beforehand. The home life that provides an example is the home that is well managed (1 Timothy 3:4, 12), where children obey their parents with proper respect (1 Timothy 3:4), so that they are "not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient" (Titus 1:6). Paul asks the pertinent question of potential shepherds and teachers, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Timothy 3:5).

We daily rub shoulders with the world around us—through our neighbors, our daily work, and our recreations—and our behavior is to be such that we are worthy of respect (1 Timothy 3:8) and have a good reputation with outsiders so that we "will not fall into disgrace and into the devil's trap" (1 Timothy 3:7). Godliness in the home is

essential to our example. What we are there has more to do with our usefulness to God and to others than we may sometimes appreciate.

Love

Love is the priority virtue, and it must be conspicuously present in the shepherd and teacher's life. It is not an option but an absolute necessity. Besides being the first aspect of the Spirit's fruit, it is the basic virtue from which all the others flow. Rather than being lovers of money, we are to be lovers of God and of people, so that we willingly and spontaneously open our homes to them (1 Timothy 3:2). An essential part of any good reputation we have with outsiders, and respect they may give us, will be on account of the love we exhibit toward them and others (1 Timothy 3:7–8; cf. John 13:34–35; Galatians 6:10).

Love displays itself in gentleness and self-control. It wants to serve others and is never overbearing (1 Timothy 3:2–3; Titus 1:7). We are to set an example of loving all people, and especially those of God's family. We are to love the difficult and the unattractive. They are the ones whom we should be inviting into our homes, and into whose homes we should gladly go when asked. We are to love those who oppose us, not viewing them as enemies but as friends to be won over by love.

The expression of love is the most powerful answer to most relationship problems that arise in a church. If it is clear to all that the shepherd and teacher strives to love everyone equally, and endeavors to have no particular friends but rather to be everyone's friend, then people will willingly accept him as a mediator or a calming influence when human relationships are under stress. A church can never have too great an experience of God's love, and the shepherd and teacher must be at the forefront of its expression.

Faith

It is interesting that here as elsewhere love and faith go hand in hand (1 Timothy 2:15; 6:11; 2 Timothy 2:22). All Christians possess

faith, but the shepherd and teacher is to be such an example of it that faith grows in the community of believers to which he belongs.

We are to be examples, first, in our knowledge of the faith, holding “firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught” (Titus 1:9). As shepherds and teachers, we need to be constantly building upon the foundations of our faith, to develop our understanding of it and its application to contemporary life. We are to know it so as to be able to teach it (1 Timothy 3:2), for then we “can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it” (Titus 1:9). We must “keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience” (1 Timothy 3:9). We must not be surprised or put out if people question us to make sure we do possess a sure grasp of the foundation truths of the faith (1 Timothy 3:9–10).

We are to be examples, too, of the exercise of faith. Nothing honors our Lord and Savior more than our confidence in Him—and not least confidence by prayer in His name (Philippians 1:19). The principle that “without faith it is impossible to please God” (Hebrews 11:6) is fundamental to effective ministry. Addressing ministers, Charles Spurgeon exhorted them,

Our work especially requires faith. If we fail in faith, we had better not have undertaken it; and unless we obtain faith commensurate with the service, we shall soon grow weary of it. It is proven by all observation that success in the Lord’s service is very generally in proportion to faith. It certainly is not in proportion to ability, nor does it always run parallel with a display of zeal; but it is invariably according to the measure of faith, for this is a law of the Kingdom without exception, “According to your faith be it unto you.” It is essential, then, that we should have faith if we are to be useful, and that we should have great faith if we are to be greatly useful. . . . We, above all men, need the mountain-moving faith, by which, in the old time, men of God “subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire,

escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.”³

If we are to be obedient to our Lord Jesus Christ in our neighborhoods and spheres of influence, God’s people need to be led out into new ventures of faith, whether in evangelism, church planting, or other enterprises. Faith’s secret is large views of God our Savior—and He is so great that our views can never be large enough. As shepherds and teachers, we need to cultivate daily personal Bible study and helpful reading of Christian literature that fans and nurtures faith. In that way we serve God’s people by stirring and feeding their faith through example, sometimes almost unconsciously, since we cannot measure the degree to which our exhibition of faith encourages it in others.

