

Spiritual Disciplines for Holiness in the Life of a Minister

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Abstract

Pastors need to use the spiritual disciplines daily and diligently to cultivate sanctification toward God to know him increasingly better. With the Spirit's blessing, such cultivation is essential for a truly God-owned ministry that results from the pastor's large, varied, and original life with God. Pastors must read Scripture diligently, systematically, prayerfully, and meditatively; pray unceasingly, read sound literature, listen to God-glorifying sermons, and profit from the sacraments, fellowship with believers, and sanctifying the Lord's Day. Even faithful stewardship of time and money, evangelizing and serving others, and the ministry of the Word through loving the Triune God and his people can be forms of a lifestyle of spiritual discipline that grows our relationship with God and promotes and sustains an effective ministry.

Keywords

Holiness, spiritual disciplines, prayer, fellowship, ministry, love

Paul writes to Timothy, “Take heed unto thyself” (1 Tim 4:16).¹ Take heed, pay attention, be alert, the apostle says, for you are in danger, dear minister of Christ, and you must keep watch over your very self. For you must be “an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (v. 12).

One might think that the vocation of preaching, teaching, and leading in the church might fortify ministers against serious spiritual dangers, but in fact, the opposite is often true. Charles Spurgeon spoke of the “secret snares” of the ministry, “and of these the worst is the temptation to *ministerialism*—the tendency to read our Bibles as ministers, to pray as ministers, to get into doing the whole of our religion as not ourselves personally, but only relatively, concerned in it.”² As ministers, we can handle the word of God as if it were no more than the words of men. We can take that which is holy for granted even as we live unholy lives. We can exhort others to holiness, but, like the Pharisees, not move an inch in that direction ourselves.

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

I. Pursue Holiness

Without holiness, no man—ministers included—shall see God (Heb 12:14). Perhaps no definition of sanctification, the process of becoming holy, matches that of the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 35): “Sanctification is the work of God’s free grace, whereby we are renewed in the whole man after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”³

It is impossible to separate godly living from a vibrant spiritual life and a God-owned ministry. The sanctification of our own heart is not an ivory-tower topic or an isolated experience. It is a daily way of life, an absolute

¹ Portions of this article are adapted from Joel R. Beeke, “The Utter Necessity of a Godly Life,” in *Reforming Pastoral Ministry*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 59–82; and the chapter on the faithfulness of God’s ministers in Joel R. Beeke and Paul M. Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, forthcoming). Used with permission.

² Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (London: Passmore & Alabaster, 1875), 1:10–11 (emphasis added).

³ *Westminster Confession of Faith* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1994), 297.

necessity—both personally and in relation to our calling as ministers of the gospel—if we are to live to the glory of God.

Jesus condemns the Pharisees and scribes for not being and doing what they proclaimed. They were condemned for carrying on a professional ministry in which a great disparity existed between lip and life, between the doctrine professionally proclaimed and the doctrine assimilated and manifested in daily living. “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat,” Christ tells us. “All therefore whatsoever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not ye after their works: for they say, and do not” (Matt 23:2–3). We as ministers are called to be as holy in our private relationship with God, in our role as husbands and fathers in our families and as shepherds among our people, as we appear to be on the pulpit. There must be no disjunction between our calling and living nor between our confession and practice.

The qualifications for elders remind us that spiritual leadership demands holistic moral excellence (1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9), not just to enter ministry but to abide in it. If a man cannot present himself as an example of sincere godliness and repentance over sin, he should not continue in the ministry. Those who are teachers will receive a greater judgment (Jas 3:1).

