

H. B. CHARLES, JR.

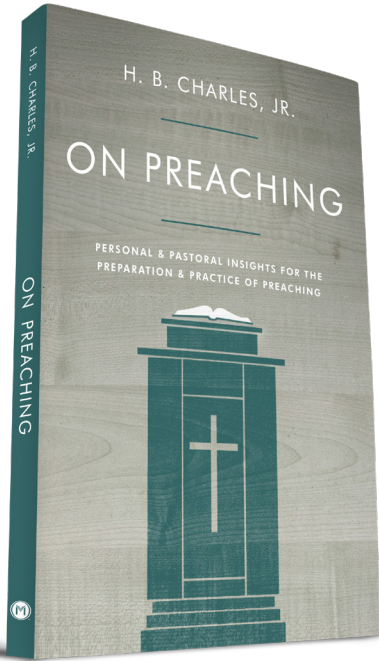
ON PREACHING

PERSONAL & PASTORAL INSIGHTS FOR THE
PREPARATION & PRACTICE OF PREACHING



CONTENTS

1. *On Preaching* Excerpt
2. *On Pastoring* Excerpt
3. *It Happens After Prayer* Excerpt



Preaching Magazine's 2015 Book of the Year, *On Preaching* is a primer on biblical preaching for pastors, seminarians, church planters, and Bible teachers. Full of energy and formatted into 30 short chapters, it gets straight to the point of how to preach well.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

APPLE BOOKS



AMAZON



WALMART



TARGET



LIFEWAY



GOOGLE PLAY



CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 

BARNES & NOBLE



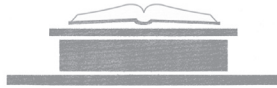


Part 1:

PREPARATION
FOR PREACHING



Chapter 1



PREACH THE WORD!

What is preaching?

The term Paul used in 2 Timothy 4:2, where he charges Timothy to preach the Word, was originally a political term, not a religious one. It referred to the function of a herald. If the king had a message to get out, he couldn't just call a press conference and have all the news media publish or broadcast his remarks. He would dispatch his herald to deliver his message to his people. When the herald arrived at a city, he would cry out his message in a grave, formal, and authoritative voice. When he spoke, the people did well to listen and take heed. To ignore the herald's message was to reject the king's authority. And the herald would be careful to proclaim the king's message with clarity and accuracy. To misrepresent the king's message was just as dangerous as rejecting it.

This is the picture that naturally came to Timothy's mind when Paul charged him to be God's herald who faithfully proclaims the Word of God. And the assignment has not changed for those of us who preach today. We must preach the Word.

It is God's will to save the lost and sanctify the church through faithful, biblical, Christ-centered preaching. Unfortunately, biblical preaching is not a high priority for many people looking for a

church. Secondary things like music styles, ministry programs, and congregational prominence are often deemed more important than biblical preaching. In some instances, church shoppers consider a congregation's available parking spaces before they ever consider that congregation's doctrinal positions. Consequently, many pastors and churches—seeking either survival on one hand or success on the other—have compromised the centrality of preaching.

But preaching is and has always been the distinguishing mark of the true church of Jesus Christ. Faithful preaching is the essential mark of the true church, because if a church faithfully preaches the Word and allows its life to be shaped by it, everything will eventually fall into its proper place. Conversely, a church's apparent success is only incidental if it does not have a biblical standard of measuring, sustaining, or renewing its ministry. Biblical preaching is the central, primary, and decisive function of those God calls to shepherd the church.

Paul's charge to Timothy is the Lord's charge to every preacher: Preach the Word! This divine command obligates us to preach; moreover, it specifies what we are to preach: the Word. The importance of preaching rests in its content, not in its function. Our preaching is not the reason the Word works. The Word is the reason our preaching works. This is the biblical priority of pastoral ministry. We are charged to carry out a holy function—preaching. And we are charged to herald a holy message—the Word.

But what does it mean to preach the Word?

PREACH THE CONTENT OF THE WORD

The herald was on assignment to deliver the message of the king. It was not his message. And he did not have editorial authority over it. He could not change the message to suit the crowd. Neither

can we. The pulpit is not the place for personal testimonies, political speeches, group therapy sessions, motivational talks, self-help advice, worldly philosophies, or scientific theories. The pulpit is the throne of the Word of God. Therefore, the sacred text must be the priority of our preaching.

One noted scholar often says that those who preach should always be pointing to the text. Literally. If you are gesturing with your right hand, you should keep your left hand's finger on the text. If you reverse hands for gesturing, you should also reverse hands for holding your spot in the text. This is a practical way to remember that our preaching should always point to the text. We must preach "the sacred writings" (2 Timothy 3:15). And we must preach "all Scripture" (2 Timothy 3:16). Did you get that? Preach the Bible. But don't just preach your pet topics, hobbyhorses, or favorite doctrines. Preach it all. Strive to end your ministry with the words of Paul: "Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:26-27).

PREACH THE MEANING OF THE WORD

We must preach the content of Scripture. But biblical preaching involves more than reading, quoting, or mentioning Scripture in your sermon. The content of our messages must line up with the meaning of the text. Paul wisely counsels, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15).

Scholars are not sure what particular nuance Paul intended when he speaks of "handling the word of truth." But the big idea is clear. The pastor-teacher who is approved by God and needs not be ashamed of his work must have an unwavering commitment to the

faithful exposition of the Word of truth. Ultimately, there are only two ways to preach—by exposition or by imposition. Either your preaching explains the God-intended meaning of the text or it sinfully imposes human speculation onto the text.

Think about it. When you go to the airport to catch a flight, you are clear about the destination, flight number, and time of departure. But there is another key piece of information you need before you travel. You may not think about it until you get to the airport. But when you arrive, the gate number becomes all-important. You don't just go to any gate and hop on a plane. You go to the specified gate, because going to the wrong gate, even if it's just the next one over, can lead you far from your intended destination. Likewise, a lack of precision in handling the Scriptures can lead people far away from God, rather than closer to Him.

PREACH THE FOCUS OF THE WORD

When Paul charged Timothy to preach the Word, he specifically had the Old Testament in mind. The writing of the New Testament canon was still in process, even as Paul wrote the words of 2 Timothy. The Old Testament was the collected body of Scripture from which the early church preached. Yet Timothy's preaching of the Old Testament was to be done as a minister of the new covenant (2 Corinthians 3:6). He was to read the Old Testament texts with New Testament eyes. His preaching was to focus on the divine person and redemptive work of Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ was the focus of Paul's preaching. "We preach Christ crucified," he declared (1 Corinthians 1:23). "For what we proclaim is not ourselves," he testified, "but Jesus Christ as Lord, with ourselves as your servants for Jesus' sake (2 Corinthians 4:5). Paul preached Christ. And when he exhorted his protégé

to preach the Word, he clearly intended that the message of Christ should be the focus of his proclamation of Scripture.

On one occasion, someone complained to Charles Spurgeon that all his sermons sounded alike. “And so they should,” he replied. “First I take a text, and then I make a beeline for the cross.” Likewise, our preaching should unapologetically focus on the virgin birth, impeccable life, substitutionary death, glorious resurrection, and imminent return of Jesus Christ. “Him we proclaim,” the apostle boldly declares, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). It is not Christian preaching if the person and work of Christ is not the centerpiece of the message. We are to be heralds of the Word and witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ.

What are you preaching?

Chapter 2



THEOLOGICAL TRAINING

As a boy preacher, my father let me preach one Youth Sunday at our church. After the service, a brother commended my sermon, concluding, “Junior, in a minute you are going to out-preach your old man.” When I later told my dad about the statement, I was shocked by his response. He completely affirmed it, even though the man did not have good intentions for saying it. He warned me that with the opportunities to learn and grow that I would have, I had better be a better preacher than him.

My father was right. When my father was a young preacher, to use the biblical languages he had to learn the biblical languages. There was no Bible software to help him easily get to the meaning of Greek and Hebrew words. If my dad wanted to go to school, he had to go to school. Correspondence and online options for ministerial training were not available to him.

Resources my father could never have imagined are now available all around us. But we must take advantage of them. There is absolutely no excuse for any preacher to not be prepared to faithfully carry out the call to preach. Here are several helpful hints to

consider as you prayerfully determine what training options and opportunities are best for you.

IF YOU CAN GO TO SEMINARY, DO IT

Not every preacher will have the opportunity to go off to seminary to prepare for ministry. But if you have the opportunity to go to seminary, by all means, do it. Of course, this is not a word from on high. And I understand that you must factor in your present family, work, and ministry responsibilities—not to mention the money. But if there seem to be green lights at these intersections, I would encourage you to prayerfully go forward and begin school.

There are some men who are very disciplined Bible students. And they are equipped for ministry through self-education. But most of us need the accountability and experience of actually being in a class, with all that requires. When you go into the pastorate, you become the resident theologian of your local church. You need to be a man of the Book to be a faithful pastor. And you need to learn how to exegete Scripture accurately to be a faithful preacher. So by all means, go if you can go. And do it before life, family, and ministry catches up to you.

SEMINARY DOES NOT MAKE PASTORS AND PREACHERS

My father used to say that seminary just shines shoes. Guys who shine shoes do not make the shoes. They just shine them. If you don't bring a pair of shoes, they don't have anything to work with. Likewise, seminary does not make preachers. It doesn't make pastors. School can teach a man the biblical languages, systematic theology, church history, and even principles of Christian ministry. But if the Lord has not called you into His service, these things will

not make you a pastor or a preacher.

Make sure you have a clear sense about the call of God on your life first. Get input from your pastor, congregation, family, and godly people you trust. If you are not clear about your call, wait. I would not advise you to go in order to figure out God's call. You may spend four years and end up even more confused! But if you have clarity about the Lord's call, go to school and prepare yourself the best you can for God (2 Timothy 2:15).

GO TO A BIBLE-BELIEVING SCHOOL

I know this may be hard for some of you to believe. Unfortunately, it's true. Some so-called Christian professors and schools do not believe the Bible. They spend more time trying to undermine its authority than teaching its message. So do your homework. And do not waste your time on any school that is not totally committed to the Bible. I don't care how famous or prestigious that school is. It is better to attend a small school where you will learn the Bible than to have a degree from some major institution that teaches liberal theology.

On that same note, I would not recommend that a pastor go to school to major in business, economics, computers, or other disciplines. Of course, this is between you and the Lord. But if the Lord has called you to be a herald of the Word or to shepherd the souls that He has purchased with His own blood, you should use the opportunity to focus on "the queen of the sciences"—theology!

BE A STUDENT—WHETHER OR NOT YOU ARE IN SCHOOL

Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the "Prince of Preachers," did not have formal training. In fact, he was not even formally ordained. He considered ordination to be the laying of empty hands on empty

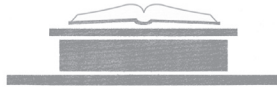
heads. Yet you would be hard pressed to find anyone who could match Spurgeon's mind for truth, preaching prowess, and pastoral vision.

True leaders are learners. Even if school is not for you now, keep studying. We really have no excuses these days for ignorance. As I mentioned earlier, for my father to learn the languages, systematic theology, and the other disciplines, he had to go to school. But we live in a day where there are so many resources available through various means. One of my favorite Bible teachers and authors admits that he is not a scholar in the languages, but he does know how to use the tools. And that would be my advice to you. You master a trade by learning how to use the tools. Remember, there are no better minds, just better libraries. Study hard and take every opportunity you are given to continue learning.

DO NOT GO TO SCHOOL JUST
BECAUSE YOU WANT TO PASTOR

Many churches require at least a master's degree in their pastoral search process. This priority of having a prepared man is important and commendable. But it can also be misguided. A degree from a school does not tell you if a man has a godly character, a pastor's heart, or a gift to preach and teach. I know men who have finished their formal training, but have been unable to find an opportunity for pastoral ministry. And I know men who have not finished their formal training, but have been given opportunities to serve in the pastoral role. Ultimately, the Lord is the sovereign "Booking Agent" for pastors and preachers. He opens doors that no one can close and closes doors that no one can open. Trust the Lord to assign you where He wants you to be at the right time (Isaiah 40:28–31).

Chapter 3



FINDING TIME TO STUDY

I once had dinner with several pastors. As we waited for our table, a friend and new pastor asked, “How do you find time for study?” As soon as he finished the question, the hostess seated us. But when we sat down, he asked again, “So how do you find time for study, H. B.?” I thought about it for a minute. Then I offered several answers that I hope were helpful, and we moved on to other topics. But the question stayed with me.

Time management is one of the most crucial areas of stewardship in a pastor’s life. We have lives and responsibilities outside of our pastoral duties, and the work of ministry is time consuming. We are always on call. Daily tasks demand our attention. Yet unexpected events throw our planned schedules into chaos.

Many people, including church members, think that pastors don’t actually work. If only they knew the truth. In reality, most pastors feel overworked. Pastoral ministry is stressful. And if we are not careful, we can work so hard that we do not have time for our most important tasks: prayer and the ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). As with many important matters in life, we don’t have time to study. We must *make* time to study. Here are seven pieces of practical advice for maximizing your study time (plus one bonus point).

PLAN AHEAD

Your study time is already limited. You don't have time to figure out what you are going to preach each week. Your study time needs to be spent studying the text, not finding a text to study. So plan your preaching in advance. Planning ahead for a month or quarter or even a year will help you get down to business when it is time to study the text and prepare a message. The goal is to have a planned schedule that will enable you to use your time in study and make the most of it.

SCHEDULE YOUR STUDY TIME

Do you schedule meetings and appointments? How about your study time? Your time of study is just as important as staff meetings, counseling sessions, and hospital visits. So begin each week by marking out the hours you will study each day. Determine how long it takes to prepare a message. Schedule it into your week. Then keep your appointments to study and write. If you have a secretary, share your schedule with him or her and ask them to help you guard it. If not, be your own schedule security guard. Have the courage to tell people that you have something scheduled that you cannot cancel. And use that scheduled time to get your sermon work done.

STEAL TIME

There will be weeks when your schedule is out of control. Stealing time is a good way to make up for the time you may lose to other things. I copy down the resources that I need from week to week and put them in a file. I take it wherever I go, and I steal back as much time as I can while I am waiting for an appointment, between meetings, or any other time I can take advantage of. It may be only fifteen or twenty minutes. But those are minutes I can use to my

advantage for Sunday. If you use software study tools, it is even easier for you to have your materials with you wherever you are. Make the most of any and every opportunity you get to study.

STUDY WHEN IT'S TIME TO STUDY

You know how it goes. When you finally get to the study, you are blitzed by the temptation to do other things. By all means, resist that temptation. When it's time to study, study. Don't web surf or answer emails or play with your smartphone or clean your desk or organize your books or . . . You get the point. Put your behind in the seat. Get to work. Don't procrastinate. Pray. Read. Study. Think. Write. You have no right to complain about the time you do not have if you do not use the time you have wisely. Remind yourself that you will never get this week again.

EDUCATE YOUR PEOPLE

Many church members think sermons grow on trees. They don't. Others think you just get up there and preach from the overflow of what you learned in seminary. You don't. At least, I hope you don't. Few church members understand what it takes to produce a good sermon. You must educate them. Talk to your deacons, elders, staff, leaders, and members about your study process. The more they understand what it takes for you to prepare, the more willing and able they will be to help you. Softhearted members will appreciate your labor, pray for your study, and free you up to prepare yourself to preach.

PRACTICE INTENTIONAL NEGLECT

Many urgent matters come across a pastor's desk each week. Much of it has nothing to do with prayer or the ministry of the

Word. You must distinguish between what is urgent and what is truly important, then learn to neglect some things during the week to prepare yourself for Sunday. Bottom line: You have failed if you go to every meeting, oversee every detail, and respond to every correspondence, but are not ready to preach. You will never get this Sunday again. Prioritize.

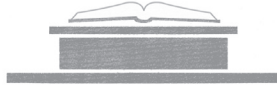
DELEGATE

In order to practice intentional neglect, without the sky falling around your ministry, make sure the things that need to be covered are covered by someone. If you have staff to assist you, trust them to do so. If you have to recruit and train volunteers, do it. Accept the fact that they may not do it the way you do it. Give them time to grow and room to fail. Stop trying to do it all. Determine the responsibilities that you can either give away or share. Then do it. And use the time you gain to work on your lesson for Wednesday and your sermon for Sunday.

BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY

Here is a bonus point: Do whatever you have to do to be ready to preach the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ! View sermon preparation as spiritual warfare. There is a battle for your attention. The Enemy would do anything to keep you from spending time in the Word and preparing the message God wants your people to hear. Fight! Pray hard. Get up early. Sacrifice a night of sleep. Drink a cup of coffee. Turn off the TV. Sacrifice your favorite hobby until you are finished. Make deals to treat yourself for the amount of work you get done. Don't go to lunch until you've made some progress. Hold the calls and turn off the email alerts. Pass certain responsibilities on to others. Do whatever it takes to get ready to preach.

Chapter 4



DEVELOPING A SERMON CALENDAR

I believe in the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I plan my preaching in advance.

Some preachers inadvertently dishonor the Holy Spirit by thinking and acting as if His work is somehow quenched if He is not free to work spontaneously. They treat the Holy Spirit like a harried housewife, overwhelmed by a lazy husband, overactive kids, and dirty dishes and clothes who gets everything done just in the nick of time. This is foolish thinking. The Holy Spirit can lead just as effectively a year in advance as He can days in advance.

What an encouragement for developing a sermon calendar! God knows if there is going to be some tragedy that needs to be addressed. God knows when there will be a death that rocks the congregation. God knows if a crisis will arise in the church that will need attention. God knows what the individuals and families are going through in your congregation. God knows what you do not know! The fact that God knows our story from beginning to end means we need not specialize in “Saturday night specials.” We can and should plan our preaching with confidence that God is at work in

and through and beyond this process to ensure our congregations are shaped by the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

There are several reasons why you should plan your preaching.

DEVOTING TIME TO SERMON PREPARATION

I am a sinner who needs to constantly watch his life and doctrine (1 Timothy 4:16). I am a husband and a father. I am a pastor with outside preaching responsibilities. And I am a human being who needs food, sleep, exercise, recreation, and fellowship. I simply cannot afford to wait until Thursday afternoon to determine what I am going to preach Sunday morning. I need to be able to redeem the time in my sermon preparation. This can only happen when I replace the time I would be spending each week thinking about what to preach with time thinking about the text and the sermon.

When you plan ahead, you can collect resources without the pressure of last-minute preparation. Because you know what you are going to be preaching on, you can scan your library for illustrative material in advance. You can have a mental trigger that notes things you may read in a blog, newspaper, or magazine that may be useful later on. You can scan the web for material related to your text or subject. And you can give your subconscious time to “marinate” in the text, deepening your thoughts and sharpening your creativity. You can also have an advantage when facing the busyness of life and “interruptions” of pastoral ministry. Having a sermon plan acts as a magnet to draw material together for your preaching.

