

Called to Be Men of God

by Eric J. Alexander

A minister must be a man of experience, under constraint, and humility in order to be effective in their ministry.

Duration: 1:05:00

Scripture: Genesis 28:16, Isaiah 42:8, Matthew 6:1

Topics: "Ministry Leadership", "Spiritual Vitality"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the importance of the center of gravity in the lives of those who preach the word of God. He emphasizes that the center of gravity should be in the message they preach, and this should be evident to others. The speaker uses the analogy of a river being constrained by its banks to illustrate how the preaching of the word gives depth, dynamic, and direction to the ministry. He also highlights the significance of being men of God and servants of the Word of God in the work of the ministry. The sermon emphasizes that theological training and orthodoxy are not enough if one's ministry lacks spiritual life and vitality.

Transcript

While the Spirit speaketh, express me that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of devils, speaking lies and hypocrisy, having their conscience seared with a hot iron, forbidding to marry and commanding to abstain from meats which God has created, to be received with thanksgiving of them who believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good and nothing to be refused if it be received with thanksgiving. For it is sanctified by the word of God in prayer.

If thou put the brethren in remembrance of these things, thou shalt be a good minister of Jesus Christ, nourished up in the words of faith and of good doctrine whereunto thou hast attained. But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little or temporarily, but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come.

This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance. For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trusting in the living God who is the saviour of all men, especially of those that believe. These things command and teach, that no man despise thy youth, but be thou an example of the believers in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.

Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine. Neglect not the gift that is in thee, which was given thee by prophecy, with the laying on of the hands of the presbytery. Meditate upon these things, give thyself wholly to them, that thy profiting may appear to all.

Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this, thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee. May the Lord bless his word to us.

Brethren, as we come together this evening, I want, if I may, to open my heart to you in a special sense. I had been looking forward to this conference day much for many weeks, and to the fellowship that we were to share together, and to the opportunity which is so seldom given to any of us who are here this evening, I suppose, of being ministered unto in the things of God. And I had, in a very decisive way, set aside the last two weeks, specifically from all other outside engagements and concerns, in order to give myself to preparation for this week's conference.

Now, I have been in the ministry for something like twelve years now, I suppose, and I cannot recollect a time when I have been so deluged with pastoral problems of the most profound and difficult nature, and my whole plans and programs so effectually torpedoed as they have been in the last two weeks. I have spent, I cannot count how many hours, with a twenty-eight year old doctor in practice who is a paranoid schizophrenic. I have been in the middle of the night, as well as during the day, dealing with another woman who is mentally very seriously ill.

I have been deluged by problems from two families in my congregation, where the daughters have fallen morally, and there has been agony in the hearts of their parents. And so there is a very real sense this evening, in which I come to you with all the plans and patterns that I had previously intended to work through, demolished. I was saying to someone earlier today, I'm sure there was a time when this would have worried me very much.

Largely, I think, and I think we all know what this means, for the sake of a certain kind of spiritual pride. But I believe that God is sovereign in this matter too. And that in one sense, he has been preparing the way for this conference in a way that I would never have expected, nor chosen.

And that there are certain things that are on my heart this evening, in these hurried hours that I have had to prepare for this conference, which he means to say to us during these days. And therefore, there is a very real sense in which I come to this conference with my spirit molded by the way that God has been dealing with us in our own situation in Scotland in these last weeks. And in a very special sense, cast upon him.

And I come to, in the spirit of being concerned, therefore, peculiarly, not so much to be talking to you, or being the one who is teaching, but rather to learn together with you some of the things that seem to me to be so utterly vital in all our thinking about the work of the ministry, which is our theme in these evenings. Within this general concern, I believe that God has purposed that we might focus our thinking on these three evenings and three spheres. This evening, upon the primary fact that above all other things that we are called to be, we are supremely called to be men of God.

