

JOHN OWEN

SERMON 5

THE DUTY OF A PASTOR

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“And I will give you pastors according to my heart,
which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” (Jeremiah 3:15)

EDITED AND PUT INTO SIMPLER ENGLISH

BY

GEOFFREY STONIER

All the names of the officers of the church under the New Testament have a double meaning — a *general* and larger meaning, and a *special* meaning. As, for instance διᾱκονος (“deacon”) has a general meaning; it signifies any minister or servant, and it has a special meaning when it refers to that *peculiar office* which was instituted in the church to take care of the poor. And so the name of a *pastor* has a more general and a more special meaning. In general, it means any teacher or officer in the church, ordinary or extraordinary. Specially, it signifies that special officer in the church which, as such, is distinguished from a teacher. “He gave some to be pastors and teachers,” (~~Eph. 4:11~~); for there is a distinction between pastor and teacher, *not as to degree, but as to order*. I do not use the distinction in the sense of those who make bishops and presbyters differ in degree, but not in order; but it is a distinction as to that beautiful order which Christ has instituted in his church. Christ has instituted a beautiful order in his church, if it were discovered and improved. And I have wished sometimes I could live to see it; but I do not think that I shall. Yet this I would recommend to my brethren as the way to discover the order of Christ in the church — there is no way to discover it but by the harmony that there is between gifts, office, and edification. The original of all church order and rule is in gifts; the exercise of those gifts is by office; the end of all those gifts and offices is, edification.

Now, I believe I can demonstrate that all ordinary spiritual gifts that Christ has given to his church are reducible to four heads: and all of them are for the exercise of these gifts; for they must all be exercised distinctly. Here you will find out the beautiful order of Christ in the church, and not else. I say, all gifts can be reduced to four heads. The one head of these gifts is to be exercised by the *pastor*, one head by the *teacher*, one by the *ruler*, and one by the *deacon*. And all these gifts, exercised by all these officers, answer everything needed for the edification of the church. For

it is a vain opinion that the rule and conduct of Christ's church is either in one or in all. There is nothing in what I have declared but what you cannot find in the purpose of the apostle in [Rom. 12:6-8](#). Let us study that harmony more, and we shall find more of the beauty and glory of it.

I shall speak of those pastors mentioned here in the text; and I shall speak of them in general, as all teaching officers in the church — which is the general meaning of the word. And all that I shall speak of them is to remind myself, and my brethren, and you, of something of the duty of such a pastor — what is incumbent upon him, and what is expected from him. Now, I am not going to go through all the necessary duties of a pastor or teacher; I will only give you some instances.

First, the duty of such an officer of the church. The purpose of a pastor, teacher, elder of the church, is here mentioned in the text — “to feed the church with knowledge and understanding.” This feeding is by the preaching of the gospel. He is no pastor who does not feed his flock. It belongs essentially to the office; and that not now and then (according to the figure and image that is set up of the ministry in the world — a dead idol) as occasion serves. But the apostle says in [Acts 6:4](#) — “We will give ourselves continually to the word.” It is to “labour in the word and doctrine” ([1-Tim. 5:17](#)); to make all things subservient to this work of preaching and instructing the church; and to do it in that frame the apostle mentions in [Col. 1:28](#). He speaks of his preaching, and the purpose of his preaching — “Whom we preach, warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom; that we may present every man perfect in Christ Jesus.” How does he do it? [Verse 29](#) — “Whereunto I also labour, striving according to his working, which worketh in me mightily.” There is not one word in our translation that answers the emphasis of the original words — “Whereunto I labour” — Εἰς καὶ κοπιῶ (Eis ho kai kopiō). Κοπιῶ is to labour with diligence and intention, with weariness and industry. “I labour ‘*usque ad fatigationem*’ — to the spending of myself. Striving (ἀγωνιζόμενος = agōnizomenos) — striving as a man that runs in a race, or striving as a man that wrestles for victory” — as men did in their public contests. And how? Κατὰ τὴν ἐνέργειαν αὐτοῦ (Kata tēn energeian autou) — “According to the effectual in-working, or inward operation, of him (ἐνεργυμένην ἐν ἐμοί = energumenēn en emoi) — who “effectually works in me.” We cannot reach the emphasis by any words in our language. And how is all this? ἐν δυνάμει (En dunamei) — “With mighty power.” Here is the frame of the apostle's spirit (it should give dread to us in considering it) — “I labour diligently, I strive as in a race, I wrestle for victory — by the mighty in-working power of Christ working in me; and that with great and exceeding power.”