Purity

Purity in its widest possible sense is required of those who shepherd and teach God’s people. Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is pure (1 John 3:3), and so those who belong to Him should also be pure. Such purity is an essential part of our relationship to God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Purity can be achieved only as it is our deliberate aim. Job knew that. He did not pretend not to be tempted, but he knew what to do with temptation when it came. “I made a covenant with my eyes not to look lustfully at a girl” (31:1). Henry Martyn, an early English missionary to India, prayed for the purity of a young woman whose beauty easily attracted him in unhelpful ways. He found that in praying for her holiness and purity, he could not at the same time harbor impure thoughts.

Purity demands that we deal honestly with ourselves, so that even the spiritual need of someone of the opposite sex does not become a pretext for helping that person on account of the pleasure we find at being in her company.

If we are married, our total and uncompromised allegiance is

to be to our wives (1 Timothy 3:2, 12; Titus 1:6). A man's wife must be the sole fountain from which he drinks for the fulfillment and satisfaction of physical and sexual desires—both in thought and physical act. We are to love our wives not only as we did in our youth, but with a growing love.

Our behavior with those of the opposite sex is to be above reproach and worthy of respect (1 Timothy 3:2, 11). Spiritual leadership constantly brings shepherds and teachers into contact with women in a variety of situations. There is natural pleasure and helpful stimulus through the interaction of the sexes in everyday life—this is part of God's gift to us. But in a fallen world—and with our fallen natures—there is plenty of scope for temptation and moral failure. We shall deal later with this subject in greater detail, for it is an area we dare not neglect. At this stage, we simply underline that as with so many other virtues, purity of life begins with purity of heart. As we think, so we are.

Speech, life, love, faith, and purity: These are the priorities. The reason for their importance is that as “overseers” or “elders” we are “entrusted with God's work” (Titus 1:7). The flock we care for is not ours, but Christ's (John 21:15–17). The blood that was shed for them was Christ's blood—God's own blood (Acts 20:28). We should set high standards for ourselves so that in imitating us Christ's flock may find themselves imitating Him (1 Thessalonians 1:6).

There are many other characteristics that become those who lead and teach Christ's flock—such as earnestness and patience—but they are all comprehended in the five priorities we have considered.

AREAS OF GROWTH

These spiritual priorities of life and character all constitute areas for growth. Love and faith are constantly referred to in the New Testament as virtues in which we are to abound. Our speech and lifestyle should increasingly honor God as the Spirit's fruit grows. Our purity should increase as we learn from our mistakes and face

up to the call to purity the gospel gives (1 Thessalonians 4:3).

God often achieves our spiritual growth in these areas through the difficulties He permits us to pass through in the course of our ministry. Paul's faith in God's power to deliver grew, for example, as he proved it in places like Philippi (Acts 16:25–26). His understanding of God's power to comfort developed as the sufferings of Christ flowed over into his life (2 Corinthians 1:5).

Paul would not have been the useful apostle, shepherd, and teacher he was had he not suffered so many disappointments and hardships. Experiences we would run away from are sometimes further periods of training from God to make us better servants of His Son. George Whitefield wrote in his diary while in Gibraltar in February 1738, "Conversed with one of the devout soldiers, who was under strong spiritual trials; and God was pleased to give him comfort. I find it necessary more and more every day, that ministers should be tempted in all things, that they may be able experimentally to succour those that are tempted."

Someone has aptly said that character is what we are in the dark. Our secret and private life provides the clue to God's approval upon our more public life and service. If we had to sum up in one word what a shepherd and teacher's life should be like, it would be the word *godly*—even though it is much out of vogue. Its essence is doing what pleases God without any eye to the approval of others. Our secret life is the clue to our public usefulness. David was described by God as a man after His own heart who would do everything He wanted him to do (Acts 13:22). "Make me that kind of man": This must be the heartfelt desire and prayer of everyone genuinely called to be a shepherd and teacher. "Above all else," the writer of Proverbs urges, "guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life" (4:23).

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