SHEPHERDING THE CHURCH

Your preaching is the most effective way you can impact your congregation. Sunday morning is when you can touch the most people at one time. You must be a good steward of your opportunity. This

happens by how you plan, not just by how you preach and study. You can easily end up at the rear of the parade if you wait until the end of the week to choose your text for Sunday. Your preaching will become too reactionary. By planning your preaching in advance, you can strategically lead your church forward in thinking and living biblically.

MAINTAINING DOCTRINAL BALANCE

In his farewell address to the Ephesian elders, Paul declared, “Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26–27). This is how I want to end my ministry. So should you. But this cannot happen if you are only riding your theological hobbyhorses from week to week.

Your congregation needs a balanced diet of God’s Word to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus Christ (2 Peter 3:18). They need to hear law and gospel. They need to be taught Christian doctrine and Christian living. They need to be exposed to the various forms of literature in the Old and New Testaments. Planning your preaching helps to guard against “vain repetition” in your preaching and establish a strategy for declaring the whole counsel of God.

PLANNING CORPORATE WORSHIP

The pastor is the worship leader of the church, whether he knows music or not. Hearing the Word of God is the highest form of worship. It also feeds the other elements of worship. Our worship will go higher only as we deepen our understanding of God’s Word. Everything that happens in worship should be viewed as an extension of the teaching ministry of the church. Planning your preaching gives a pastor a practical tool to oversee corporate worship and to

plan more meaningful times together in worship.

When the preaching has been planned ahead, you can assign appropriate Scripture readings that support the message. Music can be selected that highlights the theme of the message. Special, creative elements can be planned for the worship services. You can decide that everything in the service one Sunday will be on prayer. Or you can cross themes, preaching on the grace of God and singing about the holiness of God. Generally, your people should know what to regularly expect from the worship service. But every now and then you should knock their socks off with something special. Developing a sermon plan can be a great catalyst to accomplish this.

DEVELOPING A SERMON CALENDAR

There are different ways to develop a sermon calendar. Some pastors plan for the month ahead, ensuring that they will be at least several weeks ahead of the game. Others plan for the next quarter.

These are good places to start, but I recommend establishing a preaching calendar for a whole year. Planning your preaching for the year can make it easier to plan the rest of the program of your church. You can establish tools and goals and service opportunities to coincide with your preaching for the year. You can even organize Bible study groups around the Sunday morning preaching. This may seem like a daunting task. But it is not as hard as it sounds. You can start now and plan for the next twelve months. Pick a time and begin planning for the next calendar year. If your schedule permits, go away for several days and plan your preaching. Or schedule specific times during your regular routine when you will focus on this. Here are several practical suggestions for planning your preaching a year in advance.

START WITH PRAYER

Preaching the Word of God to the people of God is a sacred, serious task. You do not want to decide what to preach in a cavalier manner, which is why you should consider developing a sermon plan in the first place. Approach this process with a conscious sense of dependence upon God to lead and guide you.

Pray about potential books of the Bible, themes, or series to preach. What truths would the Lord have you teach your people in the coming year? Pray for and about your congregation. Pray about the spiritual condition of your congregation. Pray about their needs, individually and corporately. Pray about the future. What is your vision for the church? Pray for yourself. The things you have been studying personally and devotionally may become fodder for your pulpit work. Is there something you need to learn? I have found that the best way for me to learn a subject is to preach it. It forces me to study it diligently.

TALK TO YOUR TEAM

You may be the pastor of your congregation. But you are not the only person of influence the Lord has placed in the body life of that church. There may be associate pastors, church officers, or ministry leaders who have helpful recommendations for your preaching in the year to come. Or there may be nonofficial leaders whose opinion you value. There may even be new or young members you can talk to. Indeed, there is wisdom in having a multitude of counselors. Take advantage of the perspectives of godly people you trust to plan your preaching.

GO THROUGH THE CALENDAR

At this point, I print a blank monthly calendar for the coming twelve months. I then mark the holidays that fall on Sundays or Sundays related to special programs or campaigns. I also take note of the special days in the life of the church that will guide my preaching. For instance, our Prayer Emphasis Week is every January. I use two Sundays to preach on prayer. October is our Stewardship Emphasis Month, during which I will preach on financial stewardship.

I also put down the Sundays that I do not intend to preach. It is probably best that a pastor be in his own pulpit about forty-five Sundays of the year. But the hard number is not most important. What matters is that you plan when you will not preach. The bow that is always bent will soon break. You need to be delivered from the sweet bondage of weekly preparation occasionally. You may not be able to take an extended sabbatical, but at least arrange a mini-vacation from the pulpit. Use special days like church anniversaries or missions emphasis days to bring in a guest speaker. Recruit some of the young men around you. By any means necessary, take a break to recharge your batteries!

The biggest part of my sermon planning is choosing the series I am going to preach. My custom is to preach through books of the Bible. Consecutive exposition through books aids sermon planning. I pre-study the book enough to divide it into divisions I will preach. I may even pick a title for each sermon. I determine my start date, then start filling in the blanks in my calendar, skipping over holidays, special days, or Sundays I am out of the pulpit. The calendar fills up quickly.

Be flexible in this process. Like the Sabbath, the preaching plans are made for the preacher, not preachers for the preaching

plan. Don't be a slave to a preaching calendar. If a natural disaster or tragedy takes place that should be addressed, do it. If there is an issue in your community or city that needs a Christian perspective, speak to it. If you are led for whatever reason to ditch your plan for a week or two to preach something else, by all means, do it.

Once you complete your sermon calendar, your work is not done. Review it continuously. Ask the Lord to edit in what He wants in and edit out what He wants out. The fact that plans may need to change is not a reason not to plan at all. Trust God to use your planning to strengthen your preaching, nurture your congregation, and honor the Scriptures. Remember, one who fails to plan, plans to fail.

Chapter 5



SERMON PREPARATION

“Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.”

2 TIMOTHY 2:15

A pastor’s primary responsibility is to preach and teach the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 4:1–5). Faithfulness to this holy charge requires personal devotion, diligent study, and laborious preparation. Good preaching is hard work.

But how do you get from text to sermon? What steps should a preacher take to preach a sound, clear, and helpful sermon? The following steps are an overview of my process of sermon preparation. This is just one preacher’s way of going about his work. It is not the only way to do it, and I am sure it is not the best way. But you may find it beneficial to compare another preacher’s process of sermon preparation.

PRAY

First, start your sermon preparation with diligent prayer. Pray that the Lord would open your eyes to see wonderful things in the Word (Psalm 119:18). And pray that the Lord would give you understanding

that you may keep His Word (Psalm 119:34). Do not let prayer become a perfunctory act. R. Kent Hughes said it well: “Sermon preparation is twenty hours of prayer.” Saturate every part of your study with prayer. Pray that Christ would oversee your study. Trust the Holy Spirit to lead you to the truth. Seek the mind of God in the text. Repent as the text confronts you with sin in your life. Pray for wisdom as you read. Ask for clarity as you write. Work as if it all depends on you, but pray as if it all depends on God. I’ll have more to say about the topic of prayer at the end of this section.

READ AND REREAD THE TEXT

Before you understand what a text means, you need to listen to what it says. You definitely won’t understand 1 Corinthians if you don’t actually read 1 Corinthians. So don’t begin your study by crafting an outline before you have spent time reading the text. Read it prayerfully. Read it slowly. Read it carefully. Read it aloud. Mark it up as you read. Read expecting the text to speak to you. Then read the text again. And again. Saturate your mind with the text until it gets into your system. Let the Word of God speak to you before you try to speak the Word of God to others.

COMPARE TRANSLATIONS

You may study and preach from a particular translation. But it pays to read the text from several different versions. It can help you to see the text with fresh eyes. It will highlight words that need to be studied more, and it will further get the text into your heart and mind. Read the committee translations, like the New King James, New American Standard, English Standard Version, and the Holman Christian Standard Bible. Likewise, read some good paraphrases like *The Living Bible*, J. B. Phillips’s paraphrase, or Eugene

Peterson's *The Message*. Get a parallel Bible that has multiple translations side by side. Another good tool is *The Bible from 26 Translations*. Reading from different translations will get you deeper into the text and will also help you see words, phrases, and sentences that you should focus on in your study.

OBSERVE THE TEXT

The inductive Bible study method asks four big questions of the text: (1) Observation asks, What does it say? (2) Interpretation asks, What does it mean? (3) Application asks, How does it apply? And (4) Correlation asks, How does it relate to the rest of Scripture? (See *Living by the Book: The Art and Science of Reading the Bible* by Howard and William Hendricks for a clear and comprehensive introduction to the inductive Bible study method.)

The process begins with Observation. In Observation, you are simply taking notes on what you see in the text. Start your formal study of the text with an open Bible, pen and paper (or computer keyboard). Just work through what you see in the text. Note important, repeated, or difficult words. Do sentence diagrams. Ask journalistic questions (who?, what?, when?, where?, and why?). Do sanctified brainstorming until you have thought yourself empty.

DO WORD STUDIES

You may not be an expert in the original languages, but with all of the study helps available, there is no excuse for you misreading the original words of the text. If possible, learn the languages through formal training. If that is not possible, determine to master the tools that help you understand the languages better.

As you work through the text, study word meanings, grammar, and usage. Find out what the word meant when the writer used it,

not just the *Webster's Dictionary* meaning. And then make sure you are clear about what the word means in context. But don't drag all of this exegetical data into the pulpit. Put what you learn into clear, picturesque language so that you do not drown your people in unnecessary technical details.

REVIEW THE CROSS-REFERENCES

This is the Correlation part of the inductive Bible study method. You want to make sure your reading of the text lines up with what the rest of Scripture has to say on the subject. If you have an idea that cannot be backed up anywhere else in Scripture, you're wrong. So let Scripture interpret Scripture by carefully reviewing pertinent cross-references. Some may suggest themselves as you study, and there are helpful tools including topical Bibles (like *Nave's*) or handbooks like *The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge*.

READ THE COMMENTARIES

There is wisdom in a multitude of counselors. So take advantage of the wisdom of diligent Bible commentators. Don't treat commentators as if they are divinely inspired, but be humble enough to learn from the wisdom of others. Read exegetical commentaries for insights into the text. Read homiletical commentaries with a view toward shaping the text for the pulpit. Read devotional commentaries to get at the heart of the text for application. Read the commentaries to sharpen your thinking, not to do the thinking for you.

SURVEY ADDITIONAL SOURCES

Thank God for the Internet! There are many church and ministry websites where sermon outlines, manuscripts, and audio messages are posted. Likewise, there are books of sermons, which may have a

chapter on the text you are working on. And there are sermon tapes, CDs, and mp3s you can pick up to hear how different preachers have dealt with your text. Take advantage of these resources to broaden your thinking as you prepare your message. But don't let these take the place of your message or your own thinking and preparing.

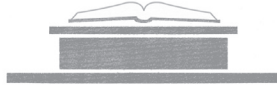
DEVELOP A SERMON SKELETON

A “sermon skeleton” is a statement of your sermon's purpose, aims, and structure. This is where you put your study material together in sermonic form. Pick a title. Identify the doctrinal theme of the message. State the point, thesis, or big idea of the sermon in a single sentence. Work through the objectives for the sermon (what do you want the hearer to think, feel, do?). Craft your outline. Write out your transitional sentences. Put the structure together before you try to put meat on the bones.

WRITE A COMPLETE SERMON MANUSCRIPT

If you develop your sermon skeleton carefully, you may be tempted to slap an introduction and conclusion on it and declare yourself ready to preach. Resist that temptation. Take the time to write out a complete, word-for-word manuscript. This will help you think through and fully develop your ideas, and allow you to absorb the sermon into your memory. You may not take the manuscript to the pulpit. In fact, I recommend you don't. You should prepare a brief set of notes for preaching. But these pulpit notes should be pared down from a complete sermon manuscript. In summary, your sermon process should consist of several practical steps: Think yourself empty. Read yourself full. Write yourself clear. And pray yourself hot. Then go to the pulpit and be yourself. But don't preach yourself—preach Jesus to the glory of God!

Chapter 6



WHY I PRAY BEFORE I PREACH

I preached my first sermon as a boy, eleven years old. The first thing I did when I stood up was pray. No one instructed me to do this. My father never prayed when he stood to preach. And none of the preachers I regularly heard or looked up to prayed at the beginning of their sermons. For some reason, I did. I had a clear sense of a call to preach, but I was scared out of my wits. Saying a prayer helped me to get on with it that day. It still does.

After observing this practice several times, a more seasoned pastor advised me, “If you haven’t prayed before you stand up to preach, it’s too late. And if you have already prayed, it’s not necessary.” He was absolutely right. I couldn’t argue with his logic. Yet I continued to pray before I read my Scripture and began my sermon. And I still do to this day.

Let me be clear. I am not saying this is what you ought to do, if it is not your practice. And it is not a negative statement about your preaching if you do not begin it with a public prayer. This is not a measure of one’s spirituality. Whether a preacher does this is not a moral issue. No one is right or wrong here. But I do believe it is

good and healthy to publicly pray before you preach. There are two reasons.

TO SPEAK FAITHFULLY

The call to preach has been a part of the Lord's sanctifying work in my life. The responsibility of preaching to others has been a means by which the Lord has kept my mind and heart close to Him. My great sense of neediness in private study and public speaking drive me to God in prayer. And this sense of dependence grows the closer I get to the preaching moment. As the time to preach nears, I am more sensitive to the reality of my sins and sinfulness. I feel a great sense of unworthiness. It blows me away to think that God would use someone like me to do something as important as preach the Word. Even when I feel good about my preparation and think I have a pretty good sermon, there is still no room for pride. Without the Lord's sufficient grace and perfecting strength (2 Corinthians 12:9), I know my preaching is doomed to fail. Nothing good could come out of my standing behind the pulpit without God's help.

I understand what Paul meant when he spoke of preaching with weakness, fear, and trembling (1 Corinthians 2:3). But when I finish with my pulpit prayer, I am ready to preach. The anxiety goes away. And I am able to get on with the assignment the Lord has entrusted to me. Prayer reminds me that it is all in the hands of the Lord. I can only plant or water the seed. It is the Lord who causes the seed to grow.

On the other hand, there are times when I have to fight my ego from getting engaged in the preaching moment. But this is not because I come to the pulpit thinking I am such a great preacher. Usually, it is just the opposite. I often feel a great sense of insecurity before I preach. I am prone to think too much about what the

congregation will think about the sermon. Or me. There can rise up something in me that makes me want the congregation to think I can really preach.

This is pride, a dangerous form of it. It is easy to justify pulpit pride by thinking that you just want to give God your best in the pulpit. Next thing you know, you can lose sight of who is to be lifted up in the sermon—Christ or the preacher. I am conscious of this sinful temptation of pride. So I pray before I preach. Prayer humbles me, clarifies my focus, and sets my heart on the sacred task of preaching the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

FOR THE CONGREGATION TO HEAR CLEARLY

I believe there is a reason why Jesus often said, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 13:9; Mark 4:9; Revelation 2:7). Just because you have ears does not mean you can hear the truth. Hearing is a spiritual act, not a physical one. It is a miracle that is wrought by the power of God. Without the work of the Holy Spirit to convince and convict, the sinful ear will dismiss the sermon as mere human opinion, rather than the Word of God. So I pray that the Lord would cause the good seed of the Word to fall on good ground that will bear fruit to His glory.

I also pray publicly so that the congregation will recognize that the preaching and hearing of the Word of God is serious business, and they will be held accountable for what they hear. The sermon is not a performance for the congregation to enjoy. It is to be a mirror that causes them to see themselves as God sees them. I want the congregation to take the message as seriously as I do when I deliver it. Only God can transform an indifferent audience into a waiting congregation that is ready to trust and obey the Word of truth.

“Open my eyes,” prayed the psalmist, “that I may behold won-

drous things out of your law” (Psalm 119:18). There are wonderful things in the Word of God that will be missed if our eyes are not open. Sin closes our eyes to these wonderful things. The various situations that hurt, trouble, or burden the congregation can also close their eyes to the truth. And Satan is at work to close the eyes of believers and unbelievers alike in the congregation, so that they will not see their need for a Savior and the sufficiency of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Even in the corporate worship of the living God, there are myriad distractions that can pull a person’s attention away from the preaching of the Word. Their bodies can be in the room while their minds can be on the other side of town. Even the previous elements of the worship service can be distracting if they are not planned and executed with spiritual excellence. There are so many things that happen before I stand up to preach that work against the message.

So I begin the sermon with a word of prayer. I pray for myself and for the congregation. I pray with the confidence that God is at work through my prayers, not just the sermon. I believe that as I pray, God helps me to speak the Word faithfully and clearly. And I believe God helps the congregation to hear in a way that will lead to repentance, faith, and obedience. I have seen the Lord do it too many times to believe otherwise.

Chapter 7



WHAT I PRAY BEFORE I PREACH

Father, please give me the physical strength and spiritual energy to speak your Word with faithfulness, clarity, authority, passion, wisdom, humility, and liberty.”

These are words I often pray as I lead the congregation in prayer before I read my text and begin my sermon. I do not know when I started praying this prayer, and I don’t remember forming these words intentionally. But they have become a regular part of my praying before I preach.

This prayer is no magical mantra. And I do not pray it out of vain repetition. I pray this because I need the Lord to do the same thing for me every time I stand to preach. Whether I pray this publicly or privately, these are seven things I want the Lord to do in and through me as I preach.

FAITHFULNESS

I want to obey the divine command to preach the Word (2 Timothy 4:2). This requires that I understand the meaning of the text. Then I must prepare and present a message that submits

to the authorial intent of the text. I want to bring out of the text what's in the text, rather than imposing my own ideas upon it. I want my thoughts and words to be consistent with sound doctrine. In a word, I want my preaching to be faithful.

The sermon is not my message. The congregation members are not my people. And the preaching moment is not my time. I am on assignment as a herald for the King. I am on kingdom business. "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God," said the apostle Paul. "Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful" (1 Corinthians 4:1–2). But the steward cannot do this in his own strength. He needs divine help. So I pray the Lord would help me to be faithful in my preaching.

CLARITY

Paul often asked the churches to pray for him. And a top prayer request was that he would have clarity as he proclaimed the message of Christ (Ephesians 6:19–20). Clarity is essential for faithful preaching. What good is it to get the text right if you cannot make the text clear? You do not want the light in your study to become a fog in the pulpit. So you should pray that the Lord would give you clarity in preaching.

One of the best compliments a person can give me is to say that my preaching is clear. I do not want the listener to be confused about what I am saying. The person in the pew will not agree with everything I say. I accept that. But I want the explanation of the text and the point of the message to be clear. I don't want to be so deep that I drown the congregation. I want the congregation to clearly understand what God is saying in the text. I also believe that clarity is a virtue in its own right. There is something attractive about a

message that is clear. So I pray that the sermon I write and the message I preach will be clear.

AUTHORITY

When I began my first pastorate as a teenager, I had no personal authority to draw from. At my installation, the late Dr. E. V. Hill preached a classic sermon entitled “What Can That Boy Tell Me?” His point was that I had the authority to preach whatever the Word of God says. I quickly learned that truth is truth whether I experience it or not. The Word of God stands on its own without needing my life to validate it.