The influence of a minister’s example amplifies the impact of his sins. William Perkins noted Isaiah’s grief even of his “unclean lips” (Isa 6:8), most likely small faults in his speech, and said, “We learn ... what a tender conscience godly ministers must have above all men; namely, that they must make conscience, not only of the great and gross sins, but even of the lowest and least sins.”⁴

Pastoral oversight begins with one’s own soul. A minister must maintain a mindset of continual spiritual watchfulness (2 Tim 4:5).⁵ One of the greatest dangers a minister faces is a failure to keep watch over his own spiritual condition. Henry Martyn wrote in his journal, “Apparently outwardly employed for God, my heart has been growing more hard and proud. Let me be taught that the first great business on earth is to obtain the sanctification of my own soul; so shall I be rendered more capable also of performing the duties of the ministry.”⁶

⁴ William Perkins, *The Calling of the Ministry*, in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2014–2020), 10:240–41.

⁵ On spiritual sobriety and watchfulness, see Beeke and Smalley, *Reformed Systematic Theology*, 3:988–93.

⁶ John Sargent, *The Life and Letters of the Rev. Henry Martyn*, new ed. (London: Seeley, Jackson, & Halliday, 1868), 214.

We as ministers must therefore seek grace to build the house of God with both the hand of sound preaching and doctrine and the hand of a sanctified life. Our doctrine must shape our life, and our life must adorn our doctrine. “He doth preach most who doth live best,” wrote John Boys.⁷ We must be what we preach and teach, not only applying ourselves to our texts but applying our texts to ourselves. Our hearts must be transcripts of our sermons.⁸ Otherwise, as John Owen warned, “If a man teach uprightly and walk crookedly, more will fall down in the night of his life than he built in the day of his doctrine.”⁹

II. *Know the Lord Your God*

The heartbeat of a godly life is personal acquaintance with God. “Acquaint now thyself with him, and be at peace: thereby good shall come unto thee,” Eliphaz says (Job 22:21). Acquaintance with God will not only affect our entire ministry; it will also influence our redeemed humanity spiritually, intellectually, emotionally, and physically.

James Stalker said,

Power for work like ours is only to be acquired in secret; it is only the man who has a large, varied and original life with God who can go on speaking about the things of God with fresh interest; but a thousand things happen to interfere with such a prayerful and meditative life.¹⁰

Each aspect is essential to produce freshness, spiritual power, and unction in our preaching and pastoral work from week to week, year after year.

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

Spiritual life begins in the heart and, as a dynamic reality, is fueled by grace and knowledge. When our hearts as preachers are increasingly sanctified toward God, new hues and subtle nuances will be added to our preaching that will reflect our inner growth. Though we speak of the same Father, the

⁷ John Boys, *The Works of John Boys: An Exposition of the Several Offices* (repr., Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1997), 25.

⁸ Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 154.

⁹ John Owen, *Eshcol: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 13:57.

¹⁰ James Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models* (New York: Armstrong & Son, 1891), 55.

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

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

As ministers, we stand at the ocean's edge of God's vast being and inscripturated truth. There is so much more to explore and experience. Like Paul, we must press on: "This one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13–14).

• *A varied life with God.* The Psalms eloquently testify that knowing God and walking with him on earth is a varied experience. Some people view the Christian life as nothing but joy and victory. However, such a view would eliminate nearly half of the Psalms, which describe pain, sorrow, frustration, and loneliness as authentic parts of Christian experience. We ought, therefore, to look to the Psalms for a more complete understanding of what we will encounter in our walk with God.

Walking with God is a varied experience. A godly person may experience days of ecstatic joy and unspeakable peace followed by days of staggering struggle and groaning heaviness. There are times when pastors sing with David, praising God "with joyful lips" (Ps 63:5). But there are also times when we must cry out with Asaph, "Will the Lord cast off for ever? And will he be favourable no more? Is his mercy clean gone for ever? Doth his promise fail for evermore? Hath God forgotten to be gracious? Hath he in anger shut up his tender mercies?" (Ps 77:7–9).

If the soul of the preacher is estranged from this varied experience of walking with God, his preaching may become truncated and narrow, failing to incorporate large segments of God's word. Such preaching will not satisfy deeply exercised children of God as Paul's preaching did. Because Paul knew what anxiety was, he could teach believers how not to be anxious. Because he had personally battled fear and sin, he could preach to the fears and groanings of other believers (2 Cor 1:3–7).