And that is to be the focus of our thinking for this evening. Tomorrow evening, I hope to draw your attention to the essential nature of the work of our ministry, and to suggest to you that we are called supremely in that connection to be ministers, or servants, of the Word of God. And on the last evening, I hope we may deal with some of the things that are involved, and which you will understand are peculiarly

close to my own heart and experience in these days, in being called to be shepherds of a flock.

But this evening, the focus of our attention is upon what the Apostle Paul is thinking of, I have little doubt, when he says to Timothy, take heed unto thyself. And to the doctrine. And the priority is an apostolic priority, and a priority which you and I may neglect only at the profoundest peril for ourselves and for our ministry.

There is a very real reason, and a peculiar one, for this priority. It is a reason which is peculiar to the work of the ministry, and I reckon is not to be found in any other sphere of life, and that is that the man you are conditions and largely determines the character of the work that you do. Now I suggest to you that that is not true in almost any other sphere of life, or in any other calling.

It is quite possible, you see, in almost every other sphere of life, for a man to divide these two things effectively, the man he is, and the work he does. For example, I have been in conversation in the last few weeks with a medical practitioner, who is a man with a brilliant mind, and an extraordinary ability, particularly in diagnosis, and who is recognized to be a brilliant physician. But I can tell you this evening, because you don't know who he is, that he is a thoroughly bad character.

His ethics are atrocious, personally. But he is still a first-rate physician, and that combination is utterly impossible in the ministry. But you see, it is possible to divorce these two things in other spheres of life.

It is utterly impossible in the ministry. You cannot keep your true self hidden in the ministry, which thereby becomes one of the most effective and radical sins of a man's character. And if you are not found out, as it were, in the early stages, brethren, the day comes when the truth will out about the inner hidden reaches of a man's life.

And in the ministry, you cannot keep it hidden. The man you are determines. The work that you do.

And the reason for this is that there is spiritually, as well as physically, a law of bringing forth. They brought forth every one after his kind, and there is a sense in which that physical principle can be applied to the spiritual life of fruit bearing. And we are sent by our Lord and Master that we might bear fruit.

And it is impossible to gather grapes of thistle. And the fruit that we bear will be in direct relation to the character that we possess. Robert Murray McShane, who had to come into this address sooner or later, Robert Murray McShane once said, What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more.

And that brings us to our true size in the ministry, brethren. What a man is on his knees before God, that he is, and nothing more. Now you will see what this means.

It means that it is perfectly possible for a man to be brilliantly trained theologically, greatly gifted technically, thoroughly orthodox mentally, and reformed, and yet for his ministry to be a complete and unrelieved disaster. Because it is possible to be thoroughly trained, thoroughly orthodox, thoroughly reformed, and thoroughly dead. And beloved, if you are a corpse in the ministry, it doesn't greatly matter whether you're a reformed corpse or a liberal corpse.

You're a corpse all the same. And in these days, we need to pay attention to this. I believe.

The reason for this, of course, is that it is men God uses. It is men God anoints. The Holy Spirit of God throughout the whole of the scriptures comes upon men.

So I say again, the man you are, largely conditioned. The work that you do. Now I'm well aware that that statement, taken out of its context, could in some senses be misleading.

But there is a basic principle here from which we can never escape. And as we seek to discover together some of the marks of the man God wants to make us, I make no apology for suggesting to you that he must first of all be a man of experience. Now, of course, I am not referring here primarily, not indeed at all for this purpose, to that kind of experience which is so often thrust upon people as a necessity when they're preparing for the ministry and the experience of the world and the experience of men and getting to know people and getting alongside the man on the factory floor and so on.

This is all very helpful, I'm sure. And I think it's wrong to be cynical about that kind of experience. But I'm referring rather to that personal experience of God and of the gospel that a man is called upon to minister.

My concern is expressed infinitely better than I could express it in the words of Spurgeon when he wrote, Better abolish pulpits than fill them with men who have no experimental knowledge of what they preach. Now, brethren, we may all of us say amen to that. But let us wait to be sure that we are not saying it about other people and failing to apply this truth to our own hearts.