The preacher’s ultimate authority is found in the Word of God. The congregation really does not need to hear about my experience as a father or husband. My experience does not carry divine authority. What the Word of God says is infinitely more important than my testimonials. So I want to preach with biblical authority that reflects the fact that the text is the Word of God, not the words of man. And I pray that what I preach and how I preach will reflect and emphasize the exclusive authority of the Word of God.

PASSION

Many newscasters advocate a position rather than present the news. This turns me off. But this is exactly what should happen in preaching. I do not want to preach like a news reporter who is dispassionately reading copy from a teleprompter. I want my preaching to reflect a head and heart that have been gripped by the truth. Passionate preaching is not about gestures, volume, and emotion. It’s about deep conviction, blood earnestness, and holy reverence. The people in the pew may not believe what I am saying. But I want it to be evident that *I* believe it. If preaching is “logic on fire,” we should

preach with convinced minds and enflamed hearts. We should pray that God would set us on fire in the pulpit and that we will burn with passion for His glory.

WISDOM

“Him we proclaim,” said Paul, “warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ” (Colossians 1:28). Wisdom should mark our preaching. Of course, the content of our preaching should reflect the wisdom of God, rather than the foolishness of the world. Likewise, we need wisdom for the presentation of the Word. Wisdom will guide us as to what to say and how to say it. Pray that the Lord would give you wisdom in preaching to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable.

HUMILITY

The preaching moment is not about you. We are called to preach Jesus and not ourselves (2 Corinthians 4:5). It is impossible to exalt Christ and exalt self at the same time. We are just friends of the Groom, like John the Baptist (John 3:29). We must decrease that Christ may increase (John 3:30). Our job is to preach in such a way that brings the hearer before the living God. Then we are to get out of the way! But our sinful flesh will constantly seek to be in the spotlight. Prayer helps to keep our egos in check. Prayer helps us to remember who and what the preaching moment is about. Prayer helps us to preach with a humility that makes much of Christ and little of ourselves.

LIBERTY

I recently began to pray this after reading a biography of an influential preacher of the last century. In letters to supporters, he

would often ask them to pray that he would have liberty when he preached. That stuck with me. I don't know how to explain it, but anyone who has been preaching for a while knows what it is like to preach with liberty and what it is to preach without it. There are times you stand to preach, and it feels like you are in one of those driver's education cars. Someone is putting their foot on the brakes, while you put your foot on the gas. But there are other times when God is obviously present and actively in charge of the preaching moment. And you can feel the Lord guiding your thoughts, leading your words, and moving the congregation. I want to feel that every time I preach. So I ask for freedom to preach my heart and convictions to the glory of God.

What do you pray before you preach?

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON 

APPLE BOOKS 

GOOGLE PLAY 

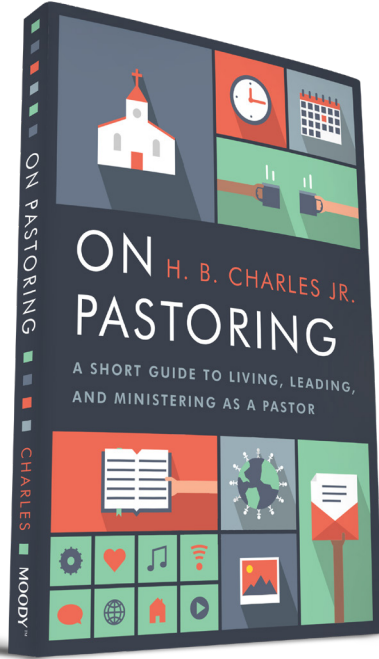
TARGET 

WALMART 

LIFEWAY 

BARNES & NOBLE 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 



In *On Pastoring*, veteran pastor H. B. Charles gives 40 quick chapters on the practical aspects of pastoral ministry. Covering the devotional life, spiritual leadership, and public ministry of the pastor, he provides advice on topics from guarding your heart to conducting funerals and weddings.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

APPLE BOOKS



AMAZON



WALMART



TARGET



LIFEWAY



GOOGLE PLAY



CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 

BARNES & NOBLE



Part 1:

THE PASTOR'S HEART

Chapter 1



MINISTERING TO AN AUDIENCE OF ONE

*Seeing ministry as service to God,
not a performance for man*

One of my former professors preached for me one Sunday morning. He was the man who formally taught me homiletics, and he continued to teach me long after I took his class. It was always a joy to have Prof, as I call him, come and minister the Word to our congregation.

As we chatted between services, he asked me about an upcoming speaking event announced in our weekly bulletin. I was scheduled to speak that week at a denominational meeting. It was a rare opportunity for a young pastor.

My professor and I joked about the challenges of preaching to preachers. Then the conversation turned. I admitted that, although I was grateful, honored, and excited about spending a week ministering to pastors and church leaders, I was very nervous. It is one thing to preach to an eager congregation. It is another thing to

preach to pastors who may be critiquing your presentation rather than listening to your message.

Prof assured me that all would go well, encouraging me to give God my best. Then he asked me how I prepare for such occasions. I told him about my strategy for overcoming my fears when I am preaching to pastors. I thought what I was about to share was very profound. It was not. (Warning: it is not wise to try to impress a former professor.)

I told him about the first time I preached before a lot of preachers. I was only seventeen, but the experience is still vivid in my mind. I had been invited to preach the closing night of a citywide revival meeting. It was youth night, but I still had no business being the main speaker. I was way out of my league. Most of the other scheduled speakers had been preaching longer than I had been alive. Before we drove to the event, my host gave me a piece of advice. “Don’t worry about the pastors in the room,” he counseled. “Just focus on the people in the pew as you preach.”

This advice proved beneficial. When we arrived for the service, the first room we entered was filled with preachers. I dutifully went around the room shaking the hands of these older, wiser men. Several pastors I greatly admired were present. As I greeted one and thanked him for coming to hear me preach, he casually responded, “We came to see you die tonight.” I was stunned. I was already nervous enough. This remark took it over the top. I felt like running away. Later, when I entered the worship service, there was the pastor who made the comment, seated on the platform near my seat. He not only came to see me die that night, but someone gave him a front-row seat to this epic preaching disaster.

Fortunately, I didn’t “die” that night. I followed my host’s advice. I preached with desperate dependence on the Lord’s help. I

preached the biblical message I had prepared for the occasion. And I preached to the congregation in front of me, rather than trying to impress the preachers around me. I experienced the Lord's assurance to Paul firsthand: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9).

After sharing this story with my preaching professor, I told him this would be the approach I would take at the upcoming convention meeting. I would preach, focusing on the congregation and ignoring the pastors in the room.

To me, my strategy seemed practical and profound. I was sure my Prof would agree. He didn't. "That's a good thought," he graciously replied. "But I think about these kinds of events somewhat differently. When I stand to preach, whatever the setting, I don't focus on the pastors or the congregation. I just preach to an audience of One."

It is the divine source that makes the difference.

This gracious rebuke tasted like bitter medicine. But it had a healing effect. And it is medicine I keep in my cabinet, as I am constantly in need of another dose. It's easy to forget who the target audience is when we minister. Indeed, we minister to the congregation. But our ministry to them must not be for or about them. "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Rom. 11:36). As we minister to others, we must remember that the purpose and passion of all that we say and do should be for God and His glory, not man and his felt needs. We are to live and serve for the glory of God, not to win the approval of man.

Warren Wiersbe wrote, "Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels to the glory

of God.”¹ This is one of the best definitions of ministry I have ever read. This simple definition teaches us that to be a good and faithful minister you only need to remember that you are a “channel” of God’s resources to others. You are not the source, God is. We are only channels through which God works to meet human needs, and we should be “loving channels” who recognize what a privilege it is to be used by God. We should be clear and clean channels, acknowledging that God does not need us. Channels get clogged and cut off. It is the divine source that makes the difference, and the Lord alone deserves the glory.

The apostle Paul gives wise counsel for Christian ministry: “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen” (1 Peter 4:10–11).

Christian ministers should use their gifts to serve one another, as stewards who must answer to the Lord for His grace toward us. As we serve, we must do so in the strength God supplies, no matter what we do. As we speak, we must speak according to the Word of God, no matter what we say. Why is it so important that we do the Lord’s work the Lord’s way? It is so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. When we serve, we must do it in God’s strength, so that God will get the glory when others are helped. When we serve, we must do it according to God’s Word, so that God will get the glory when others are helped. It is all about Him. “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory,” sang the psalmist, “for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness” (Ps. 115:1).

We should be like this young pianist who had his first recital. Before he went on stage, his maestro gave him strict instructions. The old man would be sitting in the balcony alone as the young man played. And he was to keep playing until he saw his mentor stand up. That would be his indication that the maestro was pleased with the performance. The young man went on stage and played his first song. The audience clapped enthusiastically. He played another song. They applauded again. But he kept playing. Another song. Then another. He was not playing to win the applause of the crowd. He knew his teacher was sitting in the balcony. So he continued to play until his master stood and applauded. His teacher's approval was all that mattered.

Who are you trying to please?

Chapter 2



A STRATEGIC PART OF YOUR MINISTERIAL CALL

Why the details of your calling are not accidental

One of the many benefits I have enjoyed from pastoring alongside others is to see how God uniquely guides each of us to the ministry.

I remember when one of my associate pastors preached our early service some years ago. He preached on the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). It was a solid message. He had the congregation's full attention from his introduction. He began the sermon by focusing on the fact that this parable is less about a wayward son than it is a father who was there for his sons and who cared for their needs. It is, as Jesus introduces it, a story about a certain man who had two sons (Luke 15:11). The father's loving care and concern for his sons is the dominating theme of the parable.

As a sinner listening to the message, I was deeply moved. As a preacher listening to the message, I realized I would never have thought of getting into the text that way. The relationship between

the father and son is often assumed. We tend to focus on the choices, behavior, and downfall of the Prodigal Son, ignoring what the passage teaches about the godly character of the lovesick father. But for my associate, who grew up without a father, the first thing that jumped out at him from the text was the fact that this man had an active relationship with his sons.

Later that same week, the associate and I stood and chatted on the church porch. As we talked, a man neither of us recognized came walking down the street toward us. He told us that he attended the worship service that past Sunday and was stopping by to thank me for the message I had preached. Both surprised and grateful, I expressed my appreciation for his kind words. But as he kept talking, it became clear that he was not talking about my 11 a.m. sermon. He was talking about the associate's 8 a.m. sermon. My friend and I looked at one another knowingly and smiled without saying a word. When the man went on his way, we talked about how the Lord navigates the circumstances of our lives to prepare us to minister to others in ways we may never know. The absence of my friend's father was a sad reality. But overruling providence worked it out for good in his life, to the benefit of others and the glory of God.

I had another associate who began his ministry at middle age, having spent a good part of his adult life in the world. This brother had experienced much, both good and bad, but the Lord radically transformed his life. He was a godly man with a clear sense of calling. And he was willing to do whatever it took to be faithful and fruitful in the service of the Lord. But one day he expressed to me his concerns about his usefulness. He was surrounded by young men training for ministry, several of whom had started preaching at a very young age, including me. He felt that starting his work for the Lord so "late" handicapped him.

I assured him that was not the case. After all, the phrase “too late” is not in the Lord’s vocabulary. God’s timing is perfect. Over the years, this brother became a good friend and trusted advisor. He also became an influential leader in our congregation. Many members would seek him out for his wise and godly counsel. He had seen a lot of what the world had to offer, but transforming grace changed his perspective on the world. And he had spiritual wisdom that benefited many in our congregation. The unique perspective he had as a result of his life experiences enabled him to minister to others better than the rest of us could. We started calling him (tongue in cheek) the “senior pastor” of the church.

My relationships with these two colleagues made a great impression on me. It taught me that the details of your calling are purposeful, not accidental. God integrates the circumstances of our lives to prepare us for the work of the ministry. Your life experiences—the good, the bad, and the ugly—are a strategic part of your ministerial call. Romans 8:28 is true: “And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”

My friend who was raised without a father read Scripture in a way that helped him relate to other men in our church who were also fatherless. And the way he led his sons was a strong example for other young fathers in the church, including me. His story was a part of his calling that distinctively marked him for service in our congregation. So it was with the brother who had come to God from a life in the world. He was able to warn others against the temptations of the world and offer the hope of restoration to the fallen. God used what they thought were only negatives to bless others.

My relationships with these men helped me to come to terms with my own spiritual journey. There was a time when I was embar-

raised about having a “boring” testimony. I was raised in the church. My father was the pastor of our congregation. My mother was the minister of music. As a boy, I would either sit with my mom on the piano stool as she played or with the deacons on the front row as my father preached. I didn’t really have a “prodigal son” experience. But in the parable of the prodigal son, the son who stayed home was just as lost as the son who left. I had to learn that it takes amazing grace to protect you from some things, just as it takes amazing grace to deliver you from some things. My story was a part of God’s call, work, and mission for my life.

The same is true of you and your life experiences. Your life story is a strategic part of your ministerial call. Young or old. Rich or poor. Single or married. Successful or a failure. Raised in church or saved from the streets. Led by an obvious path to ministry or by a sudden U-turn. Formally educated in the world of academia or

self-educated in the trenches of ministry. The providence of God orchestrates life to equip you to fulfill your call. “For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think,” exhorts the Apostle Paul, “but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned” (Rom. 12:3). Don’t be discouraged. Don’t compare yourself to others. And don’t underestimate the grace, wisdom, and power of God at work in your life.

God can take the one who has been dropped into a pit and thrown into prison and raise him up to a palace to save many.

God can weave the story of your life into His great purpose to spread the gospel, edify the church, and advance the kingdom.

God can open the mouth of a reluctant stutterer and make him a great emancipator.

God can take an overlooked shepherd boy and make him a mighty king.

God can transform former fishermen and tax collectors into world changers.

God can use a church-persecuting Pharisee to be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

And God can weave the story of your life into His great purpose to spread the gospel, edify the church, and advance the kingdom. God uses weak people: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us” (2 Cor. 4:7). Trust that the Lord knows your past, sees your situation, and governs your future. Your story does not trump God’s plans. The providence of God incorporates your story into God’s unfailing purpose for your good and His glory.

Chapter 3



ARE YOU A HEALTHY PASTOR?

*Why pastors must be healthy all around,
but especially spiritually*

Pastors are getting in shape. Social media is littered with pictures of them exercising and eating better to get their weight under control and live healthy lives. This is good. Paul testifies in 2 Corinthians 4:7, “But we have treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.” God has placed a priceless treasure in clay pots like you and me. It is our responsibility to guard the vessel in order to protect the treasure.

In the crucible of my schedule, I often neglect to maintain a healthy diet and exercise regimen. But the social media posts of exercising pastors challenge me to “get it in,” as they say. Robert Murray M’Cheyne was a preacher, pastor, and poet who ministered at the St. Peter’s Church in Dundee, Scotland, until he died at age twenty-nine from typhus. The story goes that on his deathbed, M’Cheyne said, “God gave me a message and a horse. I have killed the horse.

Oh, what shall I do with the message?" I think of this story often these days. Of course, the message will continue to go forth without us. But we should be faithful stewards of our bodies so we can be faithful stewards of our opportunity to herald the Word of God.

The apostle Paul wrote, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor. 6:19–20). These words are often cited to impress upon us the priority of physical health. This may be an appropriate application of Paul's words. But it is not the primary point

or necessary implication of the passage. 1 Corinthians 6:19–20 exhorts us to be holy, not healthy.

For every pastor you
hear about dying in
the pulpit because
of obesity, there are
scores more stories
of pastors who lose
their pulpits because
of the destructive
forces of sex, money,
and power.

Physical exercise has its place (unless done out of personal vanity), but God is more concerned with the spiritual health of the inner man than the physical health of the outer man. Paul counseled Timothy, "Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as

it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim. 4:7-8).

It is good to see pastors encourage one another to get in shape and celebrate healthy lifestyle choices. It motivates me to do better. It also encourages me see to spiritual leaders supporting one

another to be healthy mentally and emotionally. But it also makes me wish we did more to encourage one another to holiness of lifestyle, fidelity of doctrine, and unity of fellowship. Friends push me to take care of myself so I will have many years to preach the gospel. I appreciate the concern. But for every pastor you hear about dying in the pulpit because of obesity, there are scores more stories of pastors who lose their pulpits because of the destructive forces of sex, money, and power.

As a young pastor I heard it said that another pastor can be your best friend or your worst enemy. I thought that was a cynical statement. Unfortunately, I found it to be true over the years. Another pastor may be your best friend, standing with you in the fight for truth, holiness, and faithfulness. Or he may be your worst enemy, subtly encouraging your sin. May the Lord help us to be better friends to one another. Know that your best friends are the ones that make you better. “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov. 27:17). Iron sharpens iron by grating against it. You do not grow by surrounding yourself with “yes men” who only cosign your foolishness. You need men in your life who love you enough to tell you the truth. “Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy” (Prov. 27:6). It is better to be hurt by a friend than kissed by an enemy!

Because there are stresses and struggles in ministry we cannot share with members of our churches, we need godly men, especially other pastors, with whom we can be honest, share our hurts, and pray. Of course, if you have a wife, she should be your primary prayer partner, point of accountability, and support system. This is not always easy. But you must do whatever it takes to make sure the work of the ministry does not drive a wedge between you. Make sure your wife is your best friend, yet be careful not to dump every-

thing on her. Your calling is not her calling, and she may not have as thick of skin for the ministry as you do. Avoid overwhelming her with behind-the-scenes details that may embitter her toward the church.

Develop strong relationships with wise and godly men who will stand with you through the changing seasons of life. This kind of fellowship, counsel, and accountability should transcend ministry issues. What's going on in your congregation is definitely important. But the things happening in your life—before God, in your devotional life, with your family—are far more important. We need people in our lives to ask us tough questions about our personal lives, like:

- Are you having a daily quiet time with the Lord?
- How is your prayer life?
- Are you being faithful to your wife?
- Are you making time for your children?
- Are you practicing sexual purity?
- Are you handling your finances properly?
- Do you need to seek reconciliation with anyone?
- Are you keeping any secrets that can ruin your family or ministry down the road?

Then, when you have answered these questions, your friends should ask one more: “Did you lie in any of your answers just now?” You need total accountability.

When pastors who have fallen into disqualifying sins are probed about why they went astray, the top answers are usually the same. Many pastors who fall into sin did not think it would ever happen to them. This is the seductive nature of temptation. Our

sinful hearts can so deceive us that we see many others fall and yet think we can take the same path without consequence. This is the height of folly. Paul warned the Corinthians, “Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it” (1 Cor. 10:12–13).

Fallen pastors often admit that, in addition to dangerously assuming they were immune to temptation, they did not have true friends with whom they talked candidly. Some pastors have no ministry friends whatsoever. Others have friends that they intentionally keep on a superficial level, so that no one has room to intrude into the details of their lives. This is not healthy. You need at least one Timothy in your life, a young man you can disciple and mentor. You need at least one Paul in your life, an older, wiser man who has been where you are going and can show you the way. But you also need Barnabas’s in your life, peers who will encourage you when you are right and confront you when you are wrong.