What I shall do is to show you, in some instances, what is required for this work of teaching or of feeding the congregation with knowledge and understanding, in this duty of preaching the word:—

1. There is *spiritual wisdom* in understanding the mysteries of the gospel, that we may be able to declare the whole counsel of God, and the riches and treasures of the grace of Christ, to the souls of men. See [Acts 20:27](#); [1-Cor. 2:1-4](#); [Eph. 3:7-9](#). Many in the church of God were, in those days of light, growing and thriving; they had a great insight into spiritual things, and into the mysteries of the gospel. The apostle prays that they might all have it ([Eph. 1:17-18](#)): “That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give

unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.”

Really, it is no easy thing for ministers to instruct in such kind of duties. If there is not some degree of eminence in themselves, how can we lead on such persons as these to perfection? We must labour to have a thorough knowledge of these mysteries, or we shall be useless to a great part of the church. There is spiritual wisdom and understanding in the mysteries, of the gospel required for this.

2. *Authority* is required. What is authority in a preaching ministry? It is a consequence of unction, and not of office. The scribes had an outward call to teach in the church; but they had no unction, no anointing, that could provide evidence that they had the Holy Spirit in his gifts and graces. Christ had no outward call; but he had an unction — he had a full unction of the Holy Spirit in his gifts and graces for the preaching of the gospel. In this matter, there was a controversy about his authority. The scribes say to him, “By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?” ([Mk. 11:28](#)) The Holy Spirit determines the matter — “He preached as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” ([Mat. 7:29](#)) They had the authority of office, but not of unction; Christ only had the unction. And preaching in the demonstration of the Spirit, which men argue so much about, is nothing less than the evidence in preaching of unction, in the communication of gifts and graces to them, for the discharge of their office: for it is a vain thing for men to assume and pretend to have authority. So much evidence as they have of unction from God in gifts and grace, so much authority they have, and no more, in preaching: and let everyone, then, keep within his bounds.

3. Another thing required here is an *experience* of the power of the things we preach to others. I think, truly, *that no one preaches a sermon well to others who does not first preach it to his own heart*. He who does not feed on, and digest, and thrive by, what he prepares for his people, may give them poison, as far as he knows; for, unless he finds the power of it in his own heart, he cannot have any ground of confidence that it will have power in the hearts of others. *It is an easier thing to bring our heads to preach than our hearts to preach*. To bring our heads to preach is but to fill our minds and memories with some notions of truth, of our own or other men, and speak them out to give satisfaction to ourselves and others: this is very easy. But to bring our hearts to preach is to be transformed into the power of these truths; or to find the power of them, both before, in fashioning our minds and hearts, and in delivering them, that we may benefit; and to act with zeal for God and compassion for the souls of men. A man may preach every day in the week, and not have his heart engaged once. This has lost us powerful preaching in the world, and set up in its place quaint orations; for such men never seek after experience in their own hearts. And so it is come to pass, that some men’s preaching, and some men’s not preaching, have lost us the power of what we call the ministry; that though there be twenty or thirty thousand in orders, yet the nation perishes for want of knowledge, and is overwhelmed in all manner of sins, and not delivered from them to this day.

4. *Skill* to divide the word aright. This skill to divide the word aright is *practical wisdom* in considering the word of God — to take out not only that which is

substantial food for the souls of men, but what is fit food for them to whom we preach. And that —

5. Requires *the knowledge* and consideration of the state of our flocks. He who does not have the state of his flock continually in his eye, and in his mind, and in his work of preaching, fights uncertainly, like a man beating the air. If he does not consider what is the state of his flock, with reference to temptations, in reference to their light or to their darkness, to their growth or to their decay, to their flourishing or to their withering, to the measure of their knowledge and attainments — he who does not duly consider these things, never preaches rightly to them.

6. There is required, too, that we act by *zeal* for the glory of God, and compassion for the souls of men.

Having spoken these few plain words, I may ask, “Who is sufficient for these things?” There is required that spiritual wisdom which is necessary for understanding the mysteries of the gospel, and is thus able to instruct and lead on to perfection the most mature in our congregations — that authority which proceeds from unction, and is an evidence of an anointing with the graces and gifts of the Spirit, which alone gives authority in preaching — that experience which conforms our whole souls into every sermon we preach, so as to feel the truth in the power of it — that skill by which we are able to divide the word aright, etc. Hence, we see that we have great need to pray for ourselves, and that you should pray for us. Pray for your ministers. This, then, is the first duty required of gospel ministers.

