

# Pastor Your Own Heart First

## A Sentence That Saved My Ministry

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Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others.

I entered seminary as a naive and idealistic young man with grand designs and enormous hopes about future pastoral ministry. Between proper training and my passionate heart, nothing would stand in the way of me reaching souls for Christ — or so I thought.

I eagerly devoured every book assigned. Whether out of uncritical focus or predetermined agreement, everything I read affirmed that I was thinking correctly about what it took to succeed in ministry. I knew I was getting all I needed to be a great pastor.

Then I met Richard Baxter.

Of course, I mean the Richard Baxter who ministered in Kidderminster, England, from 1647 to 1661. That's the power of words and sentences — you can actually meet and learn from someone who has long since died. And make no mistake: although dead, he still spoke to me and challenged me in a way that fundamentally altered my ministry.

## Neglecting the Christ We Preach

I remember sitting in my seminary library, eager to dive into Baxter's book *The Reformed Pastor*. All my classmates raved about it. I opened to the first chapter anticipating confirmatory words that would strengthen how I thought about ministry. To my surprise, I was stopped dead in my reading tracks.

Take heed to yourselves, lest you be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim to the world the necessity of a Savior, your own hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits. (17)

Baxter's words landed on me like a ton of bricks, and my heart was pierced with conviction. No one had ever challenged me to search my own heart for the very grace that I was so passionate to offer others. For the first time, I had been warned to "take heed" to my own heart for fear that I might miss out on "the effectual working of the gospel."

# Covering Dullness with Ministry, Own Heart First

As I pored over Baxter's words, it became clear to me that it was my own sanctification that was being challenged. I was still confident I was saved through faith, but I had assumed that my desire to preach the living waters of Christ meant that I had been drinking deeply from his well. The line "Take heed . . . lest you . . . be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach" splashed upon my soul like a bucket of cold water, waking me out of the state of spiritual slumber in which I had lived and studied. I sat stunned under the weight of the power of what I had just read.

For days, Baxter's words searched me. His warning scared me. I was left facing the reality that I had become content to be in a state of grace without vigorously pursuing lively fellowship with Christ. I'd been deceived into thinking a passion for ministry was enough to sustain my heart. My youthful enthusiasm to minister to others, however, was often a front for dullness of spirit toward the sweetness of Jesus.

It had never even occurred to me to take the spiritual temperature of my own soul. I was exposed. My heart was laid bare by the penetrating words of The Reformed Pastor.

## Second (and Inspired) Witness

Not long after reading Baxter's words, a friend of mine helped me see that Baxter was simply reiterating something the apostle Paul had said thousands of years earlier.

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers. (1 Timothy 4:16)

"I was so focused on feeding others with the Bread of Life that I had neglected to feast on him first."

I was encouraged that even Timothy, as a "man of God" (1 Timothy 6:11), needed a word of reminder to regularly consider the state of his own heart — something that I was embarrassingly failing to do. I was so focused on feeding others with the Bread of Life that I had neglected to feast on him first. Wanting so desperately to be a spiritual chef, I was starving from not being "nourished on the words of the faith" (1 Timothy 4:6 NASB). What arrogance!

Thankfully, God opened my eyes to see the pivotal nature of a pastor's personal, experiential knowledge of Christ. I was gripped tighter by the necessity of prioritizing my own spiritual well-being, seeing how my usefulness to others rests on the depth of my ongoing experience of God and his grace.

Through Baxter and Paul, God showed me that he empowers a man to be suitable to the calling of public ministry through a vibrant and ongoing walk with the Lord Jesus Christ. I discovered that doing for Christ to the neglect of being sustained by and reveling in Christ is a recipe for disaster. Without the impact of Baxter's words, confirmed by Paul, I was surely headed for a short-lived, shallow, and graceless ministry.

## **Our Usefulness Depends on Delight**

This reorientation changed everything for me. Instead of seeking to be a great pastor, I started seeking to be a great lover of Jesus. Knowledge of Christ and intimacy with him became the prism through which I now viewed my training, ministry, and life. Driven by Baxter's challenge, I saw that many of my heroes in ministry were mightily used of God not because they were so gifted (although many of them were gifted), but because they were so personally acquainted with the grace of Christ. They served so faithfully and fruitfully because they "had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

"Our usefulness in ministry is inextricably tied to our delight in Christ."

Friend, pastoral ministry is a high and holy calling. To serve Christ by shepherding his people and proclaiming his glorious gospel is a heavenly privilege that no man deserves. It is all of grace, and it should be pursued with fervent passion. But I want you to learn what Baxter taught me: never stop pressing on toward intimacy with Christ and cultivating a heart saturated with his grace.

Our usefulness in ministry is inextricably tied to our delight in Christ. Don't be fooled into thinking that you can overlook the condition of your own heart and still be helpful to others. It doesn't work like that.

The gospel of Jesus we preach to others is first and foremost for us. Treasure it by treasuring him. Fuel your passion for ministry by filling your soul with gospel grace. It would be the ultimate tragedy to come to the end of your ministry only to realize that you had labored in vain because you had not mined the depths of the riches of Christ and his grace toward you.

Take heed, my friend. Take heed!