It is good to check in with other pastors about sermon preparation, ministry plans, and leadership challenges. It is even good to challenge one another about healthy lifestyle choices, like exercise and diet. But more important than all of these, we need to help one another be spiritually healthy pastors. It does not need to be broadcast on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. We need an underground movement to challenge one another to live our message so we do not become ministerial casualties that give the bride of Christ a black eye.

Paul wrote, “Practice these things, immerse yourself in them so that all may see your progress. Keep a close watch on yourself and

on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:15–16). As we strive to be good and godly ministers of Jesus Christ, our spiritual progress should be evident. Paul did not tell Timothy that the church would grow if he lived and served with godliness. But his spiritual progress would be obvious to the congregation. If nothing is growing in the church, it should at least be evident that the pastor-teacher is growing. Shepherds lead and feed the flock. But here is where the metaphor breaks down. Pastors are also to be an example to the flock. “The minister must experience what he would teach or he will find himself in the impossible position of trying to drive sheep,” wrote A. W. Tozer. “For this reason he should seek to cultivate his own heart before he attempts to preach to the hearts of others.”² Our members should be able to follow us as we follow Christ. May the Lord help us to be spiritually healthy pastors worth following!

Chapter 4



REAL PASTORS ARE GODLY

*The people we lead should notice our
godliness more than our gifts*

Reality TV is an oxymoron. No one lives with film cameras documenting every moment of their life. Reality TV is, at best, staged reality. It creates celebrities who milk their fifteen minutes of fame for everything they can, and who talk and act with great self-importance. But they are only famous for being famous. The more rude, loud, silly, degrading, and violent the personality, the more attention he or she gets. With rare exceptions, reality TV is utter foolishness. But this should not surprise us. Let the world be the world. And let the church be the church.

Unfortunately, one of the newer reality-TV series mixes the two; it follows the lives and ministries of pastors, warts and all. I have many objections to shows that feature so-called pastors, but the notion of a television show revealing what being a *real* pastor is about is offensive. Any pastor who signs on to do one of these shows is not worthy of the name. Real preachers don't have time to

Real preachers don't
have time to do
reality shows about
being real preachers.

do reality shows about being real preachers.

When the first of these shows began to air, the featured pastors had to defend their participation. This alone should

have told them that their decision to be a part of the show was misguided. Yet instead of checking themselves, they criticized dissenting Christians for being judgmental. Church people wrongly put their leaders on a pedestal, claimed the celebrity TV pastors. They justify their participation on these shows to help people see preachers and pastors for what they really are. People need to know that Christian pastors, leaders, and artists are human just like them.

No, they don't!

That is the problem. The world already knows that pastors are human—too human. This is why the world does not take the church seriously. For that matter, neither do many people in the church. There was a time when the local pastor was the most respected man in the community. Those days are long gone. In this generation, the culture distrusts pastors just as much as they do politicians. The caricature of the pastor is a money-hungry, skirt-chasing, fast-talking hypocrite. How did that happen? Why is it that society no longer respects the office of the pastor? I'll tell you. It's because people know that we are just like them—and they suppose that is all we are. At this point, people need to know that pastors are godly, not just human.

Seeing materialistic, argumentative, prideful, self-promoting, and troubled pastors air their dirty laundry on TV does not advance the gospel in any way. It only hands the world dirt to sling mud at the bride of Christ. Sort out your issues in your prayer closet,

with those to whom you are accountable, and in the midst of the local church. Then do a show that demonstrates the difference Jesus makes. That's what the world needs to see.

In Matthew 5:13–16, Jesus said:

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do

people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

To bring glory to God the Father before a watching world, there must be something different about us.

To bring glory to God the Father before a watching world, there must be something different about us. Dark light is an oxymoron. Unsalty salt is good for nothing.

The fact that you are spiritually gifted does not make you qualified to be a pastor. The biblical qualifications for pastoral leadership are character-driven, not gift-oriented (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4). The only ministry skill Scripture requires of pastors is that he is able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2). All of the other listed qualifications focus on the kind of man he is, not how gifted he is. It should not be that people hear us preach and think we should never get out of the pulpit, but then see our lifestyles and think we should never get *in* the pulpit. A. W. Tozer says it this way:

I am afraid of the pastor that is another man when he enters the pulpit from what he was before. Reverend, you should never think a thought or do a deed or be caught in any situation that you couldn't carry into the pulpit with you without embarrassment. You should never have to be a different man or get a new voice and a new sense of solemnity when you enter the pulpit. You should be able to enter the pulpit with the same spirit and the same sense of reverence that you had just before when you were talking to someone about the common affairs of life.³

This is why Scripture holds overseers to a higher standard. Pastors must be above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2). Pastors must do their best to present themselves approved before God (2 Tim. 2:15). Pastors must be examples to the flock, not domineering over those in their charge (1 Peter 5:3).

Can the Lord use you? The answer to that question is not about gifts, talent, and ability. The answer to the question is another question: Are you useable? Drawing a powerful word-picture of ministerial fitness, Paul writes, "Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work" (2 Timothy 2:20-21).

A wealthy man has a mansion filled with all kinds of vessels. These various vessels fall into two basic categories. Some are precious vessels made of gold and silver. Others are common vessels made of wood and clay. In the rich man's house, he has both fine china and cheap Tupperware. But when the master of the house is looking for a vessel to use, his priority is not what the vessel is made

of. He comes in from a long day's work and is hungry. He sits at the table to eat dinner. He does not really care if the plate is gold, clay, silver, or wood. What matters to the master of the house is that the vessel is clean.

This is the kind of minister that is useful to the master and ready for every good work. A dirty vessel is not useful to Christ, even if it is made of silver and gold. And the fact that you are only wood or clay does not discount your usefulness if you cleanse yourself from what is dishonorable. Ultimately, who cares if you are silver, gold, wood, or clay? The question is, are you clean?

I repeat: people do not need to know that pastors are human just like them. They need to know we are godly. They need to know we are Christlike. They need to know we are humble. They need to know we are faithful. People, both within the church and outside of it, need pastors who are men of God. This has nothing to do with your title or the way you dress or how spiritual you are on the platform. Real pastors do not merely act or talk or look a certain way. They live a certain way; they *are* a certain way. Of course, pastors are not perfect. We are in need of God's grace just as much as the people we minister to are. But our high calling demands a firm commitment to live godly lives. As pastors, we should live in such a way that people would only know we are pastors if we told them. Yet once we tell them, they should not be surprised.

We must take Paul seriously:

So flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call on the Lord from a pure heart. Have nothing to do with foolish, ignorant controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach,

patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:22–26).

Real pastors are more concerned with their godliness than their gifts, and certainly more than their reputation. They flee passion and pursue godliness. They exercise judgment and restraint.

Are you a real pastor?

Chapter 5



LEAVING A GODLY LEGACY

Prioritizing God and family above ministry

Imagine you attend your own funeral. Family and friends have gathered to celebrate your life and pay their final respects. It is a beautiful service. Hymns and songs of praise are sung. Comforting Scriptures and prayers of hope are offered. Then it is time for remarks. Friends and colleagues take turns eulogizing you. Then your wife does. And finally, your children. What will your children say about you at your funeral? The remarks your children make about you represent the legacy you leave behind.

Ultimately, the pastor's consuming passion is to glorify God in his life and ministry. This is the bottom line of Christian ministry. It does not matter that you are a great success before man if you are a horrible failure before God. The Lord Jesus warned in Matthew 7:21–23,

“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did

we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Jesus is not fooled by the profession of His name that masks a life of spiritual rebellion. Nor by the long list of ministry accomplishments you report. You can do great things in ministry and still have to introduce yourself when you face your final inspection from the Lord. “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

The Lord’s final assessment of your life and ministry is the only one that counts. Our ultimate priority should be to receive a divine commendation: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:21).

The commendation of the Lord on your life and ministry is all-important. But that is not to say that the opinion of others bears no importance whatsoever. The life of faith is inevitably lived in community with others. Our relationships with others become side-view mirrors to help us see the blind spots in our lives. The closer the relationship, the better the vantage point from which others may see the truth about our lives. This is why the legacy you leave behind is, in so many ways, directly linked to your family.

Do not mistake what makes for a godly, celebrated legacy. You

can grow the congregation. You can build buildings. You can write books. You can speak on the circuit. You can gain denominational prominence. But those things do not make a godly legacy. A pastor can serve his entire ministry in obscurity. But if in the end, you were faithful to your calling, and your wife and children respect you, you win. Make it your goal to live in such a way that when your children speak of you, long after you are dead and gone, they will be able to say at least these three things about you:

I know my father loved God unconditionally.

There are sons who want to pastor because their dads are pastors, not because the Lord has called them into the ministry. But there are many who want nothing to do with the church, much less the ministry, because of the life they saw their fathers live. This is bigger than a dad who spends more time at the church office than he should. It is bigger than the fishbowl the children have to live in because of their father's ministry. And it is bigger than the sacrifices of time and money the family has to make because of dad's ministry work. This is about religious hypocrisy.

In the cultural world of the New Testament, a hypocrite was an actor who donned a mask and went on stage to play a role. A hypocrite is a person who pretends to be something before others that he knows he is not before God. Jesus' most stinging rebukes were given to these religious phonies. Don't let that be your legacy. Live in such a way that it will be obvious to your children that you love God. This requires more than excellent

Our children should be the beneficiaries of the best legacy we could leave our family: the example of a godly marriage.

public ministry. It calls for a life of obedience. It demands cross-bearing. It requires forgiveness, generosity, and holiness. Of course, no one is perfect. But our children should be able to say that we were headed in the right direction. They should see that our spiritual priorities are in order. It should be evident to them that we are seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

I know my father loved my mother unconditionally.

Too many pastors are in an adulterous affair with the churches we pastor, and we neglect the wives the Lord has given us. This is wrong, foolish, and destructive. The Lord may send you to lead another church someday. But it is His will that you live faithfully with your wife until death parts you. So we must fight every subtle and overt temptation to put our ministry before our marriages.

The biblically qualified pastor is the husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2). And it should be obvious to our children, our congregations, and everyone else that we are a one-woman man. I am not talking about exalting your wife as the “First Lady” of the church. (For that matter, pastors and their wives should avoid becoming fixated with ministry titles at all costs. Base your identity on the gospel of Christ, not what the church members call you.) I am talking about loving your wife as Christ loves the church (Ephesians 5:25–27). Pastors should be faithful husbands. Our wives should feel secure in our love, cherished in our hearts, and treasured beyond our ministries. And our children should be the beneficiaries of the best legacy we could leave our family: the example of a godly marriage.

I know my father loved me unconditionally.

I feel like the man who said, “Before I had children, I had three parenting theories. Now I have three children and no theories.” In-

deed, there are times when I feel like my children are teaching me as much as I am teaching them. I confess that I do not have all of the answers. It is a trial-and-error process for me. But there is one thing I am determined to get right. I want my children to know that I love them unconditionally. This does not mean that I will always agree with them or that they will always get their way with me. But it means that I will be there for them. I will provide for them. I will point them in the right way and forgive them when they go the wrong way. I will pray for them and encourage them. I will point them to Jesus Christ.

The psalmist declared, “Behold, children are a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Psalm 127:3-5). Parents leave an inheritance to their children. But children are an inheritance the Lord gives to parents. To be blessed with children is to receive a living asset from the Lord. We must invest these God-given assets wisely. Do not sacrifice your children on the altar of ministry. Give them the time, care, attention, discipline, affection, instruction, and example that they need, thus communicating clearly your unconditional love for them. Your family is a gift to cherish, not another task to accomplish. Make loving your wife and children your delight, not a duty.

Chapter 6



DO YOU WANT TO BE SOMEBODY?

Why pastors have no business seeking prominence

One of my pulpit heroes agreed to preach at my church. We did not really know one another. Yet he consented to be our guest speaker. I was beyond excited. My congregation did not know who this pastor was. They showed up because I asked them to be there. But that didn't matter to me. I was excited for them that they would hear this faithful pastor who had so influenced me.

To be honest, I have absolutely no recollection of the worship service that night. And I could not tell you what the guest pastor preached if my life depended on it. But I will never forget the conversation we had in my study after the meeting.

Food was prepared for guest pastors who attended, and my office was full of pastors as we ate and talked shop. Several of the men in attendance were denominational leaders. They began to encourage me to get more involved in the work. It felt more like pressure. They dropped the hook with tempting bait. If I would only do this

or do that, they assured me, it would inevitably lead to preaching opportunities, important positions, and other benefits. As a young pastor, and being new to all of this, my eyes were big. I was flattered by the offers. I was proud that they saw something in me. And I was excited about the possible doors that could be opened for my ministry.

My guest speaker was not in this conversation. But he overheard everything that was said. Then he pulled up a chair right next to me. And out of the blue, he began to tell me about denominational horror stories he had experienced. It felt like he told me every bad thing he knew about conventions. To make it worse, each time he said the word “convention,” he overemphasized the first syllable. “CONvention . . .” The denominational leaders’ eyes became big as he railed against the things the men had just recommended to me.

The room became quiet. The atmosphere was tense. The air was sucked out of the room as my guest speaker held court. Because of his stature, no one dared to challenge anything he said. But it was obvious that others in the room were offended by his comments. As the host, I tried to head off an incident by (half) jokingly saying, “Doc, you know there are denominational leaders at the table with us, don’t you?”

“I don’t care,” was his firm response.

As he continued, I began to figure out what was going on. These stern remarks were not a personal attack. Some of the men at the table were his longtime friends. He was not trying to disrespect them. He was trying to get my attention. It worked. He had my full and undivided attention.

My guest finally stopped recounting convention horror stories. Then he began to list all the conferences and conventions where he had recently spoken. In one setting or another, he had basically

preached in all of the major Baptist conventions. In several major conferences I dreamed of attending he had been a keynote on more than one occasion. But he did not list these speaking events to show off. “Do you know which one I am a part of?” he asked. I already knew the answer. He was not an active part of any conference or convention.

The hour grew late. But my guest kept talking to me. He challenged me to live for God. He exhorted me to preach the Word. He reminded me to love my congregation. The room emptied out, as the other pastors in the room began to call it a night. But he kept talking to me, assuring me that God would open doors of opportunity for me, if I kept my priorities straight. The volunteers came in and cleaned up around us. But he kept going. It was way past midnight. But he was still talking. I didn’t say a word. I couldn’t. I was too busy crying. He was saying what I desperately needed to hear, more than he could know. I had been too focused on where my gifts could take me. I needed to be slapped in the face with a reminder that my only responsibility was to be faithful. The Lord is in charge of personnel placement.

He finally let me up for air, sort of. After challenging me for several hours, he ended the conversation dismissively. “I hope I have not wasted my time talking to you,” he said. “I hope not. But I think you want to be somebody. I don’t want to be somebody. I just want to preach. But I think you want to be somebody.” Through tears, I finally responded. “I don’t want to be somebody, either,” I whimpered. “I just want to preach the Word.”

That life-changing conversation took place over twenty years ago. But I still wrestle with the temptation to want to be somebody. As pastors who preach the gospel to others, we need to constantly preach the gospel to ourselves, as well. We must not forget that our

identity rests in the finished work of Christ, not in our church size, speaking schedule, or ministry accomplishments. “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ,” Paul testified, “by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal. 6:14). When we are tempted to be somebody, we must refuse to boast in who we are or what we have or what we accomplish. Our boasting should be in Christ alone.

For many years, I served a church in the shadows of many so-called “megachurches” in my city. This was not a thing for me. I believed my congregation was, pound-for-pound, just as strong and healthy and fruitful as these larger congregations. But there were times when I felt the pressure to measure up to other congregations. This pressure was self-inflicted. At points, I foolishly accepted the deception that numbers, prominence, and apparent success were the signs of God’s blessings on a church or ministry. They are not. I had to learn the hard way that prominence and significance are not the same things. Size and strength are not synonymous. The one at the front of the line is not necessarily the most important person in the line. He may be up front because he cut the line.

Ministry is not about pressing your way forward in the line of prominent pastors or churches. It is about being a faithful steward of the biblical message, redeemed people, and ministry work that the Lord has entrusted to you. I now serve a larger congregation, but I need this reminder now more than I did when I served a smaller congregation. Celebrity is an illusion, and Christian celebrity is spiritual warfare against true ministry. The primary enemy in this battle is not the devil, but the pastor’s own flesh. The evil one cheers on the flesh’s proud pursuits, knowing it will inevitably lead to the pastor’s spiritual downfall. “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall” (Prov. 16:18). The pastor’s concern should be to

live in a way that pleases the Lord, minister the Word of God as a good steward, and lovingly serve his congregation. Managing expectations, guarding the “brand,” and keeping up with the ministerial Joneses too easily get in the way of what matters the most.

Of course, we want to be faithful and fruitful for Christ. But we must remain faithful even when it seems we are not being fruitful. May the Lord help us to be faithful where He has placed us without us being preoccupied with getting to the front of the line. Beware. The quest for ministerial prominence is a trap. You can struggle to get to the top of the ecclesiastical ladder, only to discover the ladder is leaning against the wrong wall. Remember, prominence and significance are not the same thing. The one in front of the line is not necessarily the most important person in the line. Don't let the desire for success cause you to mix up your priorities and lead you in the wrong direction. “But many who are first will be last,” warned Jesus, “and the last first” (Matthew 19:30). I like the way one well-known Christian author puts it: “If you work on the depth of your ministry, the Lord will take care of the breadth of your ministry.”

Of course, we should strive to maximize our ministry work for Christ. We should proclaim Christ, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ (Col. 1:28). But do not become confused about what Christian ministry is all about. We are not building a career. We are discharging a stewardship. Paul wrote, “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover, it is required of stewards that they be found faithful” (1 Cor. 4:1–2). That's our assignment. Be faithful. Not successful or prosperous or famous. Faithful. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

Do you want to be somebody? Don't.

Chapter 7



PLAY WHERE THE COACH PUTS YOU!

*Being faithful where God has you,
rather than longing for where He doesn't*

It was only the first night of a weeklong revival, but this young preacher was wiped out. It may have been the first night of the meeting for the congregation, but it was my third week of preaching in a row, and I was tired. Though grateful for the opportunity to preach the Word, I didn't really want to be there. I wanted to be at home. I had traveled cross country all day without eating. I landed in time to preach. I wanted to go straight to bed, but I had to get a bite before I turned in.

We ended up at a restaurant with a group of other pastors that night. To my surprise, one of my preaching heroes was there. And I had the opportunity to chat him up over dinner. Wanting to impress my hero, I began to tell him how wiped out I was. After all, it was my third week of preaching in three different cities. But he was not impressed. He was on his seventh full week of preaching in seven

different cities. So much for trading war stories with him.

“How in the world are you able to preach seven weeks in a row?” I asked. I assure you, I did not ask this question because I wanted to match his feat of extensive traveling. I asked the question as one who struggled (and still does) with being called at times to do things or go places that I would rather not. How do you keep going when you don’t feel like going? How do you keep doing what you are called to do when you don’t feel like doing it? How do you serve at a place you would rather not be?