Secondly, another duty required is *continual prayer* for the churches over which Christ has made us overseers. I do not have the time to confirm these things by particular testimonies: you know how often the apostle expresses it of himself and enjoins it on others, to continually pray for the flock.

I will name four reasons why we ought to do this, and **four** things we ought to pray for.

1. My first reason is because I believe that no man can have *any evidence* in his own soul that he is conscientiously performing any ministerial duty towards his flock who does not *continually pray for them*. Let him preach as much as he will, visit as much as he will, speak as much as he will, unless God keeps up in him *a spirit of prayer* in his closet and family for them, he can have no evidence that he performs any other ministerial duty in the right way, or that what he does is accepted by God. I speak to those who are wise, and understand these things.

2. This is the way whereby we may *bless* our congregations. Authoritative blessing, as far as I know, is taken from us. There is only that which is euctica (from ευχομαι (euchomai = to desire earnestly, or to pray), and is declaratively left up to us. Pronouncing the blessing is only euctical and declarative, and not authoritative. Now, there is no way by which we can bless our flock by institution, but by *a continual praying* for a blessing upon them.

3. If men are but as they used to be, I do not believe any minister, any pastor in the world, can keep up a due love for his church unless he prays for them. He will meet

with so many provocations, imprudent actions, and miscarriages that nothing can keep up his heart with inflamed love towards them except by praying for them continually. He will conquer all prejudices if he continues to do so. And,

4. My last reason is this: in our prayers for our people, *God will teach us what we shall preach* to them. We cannot pray for them unless we first think on what it that we pray for, and that is a consideration of their condition. In this, God teaches the ministers of the gospel. If it be so with them, this is what should teach them. The more we pray for our people, the better shall we be instructed what to preach to them. The apostles, above all, “gave themselves to prayer and the word.” ([Acts 6:4](#)) Prayer took the first place. It is not just personal prayer, but ministerial prayer for the church and the progress of the gospel.

What shall we pray for?

1. For *the success of the word* that we preach to them. This falls in with the light of nature. We are to pray for the success of the word in all its ends; and that is, for all the ends of living for God — for direction in duty, for instruction in the truth, for growth in grace, for all things by which we may come to the enjoyment of God. We should pray that all these ends may be accomplished in our congregations in the dispensation of the word, or else we sow seed at random, which will not succeed merely by our sowing. Let the husbandman break up the fallow ground, and harrow it, and cast in the seed, but unless showers come, he will have no crop. In the same way, after we have cast the seed of the gospel, though the hearts of men are prepared in some measure, unless there comes a shower of the Spirit upon them, there will be no profit. Therefore, let us pray that a blessing might be upon the word. The ministers of the word preach, and would be accepted with the people. Take this “*arcanum*” (secret) of it — pray over it, for it is the only way to have it accepted in the hearts of the people. Then follow it on with prayer.

2. We are to pray *for the presence of Christ* in all our assemblies; for, upon this, depends all the efficacy of the ordinances of the gospel. Christ has given us many promises about this, and we are to act in faith concerning it, and to pray in faith for it in our assemblies. This is a great ministerial duty: and, if we do not do it, we are ignorant of our duty, and are willing to labour in the fire where all must perish. We fight at risk, for all the efficacy of the ordinances of preaching and praying depend not on anything in ourselves — on our gifts, notions, parts, fervency — but only upon the presence of Christ. Make this your business, to pray mightily for it in the congregation, to make all these effective.

3. Our prayers should be with respect to *the state and condition* of the church. It is supposed that he that is a minister is satisfied he has some measure of understanding and knowledge in the mysteries of the gospel; that he is able to lead the best of the congregation to salvation; that he knows their measure, their weakness, and their temptations; that he knows the times and seasons in which they are exercised and exposed, whether times of adversity or prosperity; and, as far as possible, knows how it is with their persons. We ought to suit our prayers according to all we know about them, and be satisfied that Christ himself will come in to recover those who are fallen, and establish those who stand, healing those who are backsliding, and strengthening those who are tempted, and encouraging those who

are running and pressing forward to perfection, and relieving those who are sad and in the dark. We have all sorts in our churches, and our prayers should be for a communication of supplies to them continually, in all these cases.