Better abolish pulpits than fill them with men who have no experimental knowledge of what they preach. Of course, there is a basic New Testament provision which undergirds this. One of the New Testament words used to describe the ministry is the word *matos* and concerns the whole thought of witnessing to something that we have experienced and known for ourselves.

And I don't believe that this is confined to the preserve of the first apostles. Paul speaks addressing himself to the Ephesian elders at Miletus, describing his ministry that he had received from the Lord Jesus in these words, testifying, he says, this is the ministry, testifying to the gospel of the grace of God. And there is this element in ministry, an inescapable element of a testifying to something that we ourselves have touched and handled, the reality of which has broken in upon our lives.

And it is this that I would suggest to you is the indispensable context of a man's ministry. Now, be careful, I am not saying that it is the content of his ministry. You will scarcely imagine that I'm suggesting that our preaching should degenerate into the retailing of personal experience.

But I insist with equal vigor that the context of a man's ministry of the word of God is inevitably this personal experience of God and of the gospel and of the things that he is preaching about, which is the essence of the New Testament atmosphere in which the word of God is ministered. Our preaching is, of course, a heralding of God's mighty act in redemption. But my point is that we are to preach it as men who are personally involved in the redeemer.

In such a way that his redemption and revelation have changed our own lives. And if this is so, it will quite inevitably break through. The reality of the words that we are preaching will first be born witness to, beloved, by the Holy Spirit through our own lives.

And I wonder if it is not the absence of this that is the explanation of that cold and metallic touch that can creep into a man's ministry so easily. May I share with you, brethren, that there are many people who sense amongst those of us who hold the reformed position that very coldness and detachment and clinical touch in our ministry. We are here this evening and in these days to deal with realities.

And I suggest to you that there is something of this that we need to come before God with honest and open hearts about. That spirit of harshness, that coldness, that sense of distance and detachment. Is it not here that we need to learn afresh? The need for a conviction that is born of experience.

And I wonder if in suggesting to people that we do not live, of course, by our experience. We live by the Word of God. In our concern for being objective to which I give my whole heart and mind.

I wonder if we may be in danger of losing the need for that reality in our own experience which is so vital. Last summer when I was on holiday, I took with me Helmut Thieleke's book to be distinguished from the other man with a similar name, Paul Thiele. Helmut Thieleke is the German whose writings have become very popular amongst many people today.

He has a book called *The Trouble with the Church*. I don't think that what he thinks is the trouble with the church is really what I think is the trouble with the church. But there are some very valuable insights in Thieleke's book.

And in one place he asks a question which seems to me to be very vital. And it's directed to ministers. Is the center of gravity of your life in the message you preach? Or is it somewhere else? This is what the world wants to know, says Thieleke.

In these days of the advertising medium, when the man who speaks so much about the commodity doesn't take it himself at home. The world wants to know is the center of gravity of your life who preach the everlasting tidings of God's grace in the message that you preach? Or is the center of gravity of your life, however slightly, somewhere else? You see what he means? And with all the other things with which one would disagree in his writings, one has to open one's heart to this particular issue. Where is the center of gravity of your life? Is it in these very things that you are preaching? And is that obvious to people because it's true? I think the greatest testimony that was ever borne to a minister was borne by someone who spoke of a minister in Scotland and of the man behind it.

In these words, he is a man who knows God, and he helps me to know him better. I suggest to you, brethren, that is the kind of character we ought to covet. The man you are conditions the work that you do.

And the basic thing, the context in which we minister a word is that we should be men of experience, who have experienced the very things that we are urging upon other people. Within the same context, may I suggest to you in the second place, that the man God calls us to be will be a man under constraint. I'm thinking, of course, of that description of the Apostle Paul's ministry in 2 Corinthians chapter 5 verse 14, where he describes himself and his fellow laborers as men under constraint.