The pastor answered my question by telling me a story about his days on his high school’s football team decades ago.

He was an aspiring football star, and he wanted to go pro as a running back. He was confident he should be his team’s starting rusher, but it turned out coach had other ideas. He put him on defense. The star-in-the-making, determined to find a way to get the coach to change his mind, came up with an ingenious plan: blow plays. He thought if he underperformed on defense, coach would see his mistake and put him on offense. So he slacked off, and his plan succeeded—sort of.

The coach did indeed notice his bad play and pull him from defense. But the coach didn’t move him to offense—he benched him! The wannabe running back didn’t get to play at all for the rest of the season. “I learned an important lesson from that experience,” the older, wiser pastor concluded. “If you don’t want to ride the bench, you better just play where the coach puts you.”

This principle is infinitely more important in ministry than in sports. Many of us pastor three different churches at the same time: the church where we were, the church where we are, and the church where we want to be. In the process, we become unfaithful in our stewardship of our present assignment. You cannot go back

to where you were. That was then and this is now. And you do not know what the Lord will do in the future. You do not know when or where your next assignment is (or if there even is a next). Your only responsibility is to be responsible. And the Lord has only made you responsible for your present assignment.

There has been a peculiar cycle in my ministry over the years. When a vacant church has shown interest in me, I've been so entrenched in my current ministry work that it was not even a consideration that I would go anywhere else. And the times when I really wanted to go someone else, there was no other church interested in me. During one low point, I complained to my wife that I was ready to leave. I gave her multiple good reasons why I felt it was time for us to move on to a new assignment. She calmly asked, "Is there another church considering you that I don't know about?" I told her no. "Then I think that should be your sign to stop complaining and get back to work where you are," she replied.

I tried. But it didn't work. I still wanted to go. But there was no place to go. So I started investigating vacant churches online. When I found several prospects, I got the guts to tell my wife that I wanted to submit a résumé to these churches. Again, she responded calmly, but she made it clear she did not think this was the proper course of action.

That Christmas Eve, she asked me to ride to our pastor's house to drop off gifts. (This was a pastor at a different church; I believe every pastor should have a pastor.) When we arrived, the pastor took me into a certain room and asked, "What's this I hear about you sending out résumés to vacant churches?" My wife had set me up!

For the next three hours, my pastor lectured me. He threatened to disown me if he ever again heard that I was sending out résumés like some desperate single begging for dates. He also encouraged

me. He believed the Lord would one day move me somewhere else. He believed the Lord would one day send me away from my father's congregation to serve a different church. I did not foresee the things he talked to me about, but it was uplifting to hear that he had such confidence in what the Lord was doing in my life and ministry.

Then he hit me with a big punch. "The Lord is going to do great things through you, son," he said. "But you're not ready yet." There were many reasons why I thought things were not progressing in my ministry as quickly as I thought they should. The congregation I served was growing spiritually. Members received the Word eagerly, witnessed passionately, and served one another in love. But I foolishly fell into the trap of measuring my ministry by numbers. And I could have given you a long list of reasons why we were not growing faster by the numbers. *It was because of those who opposed my leadership to guard their territory. It was because we were not in the right location. It was because my ministry strategies were not being enthusiastically followed. It was because other pastors were jealous and worked to keep me down.* But I never thought that the issue might be as simple as the fact that the Lord had me where He wanted me.

In the parable of the talents, Jesus said, "For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability" (Matt. 25:14–15a). The master was generous. But he was no fool. He knew his servants. And he was wise enough not to give a servant more than he could handle. The master gave to each of his servants according to his ability. So the Lord does with us.

There are many times when we are tempted to feel we have been given the wrong ministry assignment. We want to be some-

where else. And we nurse that desire until we think and feel that we should be somewhere else. We act like we know what's better for the team than the Coach. In the process, we forget that it is a privilege just to be in the game. None of us are on the team because we were first-round draft picks the Lord couldn't afford to pass up. We don't deserve to be on the team, much less in the game!

Whatever you do, don't neglect your present assignment. Trust the Coach. Remember that He wrote the playbook and devised the game plan. He will move you if and when He determines it is time. In the meantime, play your assigned position. Give it your best. Be faithful. Cheer on your teammates, including—no, especially—those who are in a position you would love to have. And be thankful that the Coach has called your number at all! If you don't want to get benched, just play where the Coach puts you.

Chapter 8



IN PRAISE OF LONG PASTORATES

Benefits of pastoring at one place for a long time

My orientation to pastoral ministry is bent toward long pastorates. My father, childhood pastor, and first ministry example, H. B. Charles Sr., served the church I grew up in for more than forty years. Growing up in this pastor's house, I assumed that pastors stayed put for long periods of time, rather than moving from place to place.

When my father died, one of his best friends took me under his wing, as both a son and a mentee. He was the pastor who ordained me into pastoral ministry. He has served the same church for more than fifty years, as assistant pastor and then senior pastor. My own pastor (as I said, every pastor needs a pastor; those who lead still need to be led) has served his congregation for more than forty years. Beyond these primary mentors, many of the men who have shaped my faith, theology, and philosophy of ministry have had long pastorates.

Of course, not every man is called to, or cut out for, long pas-

torates. The calling of the Lord on each person's life is unique. Some men are not divinely wired for long pastorates. After a few years, they get a sense of spiritual restlessness and become drawn away to the next ministry challenge. Some pastors are called to serve different congregations for relatively shorter periods of time. I even know several men who believe they are called by God to be interim pastors who lead congregations as they are looking for permanent pastors. And there is nothing wrong with that. This is exactly what is needed at certain times and in certain places.

There are also spiritual leaders who serve in denominational structures that do not lend themselves to long pastorates. I have friends and colleagues who serve in denominations where the bishop determines where each pastor in his district will serve every year. I have been invited to preach by brothers in those denominations and by the time the date arrives they have been moved to another church. Honestly, I would not want to serve in that kind of system. I believe effective pastoral work takes time. And you best serve a congregation when you have an intention to stay for a long time. But there are those whose biblical convictions about church government and practice find these settings to be where they should faithfully serve the Lord Jesus, even though they are often uprooted.

There are some occasions in which long pastorates are detrimental to the soul of a pastor and the health of a congregation. In some instances, longtime members of a church develop a sinful sense of ownership of a church. "This is our church," they think. "We were here before you arrived, and we'll still be here when you are gone!" The selfish attitude and divisive actions of these church bosses become detrimental to the mission of the church. Gifted people, big givers, and long-term members can make the church

a glorified social club, rather than the new community of gospel-loving, gospel-living followers of Jesus Christ.

But the blame should not be placed at the feet of longtime members. Pastors who serve a local church for a long time can also adopt this corrupt and corrupting mindset, using the church to build their own little kingdom. Unfortunately, I have seen pastors spend the best years of their lives building strong congregations, only to spend their declining years tearing down what they have built. Some men do not know when to let the work move forward without them. They build a moat around themselves to make sure no one can move them, no matter what it costs the church. They even leave without leaving. By stepping down without going away, they ruin the opportunity for the next pastor to lead by undermining his ministry.

Still there are times when it is just not possible for a pastor and congregation to serve Christ together for a long time. Division and turmoil may arise that make it best for a pastor and congregation to part ways, rather than damaging their witness for Christ with infighting. The Lord may call a pastor away to another place of service, even if things are going relatively well in the church. Or sometimes a pastor is just the transitional guy that God uses to get a church through a difficult period. He is the guy between the last guy and the next guy.

Yet I still believe it is best—both for pastors and congregations—when a man plants his flag at a local church and serves a people the Lord has called him to for the long haul. It is usually a benefit to have stability at the top of any organization. Churches are no different. Unhealthy patterns develop when there is constant pastoral turnover in a local church. When a church repeatedly refuses to let the pastor lead the church, it usually means that people

who are not called to be pastors are actually leading the church from the pews. They may be called Deacon, Sister, or Chairman, but they are the acting pastor of the church, nonetheless—wannabe pastors without biblical qualification, divine sanction, or Christian integrity.

But there are more important, spiritual reasons why long pastorates make a difference in a local church. It takes time to nurture a healthy congregation. A preacher can attract a big crowd in no time. But a crowd is not a church. A church is made up of those who trust, obey, worship, serve, give, witness, and suffer together as they grow in the grace and knowledge of Christ, not just people who show up on Sunday mornings. To nurture a Christ-centered, Bible-regulated congregation requires faithful teaching and great patience. A mushroom can grow in hours. It takes much longer to grow an oak tree. What are you trying to grow?

I praise God for the pastors and churches that hang in there together as partners in the gospel and maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace over decades. The Lord's blessings are on those men who maintain their integrity and preach the gospel faithfully year after year. Many serve without any acclaim. They write no books. They keynote no conferences. They win no awards. They build no megachurches. They lead no conventions. Yet they do not allow their place of obscurity to be an excuse for not giving God their best. May their tribe increase!

Brothers, churches are not stepping-stones to bigger churches. It is wrong to pastor a church looking out the window for a bigger or better opportunity to come along. A young pastor complained to an older pastor that his congregation was not as large as he deserved. The senior man asked, "How many members do you have?" "Only about a hundred," the young man answered. The old man snapped

back, “Son, one hundred souls are enough to give account for at the judgment seat of Christ!” Remember, prominence and significance are not the same thing. The one in front of the line is not necessarily the most important person in the line. When you stand before the tribunal of the Lord Jesus Christ, he will not ask you the size of anything. The Lord will only want to know if you have been good and faithful over the few things He has entrusted to your care. If the Lord intends for you to be somewhere else, believe me, He knows how to get you there. Until then, plant your flag and serve the Lord with gladness until He says, “Well done!”

Chapter 9



DON'T GO WITHOUT YOUR CONVICTIONS

*Maintaining your convictions as
you candidate for a pastoral position*

I did not candidate for the pastorate of the first church I served. My name was submitted for nomination from the floor during the call meeting. Some people could not hold in their laughter when the old man nominated me to succeed my father. Yet the congregation unexpectedly selected me as its next pastor. I was only seventeen-years-old, a senior in high school. I served that beloved congregation for eighteen years.

I also did not candidate for the church where I currently serve. It was made clear to me upfront that I did not fit the qualifications of what the church was looking for. That was fine with me; I was content where I was and had no desire to make a move. But for some reason I was asked to allow my name to be submitted as a pastoral candidate for the church. I was also asked to meet with the pulpit committee. It was the worst meeting in the history of pulpit

committees. I did not want to be there. And the committee did not want me there. This meeting was a courtesy we both agreed to. It was not a serious conversation, as neither of us expected that the thought of me being their pastor would go any further than this meeting. Yet several months later the church called me to be its pastor—God works in mysterious ways.

The first church I ever *did* candidate for did not call me to be its pastor. In fact, the congregation emphatically declared that they did *not* want me. As I was told, there were more than a thousand people in the call meeting. I was the only candidate. And a whopping eight people voted for me. Eight people! The whole situation was greatly embarrassing. But I was not disappointed when I heard the news of the church's decision. I already knew the church would not call me before the vote took place. I even tried to withdraw my name weeks before the meeting. I wanted to avoid embarrassment for everyone involved—especially me!

Several trusted mentors recommended me to the church. This gave me an inside track in the process. And it seemed initially that I would become the next pastor. But several doctrinal matters inevitably became an issue. They were not essential doctrines, but they were hot-button issues (speaking in tongues and the role of women in pulpit ministry). And we were not on the same page. I found it difficult to believe the church would call me once they knew what I did and did not believe. And these points of disagreement were not matters of compromise for me. They still aren't. I was sure their interest in me would wane once there was a conversation about my doctrinal convictions.

My wife did not want to relocate. But she told me she would follow me anywhere the Lord sent me. She insisted, however, that she could not support a move if I was not clear with the church be-

forehand about my convictions. We could not settle in there only for them to learn that I did not agree with them about these doctrinal hot potatoes. So I agreed to submit position papers to the pulpit committee. I was clear and straightforward about what I believe. When my wife went to mail the documents, I said to her, “Well, that’s the end of that.”

Yet they still invited me to meet the church leaders and preach in view of a call. I consented to the visit and even agreed to do a question-and-answer session with the congregation during their Sunday-school hour. I fielded questions from the committee and from the floor. Questions about the controversial doctrinal issues were at the top of the list. I explained what I believed and why. I tried to explain myself in the most non-divisive manner I could. And I would like to think I spoke the truth in love. But it did not matter. Just the fact that I was not where the church was on these matters was all they needed to know. I was on the wrong side of these issues, as far as this congregation was concerned.

After the question-and-answer session, I knew there was no way that congregation would call me to be its pastor. I could have preached down the heavens; it would not have made a difference. They had already made up their mind about me based on the answers I gave to their big questions. And they later made it clear they did not want me to lead their congregation in the call meeting—clearly. Loudly. Overwhelmingly.

More than ten years have passed since these events. As I remember this experience, I still feel the sting of embarrassment for some reason. But I do not think I would do anything differently if I had the opportunity to do it all again. I have simply concluded that it was not God’s will for me to pastor that church. That’s no cop-out to save face after the fact. It was a large, historic, vibrant church. I

was prayerfully open to a new assignment. People I trust encouraged me to pursue the opportunity. Men I respect thought I would be a good fit for the church. But it was not God's will for me to pastor that church. And I'm content with that.

After the church voted not to call me, I was warned several times that future doors would not open for me if I did not change my convictions about those controversial issues. I should use this church's decision as a sign that I need to get with the times. I am glad I refused to accept that shortsighted, knee-jerk counsel. Divine providence determines your ministry assignment, not human opinion. I would not have been called to my current church if I had abandoned the biblical convictions that caused that first church to reject me. More qualified candidates were rejected because they were fuzzy about their answers on these issues. At this point, I am convinced that most of the doors that are open to me now would not be open if I had changed my convictions.

I remember my first meeting with the deacons of the church where I currently serve. They kept asking me the same question in different ways (the same question that got me in trouble at the church that determined I was not the man for them). I answered their questions clearly and candidly, drawing from answers I had given to the same questions in years past. When I finished, they basically asked the same question again, trying to make sure I would not do the hokeypokey on them. After answering the question several times, I looked at the deacon chairman helplessly. He graciously stepped in and assured the brothers that we were on the same page. I would not have been taken seriously if we were not, no matter my training, experience, or accomplishments.

Let me be clear: every hill is not worth dying on. There are positions we have on issues that we should hold lightly, without

letting them become points of contention. If you are planting a church from scratch, you have a greater freedom to begin the new work; your doctrinal conviction and ministry philosophy can establish a precedent. But if you are being considered by an established church, chances are there will be different points of view on some things. But this should not turn you away from considering the opportunity to lead a traditional congregation. Pastors and congregations grow and mature over time. “Complete patience and teaching” are essential parts of the pastoral charge (2 Tim. 4:2b).

You must learn to love people, teach the Word, and wait on God to change hearts and minds. Yet there are some convictions that define who we are. They shape our worldview and philosophy of ministry. We don't hold these positions, they hold us! To deny what you believe would be wrong in these instances. “For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin” (Rom. 14:23b). On these issues, you must not sell out. Not for a bigger pulpit. Not for a larger platform. Not for a greater opportunity. Not for a better salary. Not for anything.

Chapter 10



GUARD THE BANK!

Keeping the main thing the main thing

I was in the midst of my pastoral transition from Los Angeles to Shiloh Baptist Church in Jacksonville. As any pastor beginning a new work, I was both excited and nervous. Convinced the Lord had given me this new assignment, I looked forward to the new opportunities that were before me. There would be challenges ahead. I knew that. Yet I faced those inevitable challenges with great expectation. In fact, I believed the challenges were a major reason the Lord made this transition in my life. I was being pulled out of my comfort zone to stretch my faith, deepen my confidence in God, and force me to learn new life-lessons.

But there was one issue I was very concerned about. I had not been the new guy in a very long time. I began the new work with eighteen years of pastoral experience, but that was all at one church. I wasn't really sure how being the new guy worked. I only knew that being the new guy can be a good thing and a bad thing at the same time. You only get one chance to begin a ministry at a local church.

I wanted to get it right. But what should I focus on at the start of my new charge?

I called several friends who had recently gone through ministry transitions. Their advice was invaluable, but one conversation in particular stuck with me. This pastor and I have been friends for some time. He knew a good deal about the church I was leaving from our conversations over the years. He also knew a lot about the church I was going to. In fact, he was the pastor who recommended me to the church. I thought he would be a good person to advise me about practical dos and don'ts as I began this new phase of my pastoral ministry journey. When I asked for his advice, he responded by telling me a story his pastor had told him years ago.

Here's the story . . .

A band of thieves staked out a town, scheming to hold up the local bank. But the town was pretty well-guarded. The robbers could not find a way to sneak in without being detected. There were no suitable access points for them to launch an attack. But they were determined to stick up this town and score big. They only needed a plan. After some deliberation, they devised a strategy and went to work. Several of the thieves went out to the local stables, set them on fire, and then fled the town. The townspeople rushed out to the stables to put out the fire. The sheriff and his deputies took off in hot pursuit of the bandits that fled the town. As they put out fires and chased fleeing suspects, the remaining robbers robbed the bank!

When my friend finished telling me the story, I did not need him to give me the punchline. I got the point loud and clear. But he told me anyway. "Whatever you do when you get to Jacksonville, brother, make sure you guard the bank!"

At some point in the pastoral candidacy process, someone

inevitable asks what your vision is for the church. This is a bad question. It is rooted in corporate models of leadership, not a biblical philosophy of ministry. (For the record, Proverbs 29:18 is not about pastoral vision. It is about divine revelation. The people do not perish because you do not have a compelling ministry plan to chart out for them. The people cast off spiritual restraint when they are not guided and governed by the Word of God.)

In many instances, this question of vision can be a part of a glorified beauty contest. The committee wants to know which potential pastor had the biggest bag of tricks to grow the church. This process may cause the candidate to feel undue pressure to promise what he cannot deliver. He begins to manipulatively politic in order to win an office, rather than prayerfully seeking the will of God for his family and ministry and that congregation. This “vision-casting” pastor often gets the church. But he begins his work focusing on the wrong things. He is concerned about fulfilling the pastoral vision he has cast for the congregation, rather than fulfilling the Great Commission the Lord Jesus Christ has given to the church (Matthew 28:18–20). And he sets a precedent of mixed-up priorities that he has to spend the rest of his ministry trying to undue.

But the danger is not just about how you begin. You must desire to finish well, too. Read the story of the kings of Israel. Over and over again you will meet men who began the journey headed in the right direction, but they took a wrong turn that shipwrecked the leadership. The goal is to end your ministry able to say with Paul, “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who

have loved his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6–8). To finish strong, you must guard the bank.

