

## Spiritual Disciplines in the Life of the Minister

**Proverbs 24:30-34** *I went by the field of the lazy man, And by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding;* <sup>31</sup> *And there it was, all overgrown with thorns; Its surface was covered with nettles; Its stone wall was broken down.* <sup>32</sup> *When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction:* <sup>33</sup> *A little sleep, a little slumber, A little folding of the hands to rest;* <sup>34</sup> *So shall your poverty come like a prowler, And your need like an armed man.*

I imagine Solomon riding his chariot, perhaps in entourage, and suddenly a vineyard catches his eye. He diverts his course, brings his horses to a halt next to the stone wall. With a finger he pushes on a deep crack in it and sees the unmaintained wall lose a few more bits of clay. He props one leg up on it and looks over the vineyard. Growing through the wall is a tall and healthy weed. He tugs at it and stares at the sight in front of him - thorns, weeds, thistles. Instead of lines of trestles with vines hung, there are vines growing on the ground. Some have been choked out of life, and are just dead branches, but here and there some vines survive. But without the trestles, the pruning, the protection, there is little or no fruit. As Solomon looks, he is being taught by the owner of this field. The sluggard of the field is instructing Solomon without saying a word. Solomon is no doubt thinking, "All this land, land which was purchased at a cost, land which could be bringing the owner the joy of its fruit, and money through the sale of it, instead lies here, being used for no other purpose. Sheer laziness, sheer slothfulness has brought about this state of affairs, and instead of fruitfulness, we have a sad and tragic waste"

I wonder if it is too much to say that this scene might picture the lives of many pastors. Like the field, they have been purchased at a great price. Like the field, they have been seeded – not with grape-seed, but with gifts – spiritual abilities to teach, lead, help, administer, exhort. But instead of great fruitfulness, their lives are characterised by the thorns of poor family relationships, spiritual dryness in their own lives, spiritual apathy at church, a narrowing effectiveness with the lost, and an overall sense of ineffectiveness. Instead of fruit, there are thorns. But the reason is the same: instead of the discipline of a farmer, the evil of slothfulness has entered in.

The farm illustration is certainly valuable. A field does not organise itself. If you neglect it, it will revert to chaotic, wild and random growth. Creation tends to go from order to disorder, unless you intervene and impose order upon it.

The human heart is the same. Left to itself, it does not organise itself into goals, plans, schedules, tasks and accountability. Left to itself, it pulls the blankets over its head, sleeps longer, watches more TV, surfs the web aimlessly, putters away its time.

The truth is, without spiritual disciplines, a pastor can be like the field Solomon saw – full of potential, but lying in effective ruin, useless to God and man until the hardship of discipline is applied.

A.W. Tozer spoke about the great temptation to laziness in the ministry:

"It is easy for the minister to be turned into a privileged idler, a social parasite with an open palm and an expectant look. He has no boss within sight; he is not often required to keep regular hours, so he can work out a comfortable pattern of life that permits him to loaf, putter, play, doze and run about at his pleasure. And many do just that"

"The ministry affords limitless opportunity for the lazy man to indulge his talents. Doing nothing can be accomplished more gracefully in the Lord's work than anywhere else, for the simple reason that the minister

has no one to check up on him. The average church requires little of its pastor except to mark time decorously; the preacher with a propensity for loafing is strongly tempted to do just that.

“However much we may dislike to hear it, loafing and puttering are deadly habits for the young minister. He will either conquer them or they will break him”. Tozer - *A Word In Season*.

A pastor without discipline will soon show the signs of his neglect. His barren prayer life will show up in his powerless preaching and ineffective witness. His lack of meditation will show up in his irritable spirit, and joyless attitude. His lack of illumination will show up in his counselling and decision-making which lack wisdom. His lack of sermon preparation and further reading will show up in his messages being repetitive, clichéd, and shallow. His lack of family time will show up in the increasing distance between him and his family. His lack of pastoral oversight will show up in the multiplying problems and discontent in his church. In short, his personal life, family and local church will start to look like that field.

Discipline for the pastor is like furrows and trestles to the vineyard farmer. Making a furrow in the soil won't get you grapes, but you won't get them without one. Building a trestle to tie the vines to won't make you grapes, but you won't get grapes without them. In the same way, spiritual disciplines will not give you spiritual fruit, but you won't get fruit without it.

Discipline is simply responding to the realities of the Fall. Our hearts tend to go from order to chaos, from diligence to sloth, from organisation to mess. In a world where the current pushes us downstream towards making a shipwreck of the faith, discipline is the hard row upstream. Discipline is imposing order upon disorder, opposing the bent of a depraved heart.

In fact, Paul made it clear that the reason he imposed discipline upon himself, was that without it, he feared he would be disqualified.