The love of Christ constraineth us. And the word, as you will know, is the same word that Jesus used when he speaks of the baptism with which he is to be baptized. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened? And it's the same word as constrained, until it be accomplished.

And it is a word which doesn't mean so much what we often take it to mean, to be thrust out. Here is what thrust out the great Apostle over the ancient world, a flame for God. He was constrained by the love of Christ.

The word rather means quite the opposite. It means to be held in as the banks of a river hold it in and keep it on its course. And this is the meaning of this word which shed so much light upon the Apostle's ministry.

He is a man under constraint, held by the love of Christ. I remember Alan Stutz at one of the earliest student conferences that I ever attended, telling us of his time in China, when he used to see the river Yangtze at one point in its journey, in this connection. It has that one place, great banks, which are a solid rock, which hold the river, constrain it on its course.

I remember Alan Stutz telling us who were students, and some of us students for the ministry in these days, he said it does three things to that river. It gives it depth. As these gray constraining banks hold the flow of the mighty Yangtze, it plows its way down into the depths of the river bed and gives it vast depths at that point where it is constrained.

It gives it dynamic, for the great power of this surging water is harnessed by the constraining force of the banks of the river. And it gives it direction, as this river cannot be dissipated and moved to and fro like that other river in ancient times which put a word into our language, the river Meander. Which is a picture of so many of our lives.

The river Yangtze is at that point held and given direction. And beloved, if there are three things that we need in our lives, and in our ministries, and in our churches, and in the lives of believers for whom God has given us responsibility in these days, it is these three things, is it not? Now the apostle Paul found this constraining force upon his own ministry, upon his own life. And it was this that gave focus to his life, and direction to his ministry.

And he is writing out of all the context of the sufferings and perplexities and trials and tribulations of the ministry in two Corinthians, you'll remember. It's there that he speaks about being perplexed and cast down, about bearing about in his body the dying of the Lord Jesus. And yet when people ask, what is it that keeps the man going through all these years, through all these dark and harsh and difficult days, his answer, the love of Christ.

And that not in any dissipated and emotional sense. Paul speaks of the love of Christ in that passage in a very clear and very decisive fashion. He says the love of Christ constraineth because we thus judge, we look at it this way, this is how we understand it.

And brethren, it was his understanding of the theology of the atonement that did this for the apostle Paul. It's not his love for Christ, it's Christ's love for him. And this is what New Testament theology did for Paul.

It set a flame burning in his heart that remained incandescent throughout all his days as he went out over the ancient world and saw men and women drawn to God. And it is this kind of constraint that we need to let God apply to our lives so that we are men under constraint. It was this that made him the kind of man who says, this one thing I do.

Brethren, are you known of a man of one thing? A man under constraint. May I suggest to you in the third place that this whole concern of being the man whom God will be pleased in his grace and mercy to use, will involve us in not only being a man of experience and a man under constraint, but a man of true humility. Now by that I mean something rather specific.

It's a very difficult thing to speak about humility, isn't it, without becoming very self-conscious. I'm not speaking now about that kind of groveling attitude which has more to do with Uriah Heap than with the New Testament, which is very proud of its humility, you know, and very conscious of it. I hope we may be able to speak of this outside of that atmosphere this evening.

You know about that book which I apologized, Mr. Riesinger came from America entitled Humility and How I Achieved It. I'm speaking this evening about something which seems to me to be tremendously important for our present purpose in thinking about the ministry of the Word. Every calling has its peculiar patterns.

And the man who stands in the pulpit and is set over a people, and he is in a very real sense set over them by God as the shepherd of the flock, he is exposed to the thickening peril of vain glory and pride and self-display. Brethren, you will not have been long in the ministry if you haven't discovered this already. And it is something that we need to face, because however much we may seek to disguise our pride and our vain glory, there is nothing so deadening in the ministry as this, however you may disguise it.