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

There are arts of study by which the contents of the Bible can be made available for the edification of others; but this is the best rule: Study God's Word diligently for your own edification; and then, when it has become more to you than your necessary food and sweeter than honey or the honey-comb, it will be impossible for you to speak of it to others without a glow passing into your words which will betray the delight with which it has inspired yourself.¹¹

- *An original life with God.* God's word is filled with concepts of solidarity and community. Yet believers are also unique individuals. Jesus says that he knows all of his sheep by name, and they know him (John 10:3, 14). If our life with God is genuine, it will be original. We will not parrot the language or experience of another person. Christ's will for Peter was not the same as his will for John, and so Peter had to learn to stop wondering about what the Lord would do with John and simply heed the call, "Follow me" (John 21:20–22).

There is a sense in which every one of us must walk alone with God with a sense of pure, holy originality. We must trust God to sanctify us in every experience we are led through so that he can make us "able ministers of the new testament" (2 Cor 3:6). He leads us through these experiences to sanctify us in a way that perfectly fits us as individuals. He tailor-makes all our afflictions, joys, and experiences to perfectly fit his will for us.

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

III. Use Ordinary Spiritual Disciplines

How are we as pastors to cultivate holiness?

Discouragements and obstacles abound. Many of us confront much that is disheartening in our ministries and which rubs against our efforts to walk the King's highway of holiness. We often feel frustrated, disappointed, near despair, and quite unholy. So much of what we are makes us unprofitable, and so much of what we do appears to be fruitless. As John Stott said, "Discouragement is the chief occupational hazard of a leader."¹²

¹¹ Stalker, *The Preacher and His Models*, 53–54.

¹² John Stott, *Through the Bible, Through the Year: Daily Reflections from Genesis to Revelation* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2006), 131.

Still, the way to cultivate godly living is surprisingly simple: We are to walk with God in the way of his appointment, diligently using the means of grace and the spiritual disciplines, waiting upon the Holy Spirit for blessing. Godly living involves both discipline and the continued grace of the Holy Spirit. This dual emphasis upon duty and grace is fundamental to Puritan thinking on godly living.¹³ As John Flavel wrote, “The duty is ours though the power be God’s. A natural man hath no power, a gracious man hath some, though not sufficient; and that power he hath, depends upon the exciting and assisting strength of Christ.”¹⁴

To this Owen adds, “It is the Holy Ghost who is the immediate peculiar sanctifier of all believers, and the author of all holiness in them.” The Spirit supplies what we lack so that we press toward the mark. The Spirit enables us as believers to “yield obedience to God ... by virtue of the life and death of Jesus Christ.”¹⁵

The believer is empowered with “the diligent and constant use and improvement of all holy means and duties, to preserve the soul from sin, and maintain its sweet and free communion with God,” Flavel said.¹⁶ It has been well said, “If thou meanest to be devout, and to enlarge thy religion, do it rather by increasing thy ordinary devotions than thy extraordinary.”¹⁷ Let us examine in more detail what spiritual disciplines or means of grace the preacher may use to enlarge his walk with God.

1. *Read Scripture*

Pastors will cultivate holiness through the discipline of diligent, systematic, prayerful, and meditative reading of the Holy Scriptures (Ps 1:2).

- *Be diligent.* Physical health is profoundly affected by one’s daily diet. In such a way our spiritual health is affected by our habitual spiritual intake. There are times of great crisis in ministry when we are driven to extraordinary times of prayer, and there are times when we are too hard-pressed to pray. But these are not the normal times. If we are to have an expanding, varied, and original life with God, we must cultivate the discipline of setting aside a regular time in which we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures. Seek God’s wisdom with greater diligence than men mine silver and gold (Prov 2:1–4).

¹³ Daniel Webber, “Sanctifying the Inner Life,” in *Aspects of Sanctification: 1981 Westminster Conference Papers* (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), 44–45.

¹⁴ John Flavel, *A Saint Indeed, or the Great Work of a Christian*, in *The Works of John Flavel*, 6 vols. (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1968), 5:424.