**1 Corinthians 9:27** *But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.*

He believed disqualification, failing to make the grade, was a real threat if he simply followed his whims, impulses and comforts. When speaking to the young pastor Timothy, Paul enlists the illustrations of three of the most disciplined professions:

**2 Timothy 2:3-6** *You therefore must endure hardship as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> No one engaged in warfare entangles himself with the affairs of this life, that he may please him who enlisted him as a soldier. <sup>5</sup> And also if anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. <sup>6</sup> The hard-working farmer must be first to partake of the crops.*

The farmer is known for his consistent discipline. The soldier is known for embracing rigorous military discipline. The athlete is known for undergoing rigid bodily discipline. You couldn't make the point more if you wanted to. Pastors are not compared to playboy actors, to Internet stockbrokers or to part-time landscapers. They are compared to the people who day-in and day-out live by a rigid form of structure, organisation and self-denial so as to accomplish their goals.

Put simply, discipline makes something else possible. Discipline by itself doesn't do anything. Tying your shoelaces does not make you walk; it just stops you from tripping over them, or from slipping out of your shoes. Lifting the handbrake doesn't make your car go; it just helps you to go without much hindrance.

**Hebrews 12:1** *Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,*

So we might want to ask at this point, what is the aim of our discipline? Unless we know what we are aiming at, we will miss it. If we are going to embark upon a disciplined structure, we want to understand the shape of what we are building.

### **The Aim of Discipline**

**1 Timothy 1:5** *Now the purpose of the commandment is love from a pure heart, from a good conscience, and from sincere faith,*

Notice here is the aim of the commandment – or the law. The law is amongst other things, a kind of discipline – a kind of structure. The Bible says correctly understood, God's structures are there to lead us to love Him, purely in good conscience with all sincerity.

The aim of discipline is the aim of the Christian life – to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, soul and mind. Now, again, I will reiterate, discipline by itself does not enable you to love God. Loving God only happens when we are exposed to God's glory by the illuminating work of the Spirit, and our response is to love Him. That is a work of God, not a work of man. But the Holy Spirit does not typically illuminate disordered and chaotic lives. Furthermore, since laziness is a sin, the laziness of ill-discipline grieves the Spirit and quenches what He might otherwise do. Laziness clouds our way and impedes our progress:

*“ **Proverbs 15:19** The way of the lazy man is like a hedge of thorns, But the way of the upright is a highway.*

Discipline makes possible continual access to the means of grace by which God reveals Himself. It is when we see God and are illuminated, that we love Him and respond to Him.

You could think of discipline as the plans and structures you build around your obedience to help it happen, and happen consistently. Your primary goal is to love God by seeing Him through the Word and prayer and ministry, therefore, discipline is the structures you build so as to make that possible. Building roads doesn't get you anywhere, but it makes the journey possible.

### **The Problem of Discipline**

However, one of the dangers of emphasising discipline is that it attracts something in us that is proud. There is a certain nobility, a certain strength in disciplined people, and very often, the flesh wants to capitalise on this. If we are not careful, we can come to idolise the disciplines. Whenever discipline becomes an end in itself, it has malfunctioned. Whenever it becomes bigger than the thing it is supposed to help you achieve, you have lost focus. When you are more impressed with the time you get up than with what you do with that time, you've missed the point. If you are more impressed with how faithful you have been in your Bible reading plan than the truth of what is in the Bible, you have missed the point.

Paul warns against the dangers of asceticism in Colossians 2. When strict severity to the body and self-denial has become more than a means, we have crossed over a line. We have made these things the means of our sanctification instead of the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul says they have the appearance of wisdom, but are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh.

The problem we have with discipline is the same problem we have with works and grace. We think the one nullifies the other. We think we must major on one or the other. We think if it about our discipline, we are rejecting the empowering work of the Spirit. Or we think that if we are Spirit-filled that we must be passive and not striving in our own strength. So you have people on the one end, who strive in their own strength, but without depending on the Holy Spirit. Or you find people on the other end, who wait for desires to produce a discipline in them that their desires are not big enough to do.

The simplest way of resolving this tension in our minds is Colossians 1:29

**Colossians 1:29** *To this end I also labor, striving according to His working which works in me mightily.*

God does the work by His Spirit in and through us, as we give ourselves entirely to it. Discipline is part of giving yourself entirely to it.

**Philippians 2:12-13** *Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.*

The Spirit will stir up desires and enable obedience, but sandwiched in there are the acts of surrender, self-denial and submission that constitute discipline.

So here is how we can think about discipline:

***While discipline is not self-empowered, it is self-imposed.***

Discipline is a fruit of the Spirit – temperance. But from Paul and others we can tell God’s will, that we impose it upon ourselves, and He will grant the power. In other words, pay the price and God will supply the goods.

