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THE LABOR OF MINISTRY AND THE TASK AHEAD

Colossians 1:24-29

(A Sermon for the Ordination of John Winfree and Christopher Ortiz)

This is a solemn and joyous occasion, isn't it? I usually like to stress the weight of these services by quoting Jonathan Edwards, who, with the last words of his farewell sermon to Northampton on June 22, 1750 said, "Let us all remember, and never forget our future solemn meeting, on that great day of the Lord; the day of infallible decision, and of the everlasting and unalterable sentence, Amen."¹

Edwards wanted to remind the congregation that each of them would give an account to the Lord on the day of judgment for how they cared for each other – pastor and congregation. That was driven, in part, because he had been treated poorly – and fired! But this idea of giving an account to the Lord isn't a made up one for pastors, is it? We recognize God's calling on you both today to a task that will require you to stand before the Lord and give an account for men's souls as you are called to keep watch over them, according to Hebrews 13:17.

Moreover, because of the weight of this task, we are charged as a church not to lay hands on anyone too hastily. The idea being that we set one aside for this important task and they actually do damage to the gospel while that responsibility falls back on us, who set you apart too hastily.

But that's not what we're doing today. We're setting apart two men whose lives we've watched, teaching we've heard, and hearts we've known as they've walked alongside of us. And we are confident that we lay hands on men whom the Lord has prepared for this task of pastoral ministry – whether through the planting of the church or overseeing of this local church. And therefore today's task is not merely a solemn one but a joyous one.

With that said, "What specifically is the task of pastoral ministry? How should we think about our duties? What must be in our minds as we aim to hear on that final day, 'Well done my good and faithful servant?'"

And though there are a number of places in the Scripture to which we could turn to answer these questions, this evening we will set our focus on Colossians 1:24-29, for it is in this text that Paul expresses his purpose and labors in his calling, and it is in this text

¹ Jonathan Edwards, *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards*, Wilson H. Kimnach, et al, eds. (Yale: New Haven, 1999), 241.

that I find myself turning to time and time again in order to settle my focus on what I am to be about when I am tempted to busy myself doing numerous lesser things.

As Paul unfolds his ministry in these few verses I believe it provides a picture to us of what the labor of a pastor must be. Therefore, as we turn to these verses may we take note of the following tasks to which the overseer is called:

You are called to do your part in filling up the afflictions of Christ before those entrusted to your care (24)

Paul begins the section writing, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church ...”

Were this phrase “filling up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions” not part of the inspired text, we would be tempted to think such a statement were blasphemy. For what could be lacking in Christ’s afflictions? From the cross our Lord cried out, “It is finished!” Therefore, dare we think that Christ somehow did not do enough and need our assistance in order to atone for men’s sins? Absolutely not. What then, we must ask, does it mean?

What is lacking is not Christ’s redeeming work itself but the personal display of his suffering as a demonstration of his love for his people, for we do not now behold those sufferings with our eyes.

Therefore, in God’s wisdom, he has chosen to use his people (especially those whom he places as shepherds over his people) to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. He uses their lives as a platform to demonstrate his love and care for his church as they suffer and are comforted before God’s people. To make it personal, I believe God will use your lives, John and Chris, as a demonstration of his love for those in Queens and the church that will be planted there as well as for those who make up Cornerstone Community Church, as they witness you love them, serve them, and even suffer before them under the hand of our sovereign Lord.

One author has written, “The life of the pastor will normally be characterized by a quality of suffering not usually experienced in the lives of those gifted for other, equally important roles within the church. ... [For] the suffering of the pastor ... functions as a primary vehicle through which the truth of the gospel is mediated to God’s people. ... In the midst of a contemporary church that is often caught up in the techniques and technology as the way to grow, Paul’s message ... reminds us that just as redemption took place through the coming of Christ, so too God’s plan for strengthening the faith of his people is not ultimately a program, but a person. ... At the heart of the pastoral office is the suffering of the pastor ... In an age where pastors are being increasingly

reconfigured as professional therapists, business managers, and coaches in the game of life, such an understanding seems as strange as it is needed.”²

If it indeed sounds strange, then we need to consider that Christ’s first words to Peter after declaring to him the final time, “Feed my sheep” were, “Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you used to dress yourself and walk wherever you wanted, but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go” to which John adds, “This he said to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God” (John 21:17-19).