¹⁵ John Owen, *Pneumatologia, or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, in *Works*, 3:385–86.

¹⁶ Flavel, *A Saint Indeed*, in *Works*, 5:423.

¹⁷ Jeremy Taylor, *Via Pacis*, no. 50, in *Jeremy Taylor: Selected Works*, ed. Thomas K. Carroll (New York: Paulist, 1990), 414.

Richard Greenham said, “Diligence maketh a rough way plain and easy.”¹⁸

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

Paul says, “All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Tim 3:16–17). In effect, he is saying, “Timothy, those Scriptures that were taught you by your God-fearing mother and grandmother are adequate to furnish you completely for a godly life and ministry.”

How often must Christ warn us as pastors, “Ye do err, not knowing the Scriptures” (Matt 22:29)? The word of God is the lifeline of our souls, the very heartbeat of our sanctification. We must be able to say with Jeremiah, “Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart” (Jer 15:16).

Proper preparation for reading the Bible is critical, however. Without it, our reading will seldom be blessed. Such preparation, according to Greenham, means approaching Scripture with a reverential fear of God and his majesty, being “swift to hear, slow to speak” (Jas 1:19); with faith in Christ, looking to him to open the meaning of Scripture to us as he did on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:31); and with a sincere desire to learn, a heart that is good soil to receive the word fruitfully (Luke 8:15).¹⁹

- *Be prayerful and meditative.* Ask for the Spirit’s light. Stop presuming that knowing the original languages of Scripture and using exegetical tools are sufficient to unlock the mysteries of the Holy Scriptures. None of us knows Hebrew and Greek like the scribes and Pharisees, yet they searched the Scriptures daily and missed their true meaning (John 5:39–40). We must pray with David, “Open thou mine eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of thy law” (Ps 119:18). Set your heart to study and obey God’s word. Ezra 7:10 says, “For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.”

¹⁸ Richard Greenham, *A Profitable Treatise Containing a Direction for the Reading and Understanding of the Holy Scriptures*, in *The Works of the Reverend and Faithfull Servant of Jesus Christ, M. Richard Greenham*, ed. H[enry] H[olland] (London: Felix Kingston for Robert Dexter, 1599), 390.

¹⁹ Greenham, *A Profitable Treatise*, 392–93.

After reading Scripture, meditating is critical. Reading may give knowledge, but meditation will add depth to that knowledge. Thomas Hooker defined the art of meditation as “a serious intention of the mind, whereby we come to search out the truth and settle it effectually upon the heart.”²⁰

Here are some suggestions for how to meditate:

1. Pray for the power to harness the mind and focus the eyes of faith on this task.
2. Read the Scriptures, then select a short passage on which to focus.
3. Memorize the selected passage.
4. Think carefully on the meaning and applications of the passage.
5. Preach the truth to yourself and stir up affections of love, fear, and so on.
6. Make a particular resolution of what action of obedience you will take.
7. Sing a Psalm related to the truth you have considered.
8. End with prayer for sanctifying grace and thanksgiving for God’s teaching.

We have lost the art of meditation. We have forgotten that disciplined meditation on the Scriptures helps us focus on God, for it involves our mind as well as our heart and affections. It transfuses Scripture through the texture of the soul. David says,

O how love I thy law! It is my meditation all the day. Thou through thy commandments hast made me wiser than mine enemies: for they are ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation. (Ps 119:97–99)

Meditation on Scripture is absolutely crucial for a pastor (1 Tim 4:15). Meditation helps prevent vain and sinful thoughts (Matt 12:35) and provides inner resources on which to draw (Ps 77:10–12), including direction for daily life (Prov 6:21–22) and strength against temptation (Ps 119:11, 15).