And I suppose if God opens up pathways to ministry in different spheres, if there are larger numbers and you're called to minister in a place where there are many people, you are exposed to it in an ever more incisive fashion. And I say again, it's a deadly thing. I wonder if you know of the young man in Scotland.

It's said by some that it was in Dr. Alexander White's Church of St. George's in Edinburgh that he went up into the pulpit on his very first Sunday in the church, newly ordained, a brilliant young man who had been made a very great deal of in the circles in which he had moved, and had been the first man of his year in the university. And he was very full of himself. And he walked up into the pulpit in St. George's on this Sunday when it came his turn to preach, with great confidence and great cockiness, and there he stood before the people and surveyed them all.

And as he started to preach, suddenly his words appeared to rush back down his throat. And his mind went a ghastly blank, and he forgot everything that he was going to say. And his tongue wouldn't obey the dictates of his thoughts.

And he found himself confused and stumbling and bungling his way through ten minutes. And in deep shame and embarrassment, he sat down and crawled down the pulpit steps at the end, if it had been possible, with his head between his knees, and came into the vestry and lay over the table, and when quite, if it was, he came back in. He said to himself, what went wrong? And White said to him, Laddie, if you'd get up the way you come down, you'd have mere chance of coming down the way you get up.

And there is a profound spiritual truth in that. And that is not said in order that we might try to affect some kind of mock humility, than which there is nothing more obnoxious, I believe, in the sight of God, but that we might learn the fact that Paul was seeking to teach the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians chapter 3, you'll remember, where he was faced with this problem of people glorying in men. And Paul deals with it largely by pointing to the fact which underlies the point of true humility in the ministry, and that is this, that this work in which we are engaged is God's work, and not ours.

Paul may plant, and Apollos may water, he said, but planting and watering are not the efficient causes of vegetation. It is God that giveth the increase, and then he turns to the neuter gender to emphasize the point. What then is Paul? What is Apollos? What thing is Paul? What thing is Apollos? There are no thing, only God is anything in the ministry of the world.

It is God that giveth the increase, and beloved, it is the increase that we so greatly need in our day as in Paul's. And it is this that our Lord is emphasizing to the disciples. I am the vine, ye are the branches.

The agricultural metaphor is the perfect one of God. And without me ye can do nothing. Now of course, this does not mean that there is no kind of work that you can do in the ministry.

Even although God the Holy Spirit is breathed right out of your ministry by your own foolish pride, you can go on laboring and as it is as though God is saying, go on great preacher, without me. So you see, it is possible for a man to indoctrinate other men, even with reformed doctrine, beloved, that only God can regenerate them. And a great illustration of this principle, of course, is the life of John the Baptist, who had not merely as a motto pinned on his wall, but as words that were burned into his soul.

I must decrease, he must increase. And John's ministry is introduced to us, you will notice, in the gospels largely with an emphasis not on who he was or what he was doing, but rather on what he wasn't. Have you noticed that? What a great encouragement to those of us who are discouraged by ourselves and our own weaknesses and failures.

He was not that light, he was not that prophet, he was not what was he then. He was a voice crying in the wilderness. But they heard John speak and they followed Jesus.

You see, I tell you brethren, there is no greater blasphemy under God's heaven than to use the pulpit as a place for self-advertisement or self-display or self-glory. Now God is the God who has said, my glory I will not give to another. So what I have to ask myself this evening before God, and I am opening my own soul to, is the real honest longing of my heart.

That when I am done, people may say, what a preacher, or what a sermon. Or is my longing that they might say, surely the Lord is in this place. This has been to me the house of God and the gate of heaven.

Is that the longing that really consumes our heart, brethren? That's what I mean by a man who has a true humility. Remember Jesus warning in Matthew chapter 6, in the Sermon on the Mount, about giving alms. And it applies to the whole sphere of Christian service.

When thou doest thine alms, he says, don't do it as the Pharisees do, in order that they might be seen of men. Let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth, that thine alms may be in secret, and God, who seeth in secret, shall reward thee openly. Now there is a principle of reward, and of purpose and intent, in these areas in Matthew 6, where Jesus is speaking about the secret concern.