In our minds, it would seem that after Peter is restored following his denial of the Lord and appointed by Christ to be an overseer in his church that there would be a warm scene of Jesus hugging him and reassuring him all will be fine and not to worry. Instead, at that crucial moment of Peter’s calling Jesus begins by telling him that he will die in service to his Lord. He wanted Peter to know that following him and leading his people would mean death.

In the same way, the first word the Lord tells Ananias he will speak to Paul is the suffering Paul will undergo in following him. He declares, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel. For I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name” (Acts 9:15-16).

In addition, throughout history, those men whom the Lord has called to lead his people underwent great suffering before those entrusted to their care. I have had the privilege of reading a fair bit of Luther, whose sufferings include poor health, the loss of children, the threat of death from his enemies, and being called the offspring of Satan – to name a few, and a fair bit of Calvin whose sufferings were so numerous and described (by himself) in such detail that I nearly turned into a hypochondriac. And though I have not read these men in as much detail, this list could be expanded to include the great sufferings of John Bunyan, Jonathan Edwards, Adinoram Judson, Charles Spurgeon, and many more.

Simply put, in God’s sovereign design, it seems his chief instruments in filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ are those who lead his people. Therefore, I begin here in noting your tasks – that place where our Lord began with both Peter and Paul – the call to suffer before God’s people, and in demonstrating such suffering, to fill up what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his church. Suffering has been the road of every pastor to some degree, but you can know that your suffering as a pastor is not in vain. As you suffer and serve, face afflictions and pour yourself out for the

² Scott J. Hafemann, *The NIV Application Commentary: 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 77-78.

Lord's people, you'll demonstrate in your own person the love of Christ them. Yet, in looking at our text, we may say more.

You are called to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ (25-28a)

Paul writes in verses 25-28a that he "became a minister according to the stewardship from God that was given to me for you, *to make the word of God fully known*, the mystery hidden for ages and generations but now revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. *Him we proclaim ...*" (emphases added).

Your central and priority task among many other crucial tasks is to proclaim the word of God, declaring the gospel of Jesus Christ. This, Paul tells us, was the task entrusted to him, and it is the task entrusted to all who are called to lead God's people.

Therefore, when Paul wrote to Timothy in his second letter addressed to him, he allowed Timothy to feel the weight of this task in writing, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: *preach the word*; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (2 Timothy 4:1-2, emphasis added). When someone begins an exhortation with such with that preface, we would do well to hear and know the weight of the task. In this case, the task is to the pastor, and it is to preach the word of God, (as Paul notes in our text), making it "fully known."

Again, this charge has been passed down to men in your position throughout history as it has continually been the position of those who understand the nature of the Word of God that preaching is the primary task of the church. Those leading the reformation identified as the first mark of a true church, the preaching of the word of God. And in more recent times, Al Mohler has reminded us that though there are many other responsibilities and priorities for the pastor, "There is one central, non-negotiable, immovable, essential priority, and that is the preaching of the Word of God."³

Therefore, just as Paul expressed his task, "to make the word of God fully known" and others have picked up the torch throughout history, so now this task falls to you, as you answer the Lord's call to shepherd his people. Christopher, you do this in Queens because there is need for a church, and the Word of God alone creates this church. John, you will do this work here – whether publicly or privately – in order that CCC grows and does not swerve from the truth.

³ R. Alber Mohler, Jr., "The Primacy of Preaching" in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 2002), 16.

Preaching is the utmost call of the minister because the word of God proclaimed is the most powerful weapon with which Christ's servants are armed. Men do not need your intelligence or gifts or witty remarks. Men need the word of God proclaimed in its fullness, both the Old and New Testaments, exalting Christ in whom God is summing up all things. And today we are recognizing in this service that God has set you aside for that great task – the proclamation of his word.

You must proclaim the word because your goal is not to give aids to men wanting simply to improve their job-performance or attitude toward their neighbors. Rather, it is declare to a world held captive by Satan, sin, and death that which alone is the power of God unto salvation, namely, the word of God. Hearing the Scripture is a necessity for it is the means by which men are enabled to repent and believe *and* it is the means by which men continue to repent and believe to the end.

You are set aside today to proclaim that which was a mystery for ages and generations, which was made known to the apostles, and which was preserved by them as the written word. That is your task, and we solemnly charge you (as Paul did Timothy) to labor in such a task with all your might, knowing that the “most essential criterion of judgment for the minister of God”⁴ on that final day will be, “Did you preach the Word?” May you be able to answer in the words of the apostle Paul with which we opened this service, “I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all [whom you entrusted to my care], for I did not shrink from declaring to [them] the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:26-27). Your priority task must be the preaching of the Scripture, making God's word fully known to the honor of Christ and the glory of God the Father.