Meditation also enriches public prayer. Christ says, “Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh” (Matt 12:34). The minister who interacts with God during the week through prayerful, meditative study of the Scriptures—who has tasted new dimensions of the grandeur and majesty of God that week, and new depths of his own indwelling sin and the riches

²⁰ Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption by the Effectual Work of the Word and Spirit of Christ, for the Bringing Home of Lost Sinners to God, the Ninth and Tenth Books* (London: Peter Cole, 1657), 210.

of Christ to atone for him—will not have a cold, dry prayer on Sunday morning but will radiate the presence of the Almighty.

2. *Pray Unceasingly*

“Men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (Luke 18:1). “Ought” means that the obligation of prayer rests upon us at all times regardless of our present frame of mind. Giving up out of weariness (“faint”) is one of the greatest hindrances to prayer.

The apostles determined to give themselves “continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2, 4). Note the order here: first prayer, then ministry. As Charles Bridges once wrote, “Prayer ... is one half of our ministry; and it gives to the other half all its power and success.”²¹

Our consciences may condemn us here more than in any other part of our ministry. You may admit this, saying, “I have not been careless in the preparation of my sermons, neither in the hard work of exegesis nor in the sweating work of sermonic application, but I am plagued with guilt when I ask, ‘Have I given *myself*—not just time but myself—to prayer?’”

Part of our problem is that we view prayer as an appendix to our work rather than as our work. Notwithstanding all our failures, we must sustain the habit of secret prayer if we are to live godly lives. The only way to learn the art of sacred wrestling and the art of holy argument with God is to pray. Praying is the only way to turn the promises of God into the horns of his altar by which we lay hold of God himself. Our preaching about prayer and all the treatises we read on prayer will be of no help unless we pray with Jacob, “I will not let thee go, except thou bless me” (Gen 32:26).

If the giants of church history dwarf us today, it is likely because they were men of prayer, possessed with the Spirit of grace and supplication. Let us refuse to be content with the shell and husk of religion without the inner core of prayer. When we grow drowsy in prayer, let us pray aloud, or write down our prayers, or find a quiet place outside to walk and pray. Just do not stop praying.

Do not abandon stated times of prayer, but also pray in response to the least impulse to do so. Conversing with God through Christ is our most effective antidote to warding off spiritual backsliding and discouragement. A prayerless discouragement is like an infected sore, whereas prayerful discouragement is like a sore cleansed and soothed by the balm of Gilead.

Failure to pray unceasingly (1 Thess 5:17) is the primary reason why there is so little unction in most preaching today. This problem is two-sided to be

²¹ Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967), 148.

sure. It is our fault as ministers because we relinquish prayer time too easily, and it is the fault of our people when they make too many demands of us. Too many churches indirectly pressure ministers to abandon prayer time by filling their days with administration duties, committee meetings, and counseling sessions. Today many pastors are busy studying the problems of the church and providing a smorgasbord of solutions, but where are the pastors who are giving themselves to prayer?

3. Read Books and Listen to Sermons

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

The Puritans excel in this. “There must scarcely be a sermon, a treatise, a pamphlet, a diary, a history or a biography from a Puritan pen which was not in one way or another aimed at fostering the spiritual life,” said Maurice Roberts.²²

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

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

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

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

Organize your private time so you can read at least thirty minutes each day for your own godliness. When you read, do not be in a hurry. Look up cited texts. Be content to read some books more slowly than others. Some books may be tasted, while others should be chewed on before being digested.

²² Maurice Roberts, “Visible Saints: The Puritans as a Godly People,” in *Aspects of Sanctification: 1981 Westminster Conference Papers* (Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1982), 1–2.

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

Be selective about what you read. Subject all your reading to the touchstone of Scripture. So much of today's Christian literature is shallow froth, riddled with Arminian theology or secular thinking. Time is too precious to waste on unprofitable reading. Read more for eternity than time, more for spiritual growth than professional advancement. As John Trapp observed, as water tastes of the soil it runs through, so does the soul taste of the authors that a man reads.²³

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

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

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

Listen to sermons in the car, on your way to pastoral visits. What a boon such preaching can be for one's ministry! When you listen, prepare your soul with prayer. Listen with a holy appetite and a tender, teachable heart. Avoid a critical spirit. Be attentive to what is preached, receiving with meekness the engrafted word (Jas 1:21), mingling it with faith (Heb 4:2). Remember that your goal is not to compare preacher to preacher, but to know God and obey his will.