“To avoid this danger the minister should voluntarily impose upon himself a life of labor as arduous as that of a farmer, a serious student or a scientist. No man has any right to a way of life less rugged than that of the workers who support him. No preacher has any right to die of old age if hard work will kill him.”

### **The Types of Discipline**

With the need and idea of what discipline is in our lives, I want to spend a brief amount of time outlining the disciplines we ought to have in our lives as pastors. I am not going to spend time detailing them, because you have no doubt heard many messages on them, studied them as topics, and read books by far better and godlier people than I, who have explained better what these are and how we should do them. Instead, I want to sketch how these disciplines form part of our lives, their value and some personal observations. The truth is, discipline is mastering our time and abilities. We all get the same 24 hours every day. We are awake for 16 to 18 of those hours (or we should be). What you do with those hours, how you divide them up, plan them, organise them, supervise them and are held accountable for them, amounts to how disciplined you are. When it comes down to these practical matters, discipline is going to be in how you plan, monitor, and correct .

Many a minister who would be shocked at the thought of doing nothing, nevertheless gets nothing done because he has acquired the habit of frittering away his time. Late hours, requiring compensatory late

sleeping, several trips to the store, assisting with the family laundry, standing in line to buy a reservation for his wife's niece who is going on a visit to [another city] —these things, or others like them, eat up the time and leave him spent and empty at the end of the day.

After a day occupied with trifles, our prophet faces his audience in the evening mentally and spiritually out of tune and altogether unprepared for the holy task before him. His confused smile is attributed to his humility. The audience is tolerant. They know that he has nothing worthwhile to say, but they figure that he has been so busy with his pastoral duties he has not had time to study. They generously forgive him and accept his threadbare offering as the best they can expect under the circumstances.

I'm going to suggest that the following seven disciplines should form part of our days, some of them part of every day.

### **The Discipline of Devotion**

There seem to be debates amongst ministers today as to whether a pastor should have a quiet time, since he is going to spend time in sermon preparation anyway. The Biblical answer is: regardless of your vocation, every believer should set time aside to adore and commune with their Lord. Pastors who spend hours on sermons, but are perfect strangers to communing with God, will quickly become powerless, hollow and eventually loveless.

Now it is true the Bible lays down no commands for having 'the quiet time'. It does not command a time, nor lay out a methodology. But flowing out of the Scriptures are examples of devotion, beginning with the Lord Jesus, and flowing out to include the apostles, the prophets, David, the other psalmists, the kings, the judges, the priests, the patriarchs. God is worthy of His people presenting themselves before Him individually – adoring Him for who he is, thanking Him for new mercies, confessing failures and sins, surrendering to His work, hearing His comforting, rebuking, challenging, promising Voice.- responding with submission and commitment. God deserves it, commends the examples of it in Scripture, church history and biography is replete with the examples of those whose lives were marked because they were devout.

I find it interesting that in Israel's law, there was both a morning sacrifice and an evening sacrifice.

**Exodus 29:38-39** *Now this is what you shall offer on the altar: two lambs of the first year, day by day continually.* <sup>39</sup> *"One lamb you shall offer in the morning, and the other lamb you shall offer at twilight.*

Devotion to God at the start of the day; devotion to God at the close of the day.

Not only so, but God told them a fire was always to be burning on the altar of burnt offerings.

**Leviticus 6:13** *A fire shall always be burning on the altar; it shall never go out.*

This, brothers, is how we must see the discipline of devotion. Kindle the flame of love for God in the morning; keep it burning during the day, close off well at night.

In other words, if by quiet time you simply mean ticking off a chapter of Scripture or mindlessly reading some clichéd devotional book, then, sure, it's not worth doing. But if it is the means of blowing on those sparks of love for God, so as to set the tone of abiding in Christ throughout the day – it must be done. We are to pray without ceasing, meditate day and night; in everything give thanks. In other words, devotion is not something you switch on and switch off. But it is something you need to strengthen and foster – from the start of your day till the end. Our hearts need to be aflame. Sleep does not revive us spiritually. Every day, we need to rekindle the embers, get them burning, keep them burning and close off with some extra oil.

I will lay no method upon you except to say that critical to devotion is prayerful meditation on Scriptures and honest heart praise, thanksgiving, confession, surrender and submission. I think you should keep a hymnal with you and sing as you should. If you meditate better when you write, then write. If you will remember your surrender better if you write, then write. But plan to give yourself enough time. Set your alarm if appropriate. Vary the elements but remember that the commitment is what keeps it intense. If it costs, the devotion is felt. Costly devotion rises up to God as a sweet savour.