In ministry, there are many times we are tempted to pay too much attention to secondary matters. The urgent screams for our attention, causing us to ignore the quiet whisper of what is most important. The good becomes the enemy of the best. We invest all of our resources in protecting the stables. In so doing, we leave the bank unprotected. This is not the way to spiritual victory, true success, or God-glorifying fruitfulness. If you give all you have to keeping the stables safe, you lose the resources you need to care for the town as the bank is looted. But if you guard the bank, you can build more stables.

A new pastor began his ministry by meeting with the key leaders of the church board. The church board members introduced themselves and told the new pastor about their area of ministry. Each department leader proceeded to tell him what was expected of him, stressing the importance of their department, and making it clear that the kingdom of heaven was at hand only if the pastor devoted his chief energy to that department. The long series of speeches and the tension-filled atmosphere made it impossible for him to give a detailed reply to all he heard. So when the series of priority-shaping speeches finally ended, the pastor stood up and said, “Thank you for your advice. I will try to please you all, but I shall try most of all to please God.” He then prayed and ended the meeting.

This is what it means to guard the bank. Do not allow yourself to be distracted by secondary things. Do not use your strength to climb a ladder that is leaning against the wrong wall. Do not spend your energy running in different directions at the same time to please people. Focus on those things that spread the gospel, build up the saints, and glorify the Lord.

When Paul met with the Ephesian elders for the last time, he did not talk to them about building projects, growth strategies, cultural engagement, ministry innovations, or strategic planning. He charged them to guard the bank:

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish everyone with tears. (Acts 20:28–31)

Paul was well aware of what would happen if the church's overseers took their eyes off themselves and the flock.

We must keep our priorities straight.

We must guard our life and doctrine.

We must be consumed by the glory of God in everything.

We must yield to the preeminence of Christ over the church in all things.

We must let the church be the church.

We must make disciples of all the nations.

We must preach the Word in season and out of season.

We must let the Word of God be the final authority and firm foundation for ministry.

We must season and marinate all that we undertake in prayer.

We must keep the main thing the main thing.

We must guard the bank at all costs!

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON 

APPLE BOOKS 

GOOGLE PLAY 

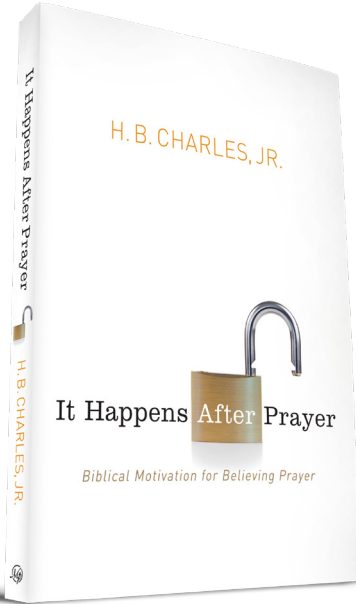
TARGET 

WALMART 

LIFEWAY 

BARNES & NOBLE 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 



We can't control the disasters of life, but we can control how we respond to life's challenges. Job loss, natural disasters, crime, and so many other difficulties plague the lives of believers. So, what do we do when facing tragedies and triumphs? We pray. And then we pray some more.

**Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:**

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

APPLE BOOKS



AMAZON



WALMART



TARGET



LIFEWAY



GOOGLE PLAY



CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 

BARNES & NOBLE





CHAPTER 1

It Happens After Prayer

*Call to me and I will answer you, and will tell you great
and hidden things that you have not known.*

JEREMIAH 33:3

Life happens. Faith weakens. Temptations attack. Satan oppresses. Needs overwhelm. Sickness comes. Finances disappear. Divorce looms. Loneliness suffocates. Friends betray. In addition, decisions paralyze. Worries strangle. Careers stall.

The challenges of life confront us all. You cannot cancel your appointment with trouble. And you do not know when pain will show up in your life. Just be sure it's coming. There is nothing you can do to stop it.

That's the bad news. Here is the good news: Though you may not be able to control what happens to you in life, you can control how you respond. This is the wonderful benefit of the Christian

life. To trust in Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord does not bring an end to all of your troubles, no matter what some high-profile religious personalities falsely teach. To the contrary, following Christ will produce trials that you would never face otherwise (John 16:33; Acts 14:22; 2 Timothy 3:12). Christianity is a battleground, not a playground. But faith in God ensures that you will never have to stand and fight alone (Ephesians 6:10–20). The believer can live with the assurance that the Lord is there (Psalm 46:1).

Yes, Christianity is a battleground. Yet *the presence of your divine Ally provides sufficient resources for every struggle you face.*

I repeat. There is nothing you can do to stop bad things from happening in your life. But you can determine your response.

You can turn the other cheek.

You can go the second mile.

You can love those who hate you.

You can bless those who persecute you.

You can forgive those who offend you seven times in one day.

You can overcome evil with good.

You can be steadfast, immovable, and always abounding in the work of the Lord.

You can give thanks in all circumstances.

You can count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds.¹

In his little book, *Wishful Thinking*, Frederick Buechner defines what a Christian is for the uninitiated. “A Christian isn’t necessarily any nicer than anybody else,” he concludes. “Just better informed.”² Isn’t that wonderful? Being a Christian does not make me superior to the unbelievers around me. It does give me

options that the unbeliever does not have, or even know are available. Therefore, I do not have to respond to my problems as those who do not know God. I can choose to be happy. I can choose to trust. I can choose to love. I can choose to forgive. I can choose to hope again.

Some people are like thermometers. They only register the condition of their surroundings. Other people are like thermostats. They regulate the conditions they find themselves in. Their circumstances do not dictate how they think or feel or act. They have a spiritual “climate control” that enables them to be strong and stable and steadfast, whatever the situation.

The apostle Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi, “I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:12–13). That is the testimony of a thermostat.

How do you respond to life’s dangers, toils, and snares? Are you a thermometer or a thermostat? What do you do when life tumbles in on you? Do you try to manage the overwhelming circumstances of life with your own strength, wisdom, and resources? To try is to be like the young man who just received his plumber’s license. A friend took him to see the Niagara Falls. He stared intently at it for several minutes, and then whispered, “I think I can fix this.” No, you can’t.

Or do you endeavor to manage your pain and problems with work, money, toys, alcohol, drugs, entertainment, pleasure, or the

myriad of other vanities the world offers? This won't work either. John wisely warns,

Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. (1 John 2:15–17)

There is only one reliable option for responding to the things that you would change if you could, but you've tried and you cannot. It is what Moses did when the burden of leading the children of Israel got the best of him. It is what King Jehoshaphat did when he did not know what to do about the coalition of nations that were planning to attack God's people. It is what Nehemiah did when he received the bad news about the broken down walls of Jerusalem. It is what David did as he hid in a cave to escape Saul who sought to take his life. It is what Daniel did before an open window, even though he knew it would land him in a lions' den. It is what the church did at Mary's house, the night before Peter was to be put to death by Herod. It is what Paul and Silas did in the middle of the night, as they sat in jail on trumped-up charges. It is what Jesus Himself did in the garden of Gethsemane, as He agonized in the shadow of the cross.

You ought to pray about these things.

WHY PRAY?

Why pray? Will God hear our prayers? Does He care? Does prayer really make a difference? What can we realistically expect from God when we pray?

There are many good and important reasons why you should pray. In fact, it would be of great benefit for you to study the Scriptures to find out what they teach about why you should pray. But that is not the focus of this book. This is not a textbook that explains the whys and hows of prayer. My goal is to simply challenge you to respond to the vicissitudes of life with prayer, to pray without ceasing, and to pray with great expectations. To that end, let me highlight just the two most essential reasons you should pray.

GOD COMMANDS WE PRAY

You should pray because the Word of God commands you to pray. This should be all the reasoning we need to govern our attitude and actions toward prayer. As Christians, our chief concern in determining how we should view a subject is to answer this question: “What does the Word of God say about it?” If you are like me, you have a long way to go in submitting every area of your life to the authority of Christ. But our attitude must be there before our actions can catch up.

As a teenager, I was given a bumper sticker that reads: “If it’s God’s will, I will.” I still have it in my study to constantly remind me that He deserves and demands my total allegiance, unconditional surrender, and complete obedience. This is why I am committed to be steadfast in prayer, even though my flesh constantly

struggles against it. Prayer is an act of obedience to God. Even if there were no practical benefits to prayer (and there are many), we should be devoted to prayer simply because the Word of God commands it.

Prayer expresses our submission to and dependence upon God. The things you pray about are the things you trust God to handle.

Scripture does not present prayer as an optional response to life's challenges. Prayer is a divine mandate. The prophet exhorted, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near" (Isaiah 55:6). "Call to me and I will answer you," says the Lord, "and will tell you great and hidden things that you have not known" (Jeremiah 33:3). In the Sermon on

the Mount, the Lord Jesus declared, "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matthew 7:7). The apostle Paul instructs, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6). James asked, "Is anyone . . . suffering?" Then he advised, "Let him pray" (James 5:13).

Prayer is our Christian duty. It is an expression of submission to God and dependence upon Him. For that matter, prayer is arguably the most objective measurement of our dependence upon God. Think of it this way. The things you pray about are the things you trust God to handle. The things you neglect to pray about are the things you trust you can handle on your own.

Can you see why God commands us to pray? Prayer reflects our

confidence in the heavenly Father to care for our needs. When my kids ask me for something, I typically respond by reminding them their dad is a “poor black preacher.” But this does not discourage them in the least, even when they are asking for something I really can’t afford. Their confidence in their father’s ability to provide for them brings me so much joy. Moreover, God the Father delights in His children bringing their needs and wants to Him in prayer. It brings glory to the Father to respond to His children who pray in faith. But it grieves the Father when we take our problems to others but refuse to pray.

Believing prayer is our sacred duty to the heavenly Father. “Continuing steadfast in prayer,” instructs Paul, “being watchful in it with thanksgiving” (Colossians 4:2). What does it mean to “continue steadfastly in prayer”? It means to be devoted, fervent, and persistent in prayer. Let me bottom-line that for you: Don’t stop praying!

Be constant in prayer. Do whatever it takes to maintain and sustain your prayer life. Keep your heart in a posture of prayer before God. Pray for the will of God by praying according to the Word of God. Set a time every day for prayer and Scripture intake. Establish a personal prayer list. Develop friendships with other believers with whom you can partner in prayer. Pray when you feel like it. Pray when you don’t feel like it. Pray until you feel like it. Ruth Bell Graham said it well: “Pray when you feel like it, for it is a sin to neglect such an opportunity. Pray when you don’t feel like it, for it is dangerous to remain in such a condition.”

The words of the beloved hymn “What a Friend We Have in

Jesus” have become a part of my personal theology. I know they are just words of a song, not the divine revelation of Scripture. But they are true, nonetheless.

What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry everything to God in prayer!
O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear,
All because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.³

I have lived long enough to know and accept the fact that some pain is necessary, inevitable, and even beneficial. I fully accept this reality. But I have determined that I do not want to experience any needless pains. If I do not *have* to experience it, I don’t want to. Yet the truth is that we have all suffered unnecessarily, because we did not take everything to God in prayer.

Before you read another paragraph, pause and simply renew your commitment to the duty of prayer. Ask the Lord to help you continue steadfastly in prayer.

PRAYER IS A PRIVILEGE

After obedience to the Word of God, there is another essential reason you should be devoted to prayer. This second reason for the praying life is what the rest of this book is about. I hope you will read to the end. But here’s the point right up front. I can’t resist; this news is almost too good to be true. Better yet, it’s too good not to be true: Only a good and wise and sovereign God like ours would make prayer a duty and a privilege at the same time.

Let me say that again. Prayer is a privilege. It is not a burden-

some duty. It is a wonderful privilege. Even though Scripture commands us to pray, we should not view prayer as something we *have* to do. We should view it as something we *get* to do.

It is a privilege to have an audience before the Creator and Sustainer of the universe. The blood and righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ has given us access to the throne of grace. Every redeemed follower of Christ is granted an open door before the Lord Almighty. We can approach God in prayer with confidence. There we can obtain the grace and mercy we need (see Hebrews 4:16).

Yet the privilege of prayer is greater still.

Not only does God command us to bring our needs to Him; He also promises to hear and answer our prayers.

“Why should I pray?” you ask. Answer: Prayer works! More accurately, God works when we pray. When we work, we work. When we pray, God works. Charles Spurgeon said, “Prayer is the slender nerve that moves the arm of omnipotence.”

In Ephesians 3:14–19, Paul makes some incredible requests on the behalf of the saints. In a prayer for spiritual enablement, he asks that the saints would be able to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge” (v. 19).

Come again? How can you know something that is beyond knowledge? That’s incredible. However, Paul’s remarkable prayer requests begin to make sense when you read the doxology in the next verse: “Now to him who is able to do far more abundantly

**We should not view
prayer as something
we *have* to do
but as something
we *get* to do.**

than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us” (v. 20). This truth applies to every prayer you pray. God is more than able to answer your prayers. What a promise! Whatever you are thinking about or asking for, God is able to do far more than that for you.

Whatever you are thinking about or asking for, God is able to do far more than that for you.

Do not misunderstand me. You should not view prayer as some rigged slot machine that gives you a jackpot every time you make a request. This book is not advocating “prosperity theology.” I am not claiming that you can write your own ticket with God by faith. Prayer does not guarantee your life

will be an unbroken cycle of health, wealth, success, and happiness. Prayer doesn’t work that way.

GOD ANSWERS PRAYERS ACCORDING TO HIS WILL

I believe in the exhaustive sovereignty of God, which is just a fancy way of saying that God is God. That is, God is God alone. This means that our prayers do not put God under obligation to do whatever we ask. It does not matter how long you pray. It does not matter how loud you cry. It does not matter how many verses you quote or promises you claim. It does not matter how many so-called positive confessions you make. As you pray, you must remember who God is. You must also remember where God is. Our God is in heaven, doing whatever pleases Him (Psalm 103:19). This is the basis upon which God answers prayer. God works all things according to the counsel of His will (Ephesians 1:11).

I had a head-on collision with this reality when I was sixteen years old. I was invited to Detroit to preach a weeklong youth revival. This was a big deal. I had never been that far away from home for that long to preach. I was beyond excited. But when it was time to leave, I had mixed emotions. My father was in the hospital. It was the first time in my life my father had ever been admitted to the hospital. He would be in the hospital the entire week. He was scheduled to come home the day I would return from Detroit.

A week later, as I was flying back to home to Los Angeles—to my father and family—my dad died. My brother and a friend waited for me at the airport; they too were unaware of his passing. They had been instructed to rush me to the hospital to see my dad, hoping to get me there before it was too late. When we arrived and asked for my father's room, I was told someone would come out to speak with me. Before they could come, I was being rushed home. Still no one told me what was going on. But I sensed something was terribly wrong.

During that ride home, I prayed harder than I have ever prayed about anything in my life. I quickly came to grips with the fact that it was my father's last day in this world. Yet I had what I thought to be a simple request. "Lord, please let me say goodbye to my father." With everything that was in me, I pleaded with the Lord to give me the opportunity to give my love to my dad before he was taken away from me. But when we pulled into the driveway, a family friend was there to break the news to me.

This was the most fervent prayer I had ever prayed. And the answer was no. But I write the next sentence without any hesitation,

reservation, or qualification. God answers prayer. Today I am several decades removed from my father's death. And in the intervening years, God has done far more for me than I could ask or think. As I look at that experience in the rearview mirror of life, I thank God

**Looking through
the rearview mirror
of life, I thank God
that He did not give me
what I desperately
requested that day.**

that He did not give me what I desperately requested that day. Before that experience, I believed prayer changes things. After that experience, I learned that prayer changes me. My life and relationship with the Lord were never the same since that day the Lord told me no. I am convinced that prayer works, even when it does not work the way you want it to work.

This is what the apostle Paul learned when he was “given a thorn in [the] flesh” (2 Corinthians 12:7 NIV). We do not know what this thorn was. But the language conveys the fact that it hurt. Paul responded with prayer. He asked the Lord three times to remove the thorn in the flesh. The Lord refused to do so. He did not give Paul what he asked. But He gave him something better. “My grace is sufficient for you,” said the Lord, “for my power is made perfect in weakness.” This transformed Paul’s perspective. He concluded, “Therefore I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9–10).

This can be your experience, too. It happens after prayer! What

happens after prayer? I'm glad you asked. "It" is a fill-in-the-blank that you can complete with any issue in your life. Whatever that special thing is that you need the Lord to do in your life, it happens after prayer.

Do you need faith to see beyond your circumstances?

Do you need divine intervention for a difficult situation?

Do you need relief from pain, grief, or sorrow?

Do you need strength to resist a temptation?

Do you need victory over some besetting sin in your life?

Do you need wisdom for a tough decision you have to make?

Do you need a door of opportunity opened for you?

Do you need healing or restoration of health?

Do you need reconciliation in some broken relationship?

Do you need grace to be faithful in a hard assignment?

Do you need assurance that God is on your side?

Each one of these happens after prayer! There are a lot of things you can do to fix your situation after you pray. But there is nothing you can do to fix the situation until you pray. Whatever it is you need God to do in your life, it happens after prayer.

A father and his son were riding their bikes together one day. As they rode down the trail, the father eyed a large branch that had fallen in the path ahead. Instead of riding around it, the father decided to use this as an opportunity to teach his son an important lesson. They pulled over, and the father instructed his son to move the branch out of the way.

The boy pushed and pulled, but was unable to move the branch. "I can't do it," he said, exhausted. "Sure you can, Son,"

replied the father. “Be sure to use all your strength.” The boy tried harder. But he could not move the branch.

Near tears, he said again, “I can’t do it.”

“Did you use all of your strength?” The father asked.

“Yes,” the boy answered.

“No you didn’t,” the father replied. “You didn’t ask me to help you.”

What is the obstacle in your path? What is it in your life that you have tried to move without success? Have you used all of your strength? No you haven’t—if you have not asked God’s help and prayed about it sincerely, diligently, and persistently.

It happens after prayer.



CHAPTER 2

God Is Not a Sleepy Friend

*I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything
because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence
he will rise and give him whatever he needs.*

LUKE 11:8

The disciples watched and waited as Jesus prayed. When He finished talking to the Father, one of the disciples had a question. Speaking for the rest, he said, “Lord, John the Baptist taught his disciples how to pray. Would you teach us how to pray?” (see Luke 11:1). This nameless disciple’s request prompted the lesson on prayer (Luke 11:2–13). In this chapter, I want to focus your attention on the Jesus’ instructions. But let’s consider the disciples’ request first.

When was this request made? The disciples asked Jesus to teach them how to pray after observing Him in prayer. This was

not the first time they had seen Jesus pray. The references to the prayer life of Jesus in Luke's Gospel alone make it clear that Jesus was devoted to prayer (see Luke 3:21; 6:12; 9:28–29; 22:31–32, 39–46). The regular, passionate, and reverent times of prayer that Jesus practiced moved and motivated the disciples. Finally, they asked Jesus to teach them to have the same sense of personal communion with God the Father. In this, the disciples should be our example. One of the primary reasons why you and I ought to pray is because Jesus prayed. Think about it. Jesus is the God-Man, the blending of complete deity and perfect humanity. In Him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily (Colossians 2:9). Yet Jesus prayed. And if Jesus felt it necessary to pray, how much more do we need to learn how pray.