Thirdly, it is incumbent on men who are pastors and teachers of churches to *preserve the truth* and doctrine of the gospel that is committed to the church — to keep it entirely, and defend it against all opposition. See the weighty words with which the apostle gives this in his charge to Timothy, “O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust”, and [1-Tim. 6:20](#) and [2-Tim. 1:14](#) — “That good thing” (τὸ καλὸν παρακαταθήκην (Tēn kalēn parakatathēkēn) — that good *depositum*, that good treasure) “that is committed to thee, keep by the Holy Spirit, which dwelleth in us.” This charge is given to all of us who are ministers, “*Keep the truth*, that good, that blessed thing.” “It is,” says the apostle, “the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust.” ([1-Tim. 1:11](#)) And it is committed to *all* our trust; and we are to keep it against all opposition. The church is the ground and pillar of truth, to hold up and declare the truth in and by its ministers. But is that all? No; the church “is like the tower of David builded for an armoury, whereon there hang a thousand bucklers, all shields of mighty men.” (Song 4:4) The ministers of the gospel are shields and bucklers to defend the truth against all adversaries and opposers. The church has had thousands of bucklers and shields of mighty men, or else the truth would have been lost. They are not only to *declare* it in the preaching of the gospel, but to *defend* and preserve it against all opposition — to hold up the shield and buckler of faith against all opposers.

But what is *required for this*?

1. There is required a *clear apprehension* in ourselves of those doctrines and truths which we are to defend. Truth may be lost by weakness as well as by wickedness. If we do not have a full apprehension of the truth, and that upon its own proper grounds and principles, we will never be able to defend it. This is to be attained by all ways and means — by the use, especially of diligent prayer and study, so that we may be able to stop the mouths of gainsayers.

2. There is required a *love of the truth*. We shall never contend earnestly for the truth, we shall never “buy it and not sell it,” whatever we know of it, unless our love and value of it arise from a sense and experience of it in our own souls. I fear there is much loss of truth, not for lack of light, knowledge, and ability, but *for lack of love*.

I have the advantage of most here present in this, that I know the contest we had for the truths of the gospel before our troubles began, and was an early person engaged in them; and I knew those godly ministers who contended for them as for their lives and souls, and that all the opposition that was made against them was never able to discourage them. What were these doctrines? — the doctrines of eternal predestination, effectual conversion to God, and the hardening of wicked reprobates by the providence of God. These truths are not lost for lack of skill, but for lack of love. We scarcely hear one word of them today; we are almost ashamed to mention them in the church; and whoever does will be sure to expose himself to public mockery and scorn. But we must not be ashamed of the truth. Formerly, we could not meet with a godly minister, but the error of Arminianism was looked upon by him as the ruin and poison of the souls of men. Such a man trembled at it — wrote and

disputed against it. But now it is not so; the doctrine of the gospel is owned still, though little taken notice of by some among ourselves, the love of it being greatly decayed, the sense and the power of it almost lost. But we have got no ground by it; we are not more holy, more fruitful, than we were in the preaching of those doctrines, and attending diligently to them.

3. Let us take heed in ourselves of any inclination to *novel opinions*, especially in, or about, or against such points of faith as those in which those who are have gone before us and have fallen asleep have found life, comfort, and power. Who would have thought that we should have come to an indifference to the doctrine of justification, and quarrel and dispute about the interest of works in justification; about general redemption, which takes away the efficacy of the redeeming work of Christ, and about the perseverance of the saints, when these were the soul and life of those who have gone before us, who found the power and comfort of them? We shall not maintain these truths unless we find the same comfort in them as they did. I have lived to see great alterations in the godly ministers of the nation, both as to zeal for, and value of, those important truths that were as the life of the Reformation; and then the doctrine of free-will condemned in a prayer, and bound up in the end of your Bibles. But now it is grown up to be an indifferent thing; and the horrible corruptions we have allowed to be introduced into the doctrine of justification have weakened all the vitals of religion. Let us, for the remainder of our days, “buy the truth, and sell it not” (Prov. 23:23), and let us be zealous and watchful over anything that should arise in our congregations.