And the principle appears to be, that the man whose desire is for the reward of men, gets it. They do it that they might be seen of men. Verily I say unto you, says Jesus, they have their reward.

They get the praise of men, but that's all they get. But you, when you do your alms, do it in secret. Let not your left hand know what your right hand doeth, and God, your Father, who seeth in secret, will reward you.

And the question is, you see, do I need to be seen of men, in order to be faithful to God? Now brethren, let's examine ourselves. What about the big occasion as opposed to the little occasion, you know? Am I more concerned to be faithful in preparation, for instance, when it's the big occasion, than I am when it's just the dozen, or so in the quiet hidden corner of ordinary people. I tell you with utter honesty this evening, I face this question when I go to the couple of dozen people who meet with me for Bible study on a Wednesday evening in my congregation.

I face this question. What about that occasion, as opposed to the other, when there may be hundreds of people there? I don't think there are many of us who don't need to search our souls about this. What is our aim and purpose? Who are we unto please? Oh, we say, we are not men pleasers.

Well, let him that thinketh he standeth take heed. This is why Spurgeon is said, on the steps up to his pulpit, to have paused, is he not, on every step, as the adulation of the crowd was focused upon him, and he stopped to say, on every step, as he mounted up to preach the word, I believe in the Holy Ghost. I believe in the Holy Ghost.

That's it. A man of true humility. And if what I've just been saying is true, then the last thing is a logical corollary of this, and that is that if we are to take heed to ourselves and become the kind of men God uses, we will be men of prayer, men of experience, men under constraint, men of true humility, and men of prayer.

If this work is God's work, you see, and not ours, then in such a man's life and ministry, prayer will not, as it so often is, be supplemental. It will be fundamental. Let me quote you Spurgeon again.

Of course the preacher is, above all others, distinguished as a man of prayer. He prays as an ordinary Christian, else he were a hypocrite. He prays more than ordinary Christians, else he were disqualified from the office which he has undertaken.

The point is that the eternal worth of any man's ministry is in direct proportion to the validity of his secret life and his walk with God. It was Professor Finliss and I first heard saying it in Scotland, but I gather that it's a phrase that has arisen in many contexts, but it does express the truth, that the secret of failure is so very often failure in secret. There is of course a warning note that needs to be sounded here.

All this does not mean that a minister's private devotional life is a kind of lever for service and a means of extorting from God, as it were, the blessings that we see we need. Can you grasp the distinction that I'm seeking to make here? The moment a man's communion with God comes down to this level of using it as a lever because he sincerely believes that this is the way to see God work, he becomes guilty of using God for his own end and of indulging in the blasphemy of making God his servant. I think this is an important thing.

You get the same kind of thing in many people's personal lives in what is often called the devotional reading of the Bible, you know, where people say, I just read the Bible devotionally to get a word to help me through the day, you know the kind of thing, to get a thought that is going to carry me through the next 24 hours, you know. If somebody professed their love for you, but was only interested in you insofar as you ministered to their own ends and purposes, you would accuse them, or at least suspect them, and justifiably, of covered love, wouldn't you? And if they professed their devotion, it would be legitimate to ask, to whom are they devoted? To me, or to themselves? And there is a sense in which we need to beware of the subtle peril of only being interested in a life of communion with God because we want the display of God's power in order that we might feed our own spiritual pride. Do you know anything about this? May I read to you a portion of William Law's *Serious Call*? Devotion is neither public nor private prayer, but prayers, whether private or public, are particular parts or instances of devotion.

Devotion signifies a life given or devoted to God. He, therefore, is the devout man who lives no longer to his own will, or the way and spirit of the world, but to the sole will of God, who considers God in everything, who serves God in everything, who makes all the parts of his common life parts of piety by doing everything in the name of God and under such rules as are conformable to his glory. I suggest to you that that is the foundation of the life of communion with God, which ought to lie at the heart of a man's life.