To whom was this request made? The disciples asked Jesus to teach them to pray. This obvious point is significant. If you want to develop a new skill, learn a new trade, or nurture a new discipline, wisdom will lead you to consult a qualified expert to teach or train you. That's what the disciples did. Who can better teach you how to pray than the Lord Jesus? Being fully human, Jesus knows all about offering prayer. Being fully divine, Jesus knows all about answering prayer. Do you really want to learn how to pray? Go to the feet of Jesus and ask, "Lord, teach us to pray."

Why is this request so important? Luke 11:1 is the only place in the Gospels where the disciples directly ask Jesus to teach them something. They asked Jesus to teach them how to pray, not to preach or do miracles. In Luke 9 and 10, Jesus sent out the disciples with power to preach and perform miracles. When they

returned, they reported that even demons were subject to them in Christ's name (Luke 10:17). Yet they still needed to learn how to pray. Why? I believe the wonder-working disciples made this request because prayer is one of the most difficult things to learn as a follower of Christ. Harder than preaching and doing miracles! It is one of the hardest lessons to learn because it is one of the most important things to learn in your Christian life. No wonder the disciples asked, "Lord, teach us how to pray, as John taught his disciples."

There is no biblical record of John the Baptist in prayer or teaching his disciples to pray. But this passing statement by the disciples of Jesus is sufficient to conclude that Jesus did teach them. It was customary for rabbis to teach their disciples how to pray. A rabbi would teach his disciples his theory and manner of prayer. This seems to be what the disciples of Jesus expected from Him. They assumed Jesus would teach them His formula for prayer. The "Jesus secret" way to pray. It was the right request. But it was the wrong perspective. They were thinking about the form of prayer, when they should have focused on the object of prayer—God the Father.

Jesus granted their request in an unexpected way. He answered the question they should have been asking. Instead of teaching them a technique, He taught them a truth. Here it is: God answers prayer. This is the most important lesson you can learn

Prayer is one of the most difficult things to learn as a follower of Christ . . . because it is one of the most important things to learn in your Christian life.

about prayer. There is no more encouraging motivation to pray. Prayer matters because it works. Better yet, God works when we pray. God is willing and able to answer prayer. It pleases Him when we pray. The Father delights to hear and answer the prayers of His children. Prayer is the Lord's appointed means to give us what we need from Him.

How then should we pray?

PRAY WITH REVERENCE FOR GOD

Luke 11:2–4 records what is commonly called “The Lord’s Prayer.” But this is not a prayer that Jesus could have prayed. He never committed any sin that would require Him to ask for forgiveness (verse 4). And praise God for that! You cannot be a sinner and a Savior at the same time. This is our problem. This is why we need a Savior. This is why God sent His only Son to die for our sins on the cross. Christ is qualified to save sinners because He was not one.

So it may be more appropriate to call this “The Model Prayer.” It closely parallels the famous prayer recorded in Matthew 6:9–13. But Luke’s record is a direct response to the disciples’ request that Jesus teach them how to pray. Here Jesus teaches an essential principle for effective prayer: The God who answers prayer is God. Did you get that? God is not the man upstairs. God is not some cosmic ATM machine. God is not a heavenly Santa Claus. God is not a winning lottery ticket.

God is God. God alone is absolutely sovereign, infinitely wise, and unchanging in His goodness. God is wonderful, perfect, awe-

some, terrible, and majestic in every way. So we must not allow our access to God through Christ to lead us to take His greatness for granted. We must pray God-sized, God-centered, God-exalting prayers.

What does it mean to pray with reverence?

Pray directly to God. Jesus said, “When you pray, say: ‘Father.’” (Luke 11:2). Older translations read, “Our Father in heaven,” carrying over the words of Matthew 6:9. But in the Greek text, Jesus simply teaches the disciples to address God as “Father.” “Our Father in heaven” affirms both the transcendence and immanence of God. But the one word address—“Father”—emphasizes God’s closeness, immanence, and nearness.

We should find it difficult to get past this opening address—Father. We should linger there. We should rejoice in it. We should stand in awe of God’s gracious condescension. We have the privilege of bringing our needs and wants and sins and hurts and fears directly to God in prayer. Not a priest or patron saint or guardian angel. God. And we do not have to approach God like some desperate beggar asking a rich stranger for a big favor. We can go to God as little children going to a caring father.

In the Old Testament, the children of Israel had many different names for God. But they rarely addressed God as “Father,” and never in a personal, individual sense. But when Jesus taught His disciples how to approach God in prayer, He did not give them a

**“Our Father in heaven”
affirms both the
transcendence and
immanence of God.
Stand in awe of
God’s gracious
condescension.**

list of Old Testament names to memorize. He taught them to address God directly as our Father.

Jesus can authorize us to pray this way because He is our great High Priest, who makes intimate communion with God possible. We are beneficiaries of God's open-door policy because of Jesus Christ:

Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need. (Hebrews 4:14–16)

Pray about things that will bring glory to God. In the opening petitions of His prayer (Luke 11:2–3), Jesus rebukes the prayers that rush into God's presence with a grocery list of personal requests. God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will should be our top priorities in prayer. Prayer is about God accomplishing His will on earth, not about you accomplishing your will in heaven. The ultimate purpose of prayer is God and His glory, not you and your needs. Prayer is not about prayer itself. It is not about the answers you may get to your prayers. And it's definitely not about you. It is about God. True prayer is God-centered.

James warns, "You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (James 4:3). Selfish prayer dishonors God. Prayer works when you pray about things that

bring glory to God. Pray that God's name would be hallowed. Pray that God's kingdom comes. Pray that the will of God is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Imagine a father playing with his small children. He sits on the couch with several coins in his hand. His children sit on his lap and work to get his fingers open. One by one, they pry his fingers open. Then they snatch the coins and happily run away. The father is left sitting alone. Is this how you pray? Do you only come to the Father for the coins in His hand? Are your health, finances, family, career, and goals your consuming focus in prayer? Indeed, God is able to work mightily on your behalf in these personal matters. God is gracious and willing to act on your behalf. But don't get fixated with the pennies in His hands. Seek the face of God, not His hand.

Instead of wrestling for coins in the Father's hands, go after the really big stuff. "You make known to me the path of life," David sings. "In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore" (Psalm 16:11).

Pray as if everything depends on God. Jesus rebukes the kind of prayer that rushes into God's presence with a grocery list of personal requests. But that does not mean your personal requests do not matter to God. They matter. God wants you to bring them to Him in prayer. The later petitions of the Model Prayer teach us to pray personally. You can pray about your personal needs: "Give us each day our daily bread" (Luke 11:3). You can pray about your past sins: "and forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us" (v. 4a). You can even pray about your future trials: "And lead us not into temptation" (v. 4b). God cares

about every season of your life—past, present, and future.

These petitions teach us how to pray about personal matters. We are to pray as if everything depends on God. For instance, Jesus teaches us to pray for daily bread. We live in a time and place where food is much more accessible than in the days of Jesus. But the fact remains that you will not eat your next meal without God. It all depends on God. Dependence upon God is not a license to be slothful in your work, unrepentant in your sins, or carefree in your lifestyle. Remember, God feeds the birds, but He does not put worms in their nests. The birds have to scratch them up for themselves. Likewise, God's faithfulness does not cancel out your responsibility. You cannot do it without God. But God won't do it without you. You must work as if everything depends on you. But you must pray as if everything depends on God.

PRAY WITH DEPENDENCE UPON GOD

In Luke 11:5–8, Jesus teaches the disciples to pray with dependence by telling the parable of the friend at midnight.

A certain man received an unexpected guest in the middle of the night. The unexpected guest was on a journey. But nightfall caught up with him. He had nowhere to stay, and his resources were depleted. So he turned to a friend who lived in the area. When the unexpected guest arrived, the host warmly welcomed him. "My house is your house," he said. But as he made his unexpected guest comfortable, the host found himself in a crisis of hospitality. There was no food in the house, and the marketplace would remain closed until morning. But the host didn't panic. He

excused himself and went to a neighbor's house to borrow a couple of loaves until morning.

Not thinking about the lateness of the hour, this midnight caller knocked on his neighbor's door for help. "Who is it?" growled the voice on the other side of the door. The midnight caller identified himself and explained his dilemma—the unexpected guest, the empty breadbasket, the closed marketplace. The midnight caller was sure these facts would spring his friend into action. He was wrong.

"Leave me alone," barked the sleepy friend. "It has been a long day. The door is locked for the night. My family is in bed with me. I cannot get up and give you anything. Come back in the morning." The sleepy friend then stopped talking. He did not think he needed to say anything else to get the midnight caller to go away.

He was wrong. The midnight caller knocked again. And again. Then louder. He didn't stop. It was as if he was trying to wake up the whole neighborhood, not just his sleepy friend. It was an embarrassing display for both the midnight caller and the sleepy friend. Someone had to put an end to this. So the sleepy friend got out of bed and gave his neighbor several loaves of bread. But he did not do it out of friendship. He bribed the midnight caller with bread. He paid off this shameless neighbor with loaves, so he could get back to sleep. He was willing to give anything he had at the godforsaken hour just to get back to sleep.

This is not a pretty story. But it teaches an important lesson about prayer. Effective prayer requires steadfast dependence upon God. You really cannot pray any other way. In fact, you won't pray

without a sense of dependence. Need drives us to God in prayer. It does not matter how much you know about prayer. If you are not aware of your neediness and God's sufficiency, you will never learn to pray. Prayerlessness is a declaration of independence. But needy people pray. The story of the midnight caller and the sleepy friend raises two questions about how your prayer life reveals your level of dependence upon God.

Do you pray? The midnight caller received an unexpected visit from a friend who was on a journey. But he had nothing to feed his unexpected guest. So he went to his neighbor's house, almost instinctively. He was confident that his neighbor could and would supply the bread he needed. Is this what you do in prayer? When you have a problem you cannot solve, do you pray about it? When your friends come to you with a need, do you pray about it? When

Prayerlessness is a declaration of independence. But needy people pray.

it is midnight in your life, do you pray about it? Do you give up? Do you try to face the problem on your own? Or do you pray?

Early African-American converts to Christianity would pick specific places for prayer in the fields where they labored as slaves. They spent so much time on

their knees in prayer that the grass no longer grew in that spot. And their knees made deep impressions in the soil. These open prayer closets also became points of accountability. When anyone neglected prayer, it was obvious. Eventually, someone would say to his brother, "The grass grows on your path out yonder." Is your place of prayer marked by the impression of your time spent in

communion with God? Or has the grass grown on your path out yonder? Do you pray?

I am not talking about some quick, halfhearted, emergency prayer. I'm talking about earnest, diligent, persistent prayer. Do you have a sense of dependence upon God that causes you to knock on the door until you get what you need?

How do you pray? This is the big question the parable of the friend at midnight raises. It does not simply exhort us to pray. It teaches us to pray in a manner that will open closed doors. The key to the parable is in Luke 11:8. Jesus says, "I tell you, though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, yet because of his impudence he will rise and give him whatever he needs." The word "impudence" unlocks the meaning of this parable. The King James Version translates it "importunity." The New King James Version translates it "persistence." And the New International Version translates it "boldness." The Greek word simply means to be without shame. Scholars disagree about who this term applies to—the midnight caller or the sleepy friend. I believe the context of the passage and the message of the parable makes it clear that the term refers to the midnight caller.

Picture the scene again. It was past midnight. The sleepy friend was in bed with his family behind a locked door. And a clear statement like, "Leave me alone," is hard to misunderstand. Common sense, good manners, and personal respect should have made the midnight caller give up when his sleepy friend said he would not, could not help him. But shamelessness made the midnight caller continue to knock. He had a need. A guest showed up unexpectedly.

It was late at night. There was no bread in his house. The market was closed. And his sleepy friend was the only one who could supply what he needed. So there was no shame in his game. It didn't matter if he woke up everyone in town. He was determined to keep knocking until his sleepy friend opened the door and gave him the bread he needed.

This is how Jesus wants you to pray. Shamelessly. Sinful pride murders believing prayer. You will never take prayer seriously as long as you are looking for face-saving alternatives to get your needs met. You cannot seek God's face and save your face at the same time. Could this be why God allows you to have an unexpected guest with an empty pantry in the middle of the night? Life is easy when guests schedule their arrival and the market is open in the middle of the day. It is also easy then to forget where your help comes from. But the unexpected forces us to humble ourselves and seek God for what only He can provide.

The midnight caller went to his neighbor's house for bread at an inopportune time. And he did not leave until he had what he needed. His sleepy friend initially refused to help. But he kept knocking until his sleepy friend got up and gave him what he needed. The point of the parable is made by way of contrast. God is the opposite of this story's antihero. Jesus is teaching that God is not a sleepy friend. The psalmist sings, "He will not let your foot be moved; he who keeps you will not slumber. Behold, he who keeps Israel will neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:3-4). If a sleepy friend will meet the need of his bothersome neighbor just so he can get back to sleep, how much more will our God meet your

needs when you pray! The persistent requests of the midnight caller worked with the sleepy friend because they bothered him. But your continual prayer works because it honors the Father in heaven.

One hot afternoon, a certain woman walked to her neighbor's produce stand to buy grapes. The line was long. And each person seemed to get special attention. But she waited patiently. When she finally made it to the front of the line, the owner asked for her order. She asked for grapes. "Please excuse me for a minute," was the answer. Then the owner walked away and disappeared behind a building. For some reason, this rubbed the woman the wrong way. Everyone in line before her was greeted warmly. They were given special attention. And, most importantly, they were served immediately. But she was forced to wait. And when she got to the front of the line, she was forced to wait some more. She was offended. She felt the owner took her regular business for granted. The longer she waited, the angrier she became.

Finally, the produce stand owner re-appeared. And with a big smile, he presented her with the most beautiful grapes she had ever seen. He invited her to taste them. She had never tasted grapes so good. As she turned to leave with her delicious grapes, he stopped her. "Oh yeah, I'm sorry I kept you waiting," said the farmer. "But I needed the time to get you my very best."

How long have you been in line waiting on God to get to your request? How long have you been in line waiting for God to answer

**Don't allow your heart
to become angry,
impatient, or bitter as
you wait on God. And
don't stop praying.**

your prayer? How long have you been in line waiting for God to meet a need, solve a problem, or open a door? Whatever you do, don't get out of line. Don't allow your heart to become angry, impatient, or bitter as you wait on God. And don't stop praying. Keep knocking at the door. Wait on God. Trust that God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose (Romans 8:28).

PRAY WITH CONFIDENCE IN GOD

The parables of Jesus are often open-ended. The story ends. The actors leave the stage. The curtain drops. And you are left alone in an empty theater to wrestle with the meaning of what you just experienced. But that is not the case here. In Luke 11:9–13, Jesus makes the point of the parable absolutely clear. The message of the Parable of the Friend at Midnight is that God is willing and able to answer prayer.

God is able to answer prayer. Concluding the parable, Jesus declares, “I tell you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you” (Luke 11:9). The verbs—*ask*, *seek*, and *knock*—are imperatives. They are not optional suggestions. They are divine mandates. Jesus does not recommend prayer for your consideration. He commands us to pray. And these imperatives are in a grammatical emphasis that denotes continual or habitual activity. Literally, Jesus commands us to keep asking and seeking and knocking.

Is it a lack of faith to pray for something more than once? Absolutely not. But it is an act of obedience. Jesus commands us to

continuously ask, seek, and knock. In other words, don't stop praying. Pray until you get an answer. Pray until something happens. Pray until you get what you ask. Pray until you find what you seek. Pray until the door is opened.

What should you ask for in prayer? What should you seek in life? What door should you knock on for access? Jesus is not specific. He commands us to ask, seek, and knock. But He does not tell us what to pray for. I believe this means you can pray about anything and everything.

You can pray for forgiveness like David.

You can pray for wisdom like Solomon.

You can pray for healing like Hezekiah.

You can pray for a child like Hannah.

You can pray for deliverance like Jonah.

You can pray for mercy like the ten lepers.

You can pray for salvation like the thief on the cross.

Whatever it is, you can pray with the confidence that God is able to answer your prayer. That is the promise Jesus makes without qualification. Your asking will be rewarded with gracious gifts. Your seeking will be rewarded with spiritual discovery. Your knocking will be rewarded with divine welcome. Jesus even guarantees that your prayers will be answered: "For everyone who asks receives, and the one who seeks finds, and to the one who knocks it will be opened" (Luke 11:10).

What should we make of this blanket promise? Is it true? Does Jesus really mean that God will answer every prayer you pray? Answer: yes and no.

No, every prayer will not be answered the way you want it to be. Remember my sincere, urgent prayer that I might see my father before he died? But God's no is not bad news. It is further proof of the good, holy, and loving purposes of God at work in our lives.

How about you? Have you ever asked God for something that seemed so important or urgent at the time? I have. Several times.

Once I asked for a transition. God blessed me where I was. I asked

for relief. God used the pressure to strengthen me. Another time I asked for my territory to be enlarged. God taught me to live with my borders. Now, looking back, I recognize how foolish, shortsighted, and unnecessary some of my requests have been. Praise God for the prayers

**Praise God for
the prayers He did
not answer the
way I wanted!**

He did not answer the way I wanted!

Likewise, God will not answer every prayer the way you want Him to. Does a father grant every request his children make? Of course not. The Father knows what is best for His children, even when they do not. And the fact that His children will be angry does not cause God to cave in when the answer should be no.

But let me say it as clearly as I can. God answers prayer. God provides. God heals. God saves. God forgives. God strengthens. God comforts. God delivers. God reconciles. God guides. Your situation may not turn out the way you ask or desire. He may not act when or how you want Him to. But God does answer prayer. God is a wise Father who sometimes refuses what you want to give you what you need. But the Lord is good and you can trust Him to answer your prayers. "There is no such thing as unanswered

prayer,” wrote William Barclay. “The answer given may not be the answer we desired or expected; but even when it is a refusal; it is the answer of the love and wisdom of God.”¹

God is willing to answer your prayers. Jesus makes His final point by asking several questions about how good fathers respond to the needs of their children: “What father among you, if his son asks him for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion?” (Luke 11:11–12). These rhetorical questions assume negative answers. No caring father would respond to his son’s hunger cries in such a cruel, negligent, and harmful way. To do so would be a kind of child abuse or child endangerment. A good father will give his son bread and fish, not a serpent or scorpion. A good father will give his son five loaves and two fish, if he can.

Jesus assumes that a good father will take care of his children’s basic needs. None of the disciples would have argued with that point. Then Jesus closes this lesson on prayer by arguing from the lesser to the greater: “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (Luke 11:13).

Wait a minute. Who is Jesus talking to? He is talking to His disciples. These are men who have forsaken the world to follow Him. Yet He calls them evil. By doing so, Jesus asserts the pervasive nature of remaining sin. At our best, we are still corrupted by sin, polluted by worldliness, and infected with selfishness. We are saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. But we still have evil in us that needs to be forsaken, cleansed, and overcome.