4. Cultivate Other Disciplines

Cultivate godly living through other disciplines, both the church's means of grace and other practices that you find profit you.

²³ "Take heed also what books ye read: for as water relisheth of the soil it runs through: so do the soule of the authors that a man readeth." John Trapp, *Solomonis Panaretos: Or, a Commentarie upon the Books of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs* (London: By T. R. and E. M. for John Bellamie, 1650), 230 (on Prov 19:27).

- *The sacraments.* God's holy ordinances complement his word. They point us away from ourselves. Each sign—water, bread, and wine—directs us to believe in Christ and his sacrifice on the cross as the source for godly living. The sacraments are visible means through which Christ invisibly communes with us and we with him. They spur us to Christlikeness and therefore to holiness.

- *Fellowship with believers.* Pastors who would be godly should seek fellowship in the church and associate with mentors in godly living (Eph 4:12–13; 1 Cor 11:1), especially fellow pastors who will keep confidences. “He that walketh with wise man shall be wise” (Prov 13:20). The church ought to be a fellowship of caring and a community of prayer (1 Cor 12:7; Acts 2:42). A Christian who tries to live in isolation from other believers will be defective; likewise, a pastor who does not commune with others usually will remain spiritually immature.²⁴

- *Journaling.* The ministry can be a lonely occupation. Ministers should take care not to divulge too many of their feelings publicly. We must use caution in whom we confide. Journaling or diary-keeping can help take the edge off loneliness by helping us to express thoughts to God and to ourselves that otherwise remain buried. Journaling can serve numerous benefits that promote godliness, including assisting us in meditating and praying, in remembering the Lord's works and faithfulness, in understanding and evaluating ourselves, in monitoring our goals and priorities, and in maintaining other spiritual disciplines.²⁵

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

²⁴ Joel R. Beeke, *Assurance of Faith: Calvin, English Puritanism, and the Dutch Second Reformation* (New York: Lang, 1991), 407–8.

²⁵ Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1991), 196–210.

²⁶ J. I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 239.

- *Stewardship of time and money.* Time is short and must be used wisely, for the days are evil (Eph 5:15–16). The godly pastor uses time to prepare himself, his family, and his congregation for eternity (2 Cor 6:2). The disciplined use of money is rooted in the principle that God owns everything we have (1 Cor 10:26). Giving reflects faith in God’s provision (Mark 12:41–44) and is an act of worship (Phil 4:18). The godly man experiences that “it is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35).

- *Evangelizing and serving others.* Christ expects us to evangelize and serve others (Matt 28:19–20; Heb 13:16). We are to be motivated in this discipline by obedience (Deut 13:4), gratitude (1 Sam 12:24), gladness (Ps 100:2), humility (John 13:15–16), and love (Gal 5:13). As pastors, one of our greatest rewards is serving people. To see people drawn closer to Christ through the Spirit’s blessing upon God’s word and the use of our gifts is a profoundly humbling experience. It also draws us closer to God.

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

IV. Practice Holistic Ministerial Faithfulness

A minister’s holiness expresses itself in faithfulness to the Lord in all his ministerial duties. Paul says, “Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful” (1 Cor 4:1–2).

Pursue faithfulness in love for Christ and people. Christ said to Peter, “Lovest thou me? ... Feed my lambs” (John 21:15). Love for Christ is the great motivation for ministry. It is Christ who calls ministers, and they must perform their labors to please him (2 Cor 5:9; 2 Tim. 2:4).