And this will relieve us of something of that strained, unnatural atmosphere that creeps into some of our lives. It was my respected and trusted friend, the Reverend William Still of Aberdeen, who once said, it is the spiritual thing done naturally, and the natural thing done spiritually, which distinguishes the man of God. I commend that to you for meditation, brethren.

Now, in the light of all this, I think we need greatly to see this imperative place of prayer in the context of our basic need as Christian men and Christian ministers to know God. That is the reason that prayer is so vital in the ministry, not as a lever primarily. But the primary reason it's so vital, and from this, of course, the whole question of our intercession and supplication for the work of God's spring.

But the primary reason it's so vital is that there is no greater need in the ministry than that a man should know God. I think it's not unnecessary, even amongst us this evening, to distinguish between knowledge about God and knowledge of God. Those of us who have the concern which is so entirely commendable for the diligent study of theology need to watch over our souls in a special way here.

Because, you see, it's possible to know about God in the most detailed and profound and orthodox way, and yet hardly to know God at all. I read you some words of Dr. Packer from the Evangelical magazine of a few years ago. In this analytical and technological age, there is no shortage of books on the church book stalls or sermons from the pulpit on how to pray, how to witness, how to read our Bible, how to tithe our money, how to be a young Christian, how to be an old Christian, how to be a happy Christian, how to get consecrated, how to lead men to Christ, how to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit, for in some cases how to avoid receiving it, how to speak with tongues or how to explain away Pentecostal manifestations, and generally how to go through all the various motions which the teachers in question associate with being a Christian believer.

Nor is there any shortage of biographies delineating the experience of Christians in past days for our interested perusal. Whatever else may be said about this state of affairs, it certainly makes it possible to learn a great deal secondhand about the practice of Christianity. Moreover, if one has been given a good bump of common sense, one may frequently be able to use this learning to help floundering Christians of less stable temperament to regain their footing and develop a sense of proportion about their troubles, and in this way one may gain for oneself a reputation for being quite a pastor.

Yet one can of all this and hardly know God at all. I think that's true, brethren. Daniel 11 32 reminds us that it is the people that know their God who shall be strong and do exploits, and one is therefore not to find, not surprised to find amidst all the paganism and all the debauchery of the atmosphere in which Daniel ministered, this man of God standing out in his generation as a man who was influencing rather than influenced.

Nor is one surprised to discover that his windows were opened towards Jerusalem, and he was found bowed before God three times a day. And one is not surprised to find either that the great apostle himself, who breached the strongholds of Satan in days full of complexities and darkness, tells us that the consuming passion of his life was that I may know him. All things I am ready to count but loss for the excellency of this knowledge.

Now as we close this evening, I suggest to you that it is here that our ministry is really tested as the years go by. I know that the ministry brings us to great physical tests and to great mental exhaustion, but I don't think it's a man's physical resources nor his mental capacity that is primarily tested in the ministry. It's his spiritual resources that are tested primarily.

And of course it's at this point that we would all like someone to prescribe a recipe for us. A better Alexander than myself who wrote that book which Ian lent me recently called Thoughts on Preaching. A companion volume I imagine to thoughts on Christian experience or religious experience.

It says in it, Brethren I can give you no recipe because God works with a glorious individuality in his children. And this is tremendously important for us to grasp. Perhaps all I can do before we close this evening is to point out the need for what, for the lack of a better word, I have to call balance.

I think balance is one of these very self-conscious and overworked words in these days, you know. A person who says I'm not this kind of person, I'm a very balanced person. Personally I'm always a bit suspicious of balanced people, but for the lack of a better word, the balance that I suggest to you is this.

It's the balance first of all between an honesty and realism on the one hand, and a true wholeheartedness and devotion on the other. I believe that the scriptures hold this kind of balance. It is possible you see for us in an unbiblical way to be dishonest and discouraging with each other about this, is it not? Prescribing for other people things that are not in the slightest bit true of ourselves.