Bring one man into the congregation who has a by-opinion, and he will make more stir about it than all the rest of the congregation in building up one another in their most holy faith. Take care lest there arise men arising from among ourselves speaking perverse things, which is to make way for grievous wolves to break in and tear and rend the flock.

4. There is *skill and ability* required in this, to discover and be able to oppose and confound the cunning arguments of the adversaries. Great prayer, watchfulness, and diligence are required, that we may be able to attend to these things. And those who are less skilled may do well to take advice from those who are more exercised in them, to give them help and assistance.

Lastly, I mention one more duty that is required of pastors and teachers in the church; and that is, that *we labour diligently for the conversion of souls*. This work is committed to us. I should not mention this, but there is a need to rectify a mistake in some. The end of all particular churches is the calling and edification of the church catholic. Christ has not appointed his ministers to look to themselves only, but they are to be the means of calling and gathering the elect in all ages: and this they principally must do by their ministry. I confess there are other outward ways and means by which men have been, and may be, converted. I find by long observation that common light, in conjunction with afflictions, often begins the conversion of many, without this or that special word: and persons may be converted to God by religious conference. There may be many *occasional* conversions wrought by the instrumentality of men who have real spiritual gifts for the dispensation of the word, and are occasionally called to it. But principally, this work is committed to the pastors of churches for the conversion of souls. Take this observation — *the first object of*

the word is *the world*. Our *work* is the same as the apostles'; the *method* is directly contrary. The apostles had a work committed to them, and this was their method — *the first work* committed to the apostles was the convincing and converting sinners to Christ among Jews and Gentiles — to preach the gospel to convert infidels. This they accounted their chief work. Paul made nothing of administering the ordinance of baptism, in comparison of it. "Christ sent me not," says he, "to baptize, but to preach the gospel." (~~1 Cor. 1:17~~) In comparison, I say, preaching was their chief work. And then, *their second work* was to teach those who were disciples to do and observe whatever Christ commanded them, and to bring them into church order. This was their method. Now the same work is committed to the pastors of churches, but in a contrary method. The first object of our ministry is the church — to build up and edify the church. But what then? Is the other part of the work taken away, that we should not preach to convert souls. God forbid. There are several ways in which those who are pastors of churches preach for the conversion of souls —

1. When other persons that are unconverted come where they are preaching to their own congregations (of which we have experience every day), and they are there converted to God by the pastoral discharge of their duty. "No," say some, "they preach to the church as *ministers* — to others only as *spiritually gifted*." But no one can make this distinction in his own conscience. Suppose there are five hundred in this place, and a hundred of this church, can you make the distinction that I am preaching in a *double* capacity — to some as a minister, and to others not as a minister? Neither rule, nor reason, nor natural light, expresses anything to that purpose. We preach *as ministers* to those to whom we preach, for the conversion of their souls

2. Ministers may preach for the conversion of souls when they preach elsewhere occasionally. They preach as ministers wherever they preach. I know *the indelible character* is a figment; but the pastor's office is not such a thing as men may leave at home when they go abroad. It is not in a minister's own power, unless lawfully dismissed or deposed, to hinder him from preaching as a minister. And it is the duty of particular churches (one end of their institution being the calling and gathering of the church catholic) to part with their officers for a season, when called upon to preach in other places for the conversion of souls to Christ. We had a glorious ministry in the last age — wonderful instruments for the conversion of souls. Did they convert them *as gifted men*, and not *as ministers*? God forbid. I say, it may be done by those who have received gifts, and not been called to office; but I know no ground for anyone to give up himself to the constant exercise of ministerial gifts and not say to the Lord in prayer, "Lord, here am I; send me." Is. 6:8)

Had I time and strength, I should tell you of the duty of pastors and teachers in administering the seals, and what is required for it; and their duty in directing and comforting the consciences of all sorts of believers; what prudence, purity, condescension, and patience are required in it as a great part of our ministerial duty.

I should show you, also, their duty in the rule of the church. Not that ever Christ intended to commit the rule of the church to them alone — to take them away from that great and important duty of preaching the gospel; but as time and occasion allow them, to attend to the rule of the church.

And lastly, in living an exemplary life, and in assembling with other churches of their order for the management of church fellowship.

“Who is sufficient for these things?” (2 Cor. 2:16) Pray, pray for us; and God strengthen us, and our brother who has been called this day to the work! It may not be un-useful to him and me to be reminded of these things, and to beg the assistance of our brethren.