Love for Christ overflows into a minister’s care for people. Martin Bucer said that this “care of souls” involves

providing that Christ’s lambs, who are still straying from his flock and sheep-pen, should be gathered in; seeing that those who have been brought in should remain with the flock and in the sheep-pen, and when they do go astray again, leading them

back again; and protecting those that stay with the flock against all temptations and afflictions, and helping them again if they fall prey to them.²⁷

Pursue faithfulness in the ministry of prayer and the word. Every minister should devote large blocks of his time to prayerful intercession according to the word, prayerful study of the word, prayerful meditation on it, prayerful preparation of sermons, prayerful preaching of the word, and prayerful thanksgiving for its Spirit-worked effects.

Faithfulness in the ministry of the word demands the hard work of application. The Dutch Reformed churches charge ministers of the word to

faithfully explain to their flock the Word of the Lord, revealed by the writings of the prophets and apostles; and apply the same as well in general as in particular, to the edification of the hearers; instructing, admonishing, comforting and reproofing, according to every one's need; preaching repentance towards God and reconciliation with Him through faith in Christ; and refuting with the Holy Scriptures all schisms and heresies which are repugnant to the pure doctrine.²⁸

Lastly, pursue faithfulness in leadership. Spiritual leadership is the wise exercise of proper authority to influence people to take united action with biblical intention, motivation, instruction, and association. Intention answers the question, "What is our goal?"; motivation, "Why should we strive for it?"; instruction, "How can we attain it?"; and association, "Whom can I trust to be my companions and helpers to get there?" Faithfully labor to provide answers to these questions so you can lead and direct the church.

Ministers provide leadership by a combination of example, relationship, and communication. Paul says,

We preached unto you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess 2:9–12)

All Christian leadership must be soaked in thanksgiving and prayer to God (1 Thess 1:2–3; 2:13; 3:9–13; 5:23), for ministers can provide external motivations, but God alone places distinctively Christian inner motives in the heart.

²⁷ Martin Bucer, *Concerning the True Care of Souls*, trans. Peter Beale (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2009), 69.

²⁸ "Form of Ordination of the Ministers of God's Word," in *Doctrinal Standards, Liturgy, and Church Order*, ed. Joel R. Beeke (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 1999), 141.

Conclusion

Ministers must live holy, disciplined lives. Reading, singing, memorizing, and meditating upon Scripture; engaging in secret prayer; reading sound biblical literature; listening to the preached word; using the sacraments; pursuing spiritual fellowship; journaling; sanctifying the Lord's Day; exercising stewardship; serving others for Christ's sake; preaching, teaching, and writing—these are the spiritual disciplines which, if diligently pursued in dependence upon God's gracious Spirit, will greatly sanctify our hearts toward God.

That in turn will work two great benefits:

1. Disciplined living will promote godly living in every area of our life.

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

Holiness ... extends to every part of our life, influences everything we are, or do, or think, or speak, or plan, small or great, outward or inward, negative or positive, our loving, our hating, our sorrowing, our rejoicing, our recreations, our business, our friendships, our relationships, our silence, our speech, our reading, our writing, our going out and our coming in—our whole man in every movement of spirit, soul, and body.²⁹

2. A life of godliness will promote and sustain an effective ministry.

The people we serve will have a model to emulate and, by God's grace, will do so. The level of godliness in our personal lives does more to influence people than all of our busyness. Robert Murray M'Cheyne said, "It is not great talents God blesses so much as great likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."³⁰

²⁹ Horatius Bonar, *God's Way of Holiness* (repr., Pensacola, FL: Mount Zion Publications, 1994), 16.

³⁰ Robert Murray M'Cheyne, Letter of October 2, 1840 to Daniel Edwards, in *Memoir and Remains of Robert Murray M'Cheyne*, ed. Andrew A. Bonar (repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), 282.

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

However hard the task is to strive for godliness, let us not forget that godliness is ultimately God’s work of blessing the exercise of spiritual disciplines as he has promised to do. What a blessing that the outcome of the task of godliness does not depend on us! It rests with the King of kings, who sanctified himself that he might sanctify his people (Heb 2:9–11). And he who sanctifies and they who are sanctified are one. This provides unspeakable peace and freedom to fulfill in some measure the chief goal of our lives: “To glorify God and enjoy him forever.”



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