Isn't this true? Talking as if things were true of us which in fact are not true. You know one of the encouraging things to me about biblical biography is that it is so frank, so utterly realistic. Talking to us about Elijah and his praying for instance.

Elijah, a man subject to like passions as we are, prayed. Now that's not to discourage us and make us feel the various worms when we come away from this kind of picture, but to encourage us to believe that God was able out of the common clay of this man to make a man whose life told for God in his generation with all its dissoluteness and disorder. And the same is true of men like Abraham, and the same is true of Moses.

And isn't this one of the encouragements that we need? You see I think probably it's possible for us to come to some of the lives of some of the great men of God in the past and see that they rose like old John Welsh in the middle of the night. And to imagine that this is a pattern that God imposes upon everybody. Reverend I tell you with all my heart this evening that if I rose much in the middle of the night, my next day would be an utter disaster.

My physical constitution couldn't stand it. Now I'm absolutely honest about this. And personally I don't see very much difference between the man who in older days went to bed at nine and got up at four thirty, and my going to bed at twelve and getting up at seven thirty.

I don't see very much difference about this. I don't think that there's anything specially sanctified about three or four o'clock in the morning. Now I think we must be very honest about this brethren.

And I think it's an important thing that we should be. We live in days of peculiar tensions and strains and so on. This is true.

That's the one side of the picture and I don't want to under emphasize it. But let me say this on the other side of the picture. Although the pattern of our life may be different.

Although God deals with us all differently and to try to stereotype a man's secret life is disastrous. But I believe that nonetheless, although all these things are true, the very same kind of wholeheartedness and devotion and passion that rule these men's lives needs to rule ours. However different the context may be,

it is possible to use the difference of our historical context as an excuse for escaping the rapier challenge of their devotion to God.

And this is the Bible. You get it in the Apostle Paul. I count not myself to have apprehended, not as though I had already attained.

He has no unreal pretensions about himself. He is ready to acknowledge certain things as being true. We are cast down.

We are perplexed. He speaks about all the weaknesses of his life. But you get the thrust of it, don't you, in these words.

I press toward the mark. I count all things but loss and regard them as garbage in order that I may win Christ. I am become all things to all men.

Do you see how everything he is ready to let it slide for this one thing? If by any means I might win some. Now that's the kind of man I long that God might make me and you. And however different our circumstances may be from each other and from other people who have gone before us, this is the abiding factor.

And the second balance and the last thing I want to say this evening is this. That we have to hold the balance between a true discipline on the one hand and a proper Christian liberty on the other. All I want to say about that is that there is in this age of debunking a tendency to debunk the idea of discipline, you know.

Let's not be in bondage. We are after all not under law. We are Christ's freed men.

And of course there is a discipline which can lead to bondage. There is a very close friend of mine who is in the ministry now whose life is disciplined like iron. And people find him singularly unapproachable and a little hard.

We need to learn brethren that the fire which burned in the hearts of men in the early church was not only a fire that consumed. It was a fire that warmed. There is a discipline which can lead to bondage.

But I wonder if we do not even more need to learn that there is a liberty that can lead to license and carelessness and dissipation of time and energy. And I wonder if we don't need to give our attention to this in the context in which we live. Not taking our patterns from other people and strict stereotyping of our lives by them, but realizing that God wants us to be men who are redeeming the time.

Are you just using your time or are you redeeming it? Of course as we will be having to say on Wednesday evening, it's possible for a man to have his timetable so strictly organized as you will imagine to return to what I was saying at the beginning. But when people do come on the phone, when they knock on the door, when they come with broken hearts, you resent them. You know? I don't think Jesus ever did that with people.

May God make us men who are in the deepest and truest sense. Men utterly of one thing. So that we may become men whom God will use.

Whether in the way we specially want or not doesn't really matter. But that his name might be glorified and that our terribly needy world might be blessed and saved and that God may be all in all.

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