However, as evil as we are, we still know how to take care of our children. We provide for our children's needs. We even provide beyond their needs, when we can. We surprise them with undeserved gifts. In contrast, John says, "God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). If evil men know how to give good gifts to their children, how much more will God take care of His blood-adopted children.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said as much. "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to you children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" he told the crowd (Matthew 7:11). And in Luke 11:13, Jesus specifies one of God's best gifts: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him?"

Be careful not to misinterpret this verse. Jesus makes this promise *before* His atoning death on the cross, His glorious resurrection from the dead, and His permanent gift of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Everyone who lives and trusts in Christ on this side of these redemptive milestones is already a beneficiary of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Paul asserts, "Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him" (Romans 8:9). If you do not have the Holy Spirit, you are not saved. You are not a Christian. You do not belong to Christ. But if you are in Christ, the Holy Spirit lives in you. You do not have to do anything to receive the Holy Spirit. He is already there.

Every born-again Christian has all of the Holy Spirit he or she

will ever get. But the Holy Spirit is still trying to get all of you! When D. L. Moody was asked if he was filled with the Holy Spirit, he answered, "Yes, but I leak." So do I. So do you. But when you pray, God the Father has the Holy Spirit fill you afresh with all that you need to resist temptation, live obediently, model Christlikeness, love selflessly, and live victoriously.



CHAPTER 3

God Is Not a Crooked Judge

*And will not God give justice to his elect,
who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?*

LUKE 18:7

The meaning of some parables is not immediately apparent. That's not the case with the Lord's parable of the unjust judge.

Luke introduces this parable of Jesus by stating its intended purpose beforehand: "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart" (Luke 18:1). Jesus tells this parable because He knows that His disciples will be tempted to lose heart along the way. And the Lord gives a prescription to fill when our faith seem to be losing heart.

The term "lose heart" means to give up, give in, or give out because of weariness, frustration, or discouragement. It is spiritual

burnout that causes one's faith to become faint. Luke 18:1 is the only place this phrase is found in Luke's writings. But the apostle Paul uses it on several occasions. In 2 Corinthians 4:1, Paul says, "Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart." Later, in 2 Corinthians 4:16, he concludes, "So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day." He tells believers in Ephesus, "So I ask you not to lose heart over what I am suffering for you, which is your glory" (Ephesians 3:13). He says to Christians in Thessalonica, "As for you, brothers, do not grow weary in doing

good" (2 Thessalonians 3:13). And Paul writes to those in the Galatian church, "Let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

These Bible verses warn us that the temptation to give up is real and powerful and unavoidable. Every person will inevitably face quitting points in life. It does

not matter how long you have walked with the Lord, how much Scripture you know, or how deep your level of devotion to the Lord is. "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall," warns Paul (1 Corinthians 10:12). Be on your guard. You are not immune to losing heart. All of us will face quitting points at some time or another.

The temptation to give up is real and powerful. Every person will inevitably face quitting points in life.

FACING THOSE QUITTING POINTS

There are personal quitting points. They appear when you feel like you have given all you can give or that you have taken all you can take. You are at wit's end. You are crushed by the straw that broke the camel's back.

There are relational quitting points. They occur when dealing with someone you care about brings you to that can't-live-with-them-can't-live-without-them point of exasperation. Your relationship is more than strained. It's broken. You feel like you cannot go any further with this person.

There are moral quitting points. They loom ahead when you consider negotiating your values, because doing wrong seems to pay so well and doing right seems to cost too much. Without a doubt, life constantly offers you spiritual shortcuts. And they can seem very inviting when the pressure is on.

Finally, there are spiritual quitting points. These will tempt you when your faith begins to faint and you feel like giving up on God. During a spiritual depression we need to sing with the psalmist, "Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation and my God" (Psalm 42:5–6).

THE POWER OF PERSISTENT PRAYER

We all face quitting points in life. The question is: What do you do when you are tempted to lose heart? How should you respond when your faith begins to faint? Is there any counsel from the Lord to face those times when you feel like giving up?

The answer appears in Luke's introduction to Jesus' parable: "And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart." Did you hear the answer in the words of that verse? Prayer is the remedy for discouragement. Period. You should pray when you begin to lose heart. This is not a recommendation. It is not a suggestion that you can accept or reject at your discretion. It is not optional. The call to prayer is a moral imperative. "They ought always to pray," Luke says. It is wrong to give up at life's quitting points. You must pray your way through.

Of course, this is not an easy thing to do. Such diligence requires more than sporadic, halfhearted, or reactionary prayer. You ought always to pray. You are to continue steadfastly in prayer. You ought to pray until something happens. Diligence defeats discouragement.

**Continual prayer
will keep you from
losing heart.
Persistent prayer
revives the fainting
heart.**

Continual prayer will keep you from losing heart. Persistent prayer revives the fainting heart. This is why 1 Thessalonians 5:17 exhorts us to "pray without ceasing." What does this mean? Does it mean that you should do nothing but pray? No. It means that you are to do nothing without prayer. Don't take a step without prayer.

Don't make a decision without prayer. Don't take a step without prayer. Don't take action without prayer. You ought to always pray and not lose heart.

Jesus illustrates the priority and power of prayer with another parable recorded in Luke 18:2-5:

In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor respected man. And there was a widow in that city that kept coming to him and saying, 'Give me justice against my adversary.' For a while he refused, but afterward he said to himself, 'Though I neither fear God nor respect man, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will give her justice, so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming.'

This intriguing little parable has two main characters. First there is a judge, whom Jesus describes as a man "who neither feared God nor respected man." What a stinging indictment! This expression tells us that this man was morally unfit to be a judge. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge," teaches Proverbs 1:7; "fools despise wisdom and instruction." As one who did not fear God, how could this man properly administer the law of God?

There are many people today who think one's theology can be separated from one's ethics. In fact, many people act as if the two should never be joined together! But Jesus married the two by telling us that this crooked judge's lack of reverence for God corresponded with his lack of respect for people. I've often heard the statement "I couldn't care less" thrown around by those who don't really mean it. But it was actually the life philosophy of this judge. He literally couldn't care less about God or anyone else. He was a heartless, wicked man whose every verdict was purely motivated by his crooked self-interests.

The other main character of the parable is a widow. And Jesus

goes out of His way to describe her in desperate terms. First, she was a woman who lived in the highly chauvinistic culture of the ancient Near East. In a real sense, she had no personal rights. Her existence was tied to men in her life.

Likewise, she was a widow whose position, provision, and protection were all snatched away from her by the death of her husband. And, apparently, she didn't have a father, son, brother, or anyone else to speak up on her behalf.

Furthermore, this poor woman had an adversary who she could not handle on her own. This most likely means that she was entangled in a financial dispute with some man who was taking advantage of her.

Worst of all, this helpless, desperate widow happened to live under the jurisdiction of this unscrupulous judge who neither feared God nor respected people.

This widow did not have the power to force the judge to hear her case. But this widow did have something she could use . . . she had persistence.

So when this desperate loser went to this heartless winner for justice, he flatly refused to help her. Under normal circumstances, this would have been the end of the matter—leaving the widow helpless and hopeless. But the irony of this parable is that the loser wins. This widow did not have the power to force the judge to hear her case.

She did not have any powerful connections to influence him. And she did not have any money to bribe him. But this widow did have something she could use to convince the judge to change his mind. In a word, she had persistence.

Imagine the scene. The widow came to the judge's office, seeking justice against her adversary. The judge doesn't just refuse to help; he demeans her and kicks her out. The nerve of such a nobody to think he would act on her behalf! He then gets back to work, plotting further crooked schemes, never expecting to see or hear from this widow again. But when he leaves the office for lunch, there she is, asking for justice. When he returns, she is still there asking for justice. At the end of the day, she follows him home, asking for justice. And when he leaves for work the next day, there she is asking for justice. Unfortunately for this judge, he can't just issue a restraining order against this widow to make her leave him alone. So she keeps bothering him.

Finally, her punishing persistence wears him down and he agrees to hear her case and render justice. Can you hear him? "Will someone please help this old lady, before she knocks me out with unrelenting persistence!"

This is the parable Jesus tells to make the point that His disciples ought always to pray and not lose heart. Prayer is the remedy for discouragement. Persistent prayer revives the fainting heart.

In Luke 18:6–8, Jesus drives the point of this parable home with a series of questions: "Hear what the unrighteous judge says. And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?"

Let's wrestle with the implications of this parable in the same way. Consider these two big questions about the main characters of

this parable to help you understand why you ought to always pray and not lose heart.

A KEY QUESTION:

IS GOD LIKE THIS CROOKED JUDGE?

I want to offer two answers to this key question.

Yes, there is a real sense in which God is like this crooked judge. Like the parable of the friend at midnight in Luke 11:5–8, the lesson Jesus teaches about God in this parable is made by way of contrast, not comparison. God is the antithesis of this character. That is, God is not a crooked judge. But this does not mean that there are absolutely no similarities between God and this judge. They are polar opposites in terms of their moral character. But they share the same authoritative role. Both are judges. This unjust judge ruled his jurisdiction. Like it or not, the residents in his jurisdiction had to go to him to receive justice. In terms of ruling authority, God is like this crooked judge. God is sovereign. Divine sovereignty simply means that God is God alone. He rules and reigns over everything. God has absolute control, complete authority, and unimpeachable jurisdiction over all creation. Ultimately, God is the only being that truly has free will. Everything and everyone is subject to God's sovereign authority.

So here is a real sense in which God is like this crooked judge. God is in charge. The psalmist declares, "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases" (Psalm 115:3). And we must turn to God for justice. God is the only one who can make it right when things go wrong in our lives. This is the distinct nuance between

the two parables Jesus teaches on the subject of believing prayer. The parable of the friend at midnight teaches that God will meet your needs if you pray. But the parable of the unjust judge teaches that God will fix your problems if you pray. When things go wrong, you don't have to give up, give in, or give out. And you don't have to take matters into your own hands. God has everything under control.

Ultimately, God is not like this crooked judge. The unjust judge decides to help the widow, "so that she will not beat me down by her continual coming," he says (Luke 18:5). In this statement, the crooked judge uses a term that means to give someone a black eye. That's how this widow got her way with this judge. She beat him down with her nagging and unrelenting persistence. He finally decided to help her just to get her off his back. Herein lies the tension of the text—the contrast between this crooked judge and our heavenly Father. God is not a crooked judge. You have critically misunderstood both God and prayer if you think that prayer is about bugging God long enough or nagging God hard enough that you wear Him down to get your needs met.

"We must not conceive of Prayer as overcoming God's reluctance," wrote Richard Trench, "but as laying hold of his highest willingness."¹ You ought always to pray and not lose heart because God is not a crooked judge.

**When things go wrong,
you don't have to give
up, give in, or give out.**

OUR GOOD AND JUST GOD

This judge, who neither feared God nor respected man, was a stubborn, hardhearted man who was only motivated by crooked self-interests. But our God is a good God. James 1:17 says, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.” God does not shift or turn or change. And nothing that does shift or turn or change can eclipse God’s goodness. God is good all the time. *God’s character is good.* And God’s ways never contradict His character. God only and always does what is good. This is true no matter how bad things may get in your life. Indeed, life is hard. But God is still good. The goodness of God always outweighs the badness of life. So you can pray with confidence, knowing that God’s character is good.

Besides His good character, *God’s ways are just.* To say that God is just is to say that God judges by a righteous standard. In this sense, God is no respecter of persons. God’s judgments are not shaped by our comparisons, excuses, or rationalizations in any way. God doesn’t grade on a curve. God judges by a righteous standard: namely, His own good and holy character. If you want proof of the justness of God, run to the cross. There behold the miracle of divine justice, in which God demonstrated His unconditional love without violating His holy wrath. On the cross, God treated Jesus as if He had committed all of our sins so He could treat those who believe as if they had performed all of the righteousness of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:21). This is the miracle of the sacrificial and substitutionary death of Jesus that satisfies the justice of God.

Romans 8:32 rightly asks: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” In other words, if you can trust the justice of God to save you, you ought to trust God to sustain you, protect you, and keep you. The God who has settled your eternal destiny also oversees your daily experience. The Lord who has prepared an eternal home for you will get you safely there. “And whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified” (Romans 8:30). There is no need to worry. God will take care of you.

Behold the miracle of divine justice, in which God demonstrated His unconditional love without violating His holy wrath.

Besides God’s good character and just ways, *God’s timing is perfect*. Jesus asks, “And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them?” (Luke 18:7). This statement has proven difficult for scholars to interpret and translate. Literally, the Greek suggests that God may delay His coming or tarry long with His elect. But in verse 8, Jesus says, “I tell you, he will give justice to them speedily.” Well which is it? Does He tarry? Or does He come speedily? It is both. There are times when God forces you to sit in His waiting room. But when He acts on your behalf, He moves speedily.

God’s timing is perfect. This truth brings great comfort to my soul. God is never in a hurry. God is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90:2). God lives in one eternal now. He is not bound by clocks and calendars. It really doesn’t matter when the Lord shows

up. It's always the right time. He showed up for Noah years before the flood. But it was the right time. He showed up for Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego while they were in the fiery furnace. But it was still the right time. He did not show up for Mary and Martha until after Lazarus had been dead for four days. But it was still the right time. "Too late" is not in God's vocabulary. God knows how to act. God knows where to act. And God knows when to act.

**A SECOND KEY QUESTION:
ARE YOU LIKE THE PERSISTENT WIDOW?**

Let me offer three answers to this question.

Yes, there is a real sense in which you are like this widow. This poor widow went to the crooked judge and pleaded, "Give me justice against my adversary" (Luke 18:3). She had an enemy who she could not handle on her own. Likewise, you and I have an enemy who we cannot handle on our own. This widow was probably in a financial dispute with some man who had taken advantage of her. But our conflict is a spiritual dispute with eternal implications in which we struggle against the enemies of our souls—the flesh, the world, and the Devil—that seek to take advantage of us. It's a war on terror that demands that highest level of alert.

Here's the terror plot. The flesh wants you to be happy. The world wants you to fit in. And the Devil wants you to be religious. Admittedly, these things don't sound very threatening. But the underlying danger lies in the fact that the flesh wants you to be happy without God. The world wants you to fit in without God. And the Devil wants you to be religious without God.

The temptation to live without God at the center of your life is our spiritual enemy's weapon of mass destruction. The adversary knows that you cannot handle him on your own. So he constantly schemes to undermine your faith in God. In fact, the Enemy wants you to believe that God is a crooked judge so that you won't pray. If you don't pray, the Enemy is assured the victory. You are like this widow in that you have an adversary that you cannot handle on your own.

However, if you are in Christ, you are not like this desperate widow. Jesus asks, "And will not God give justice to his elect, who cry to him day and night?" (Luke 18:7). The word "elect" is precious. It means to be chosen by God. *Election* describes the process of salvation from a divine and eternal perspective. It means that you are saved because God chose you, not because you chose God. It was God's choosing of you that enabled you to choose Him. Thus, those who are saved are God's elect. That's what you are in Jesus Christ. You are God's chosen one.

Elect means to be chosen by God. Election describes the process of salvation from a divine and eternal perspective.

Ephesians 1:3–4 says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him." God has chosen you for Himself in Christ. In fact, before God said, "Let there be light," He had you on His mind! As one of God's chosen ones, you have been placed in a position of

complete spiritual blessing. So you are free to come to God as one of His elect, not as some helpless widow.

As God's elect, you have direct access to God. This widow didn't have any real access to the judge. Even though he was the judge over her jurisdiction, she had no reason to believe that he would listen to a nobody like her. Unless you could do something to benefit him, this judge didn't have time for you. But that is not the Christian's predicament. Prayer is not a scheduled appointment with a busy executive. It is quality time with a loving Father. You and I have complete access to God through faith in Jesus Christ. We can come boldly and with confidence to the throne of grace to receive grace and mercy when we need it (Hebrews 4:16).

Likewise, as God's elect, you have an advocate before God. This widow did not have anybody to speak to the judge on her behalf—not a husband, not a father, not a son. No one. But you and I have a mediator who intercedes on our behalf before God. John the apostle writes, "If anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). An "advocate" is a defense attorney. He speaks on the behalf of the accused. When the accuser of the brethren speaks against you (Revelation 12:10), your divine Advocate speaks on your behalf, pleading His blood on your behalf. Really, the fix is in—a *good* fix for our would-be problem. God the Father is the Judge. And the Lord Jesus Christ, our elder Brother, is our defense. And so Paul declares, "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is

interceding for us” (Romans 8:33–34).

Break out of your widow mentality!
Remember you are God’s elect.

Furthermore, as God’s elect, you have assurance from God. This widow did not have any agreement with this judge that would obligate him to do anything for her. How could she, dealing with someone who did not fear God or respect men? With

this crooked judge, seeing was the only way to believe him. You couldn’t take him at his word. He was as sure to change his mind as the wind is to blow in a different direction. But this is not how our God operates. Balaam was right: “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Numbers 23:19).

You and I have the faithful promises of almighty God to appeal to as we cry out to Him for help. “His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire” (2 Peter 1:3–4). Praise God! We can take God at His word. We can trust the Lord to do what He says. We can stand on the promises of Christ our King.

Are you like this desperate widow? Let me give you one more

**When the accuser of
the brethren speaks
against you, your
divine Advocate
speaks on your behalf,
pleading His blood on
your behalf.**

answer to ponder: I don't know. Really, I don't know. For Jesus turns the parable of the unjust judge on its head with a closing question: "Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b).

Be clear; Jesus did not ask this question out of ignorance. If such faith is to be found, Jesus is the only one who can find it. Likewise, Jesus did not ask this question in despair. The Son of Man will find faith on the earth when He comes again. It may only be a remnant of humanity. But it will yet be a great congregation assembled from every nation, tribe, tongue, and people group on the earth. Nor is Jesus predicting a worldwide apostasy in the last days.

Rather, this is a spiritual challenge that each of us must face. As you read through this passage, the question of the parable seems to be whether the Lord will show up when His elect need Him. But now this parable is telling us the real question is not whether the Lord will show up. The real question is, Will you show up when He shows up? Are you like this persistent widow? Will you persist in prayer? Or will you lose heart? Will you give up and throw in the towel before the Lord brings justice to you speedily? When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth?

Jesus predicts, "And because lawlessness will be increased, the love of many will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 24:12–13). Of course, it is not enduring that saves. Salvation is a gift we receive, not a reward we earn (Ephesians 2:8–9). But steadfast endurance is the distinguishing mark of those who are truly saved. "And I am sure of this," Paul

testifies, “that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:6). God is going to do His part. But you must do your part.

The fact is we are so weak, limited, and sinful that we need God to help us do our part as well. And He has made provision to help us. He has given us the wonderful privilege of prayer. Will your love grow cold? Or will you endure to the end? You can endure to the end if you always pray and do not lose heart.

Interested in the whole book?
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON 

APPLE BOOKS 

GOOGLE PLAY 

TARGET 

WALMART 

LIFEWAY 

BARNES & NOBLE 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 