You must also do all that is necessary to ensure that those under your care come to maturity in Christ (28)

In verse 28 Paul addresses the goal or purpose of his labors as he writes, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.” Thus we see that Paul labored for the goal of presenting all under his care mature in Christ.

John and Christopher, your labor is not simply to see converts (though it is certainly not less) but to see men come to the full realization of their salvation, namely, being conformed to the image of Christ. With that said, we all know that such will not be realized until the Lord returns. However, you must labor toward that end continually in men's lives so that they are ever more and more being conformed to the image of our Lord, the hope of our salvation. You labor to see men *profess* faith and *persevere* in faith.

⁴ Ibid.

In order to achieve this goal, Paul declares that he proclaims Christ and warns and teaches everyone with all wisdom. As we have said, Christ and his work must be proclaimed. Yet we now see as well that you must warn and teach. These are two tasks that have fallen on hard times in our churches.

First of all, it seems in large part the church has surrendered her responsibility of teaching to the seminary. The complexities of scripture and the often difficult task of interpretation is left to those outside of the church where we repeat things that we know and feel comfortable talking about behind the pulpit. The task of the preacher, however, is to teach. We must show how God is both just and the justifier of those who have faith in Christ, how different men at different times writing on different themes write one unified story, how God's plan of redemption includes the creation itself and how that affects even the smallest task we do, how the law has functioned in the history of redemption, how it is that God's plan of summing up all things in Christ affects our understanding of Israel, the temple, and all the promises, among many other complex and difficult things in the scripture. It is our task, and we must not be content in handing it off to another. We must teach our people so that they too might instruct others also. May it never be said to those under our teaching, "By this time you ought to be teachers, [but] you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God" because *we* have failed in this call to teach men God's word!

And Paul notes that he warns or admonishes men as well. Again, in our day warning men both publicly and privately is not known in our churches as it should be. We've fallen into an individualistic thought process that you have no business in the details of another. However, you as a pastor are called to realize what's at stake as men harbor sin. There is an eternal weight here in Paul's mind, no doubt, as he speaks of warning men. For you know that should men continue down a road where the word brings forth no obedience, there is no sensitivity to what is good and evil, and no perseverance of faith, men will show themselves not to have known the Lord. Therefore, you must warn men for the sake of their souls. You must speak as Baxter suggests, "As a dying man to dying men," knowing you will one day stand before the Lord and give an account for them.

Finally, you are called to labor by the strength of the Spirit, which means you must be a man of prayer (29)

In the pages of scripture it is often seen that it matters not simply what you do but *how* you do it. And the same is true for your labors as a pastor. Thus, Paul ends this section writing, "For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me" (29).

John and Christopher, you must labor in these tasks by the power of the Spirit, so that Christ alone is honored in your labors. This seemed to be something spoken about more often in prior generations as Spurgeon declared, "Except the Lord endow us with power from on high, our labor must be in vain, and our hopes must end in disappointment,"⁵ but such power is no less needed today.

With that said, it appears that God's sovereignly appointed means for endowing the pastor with the power of the Spirit is through the prayers of his people. In Acts 4, it is as the disciples are praying that they are filled with the Spirit, and that is just one such example. Therefore, if you are going to labor by the strength of the Spirit, you must be a man of prayer.

You will be tempted to allow a number of things to clutter your schedule and prayer will seem to be that which you can always push to a later time. There are a number of things that can slide in your schedule, you cannot allow prayer to be one of them. "You do not have to have a bulletin; you have to pray. You do not have to chair every committee or attend every meeting; you have to pray."⁶ You must put a high price on the power of the Spirit in your ministry and therefore you must put a high priority on prayer as a part of your tasks.

Therefore, as we have outlined the tasks of the pastor in this text, we see that you are called 1) to fill up the afflictions of Christ, 2) to proclaim the whole word of God, 3) to make it your goal that those entrusted to your care attain to full maturity in Christ, and 4) to labor by the strength of the Spirit, meaning you must be a man of prayer. These are overwhelming tasks. Therefore, may you never forget that just as his grace has come to you so that you sit here today who you are by the grace of God, so his grace will be with you all your days.

May glory be given to our Lord through your ministry. Amen.

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, *An All-Round Ministry* (reprint. ed., Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 322.

⁶ D. A. Carson, *A Call to Spiritual Reformation: Priorities from Paul and His Prayers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 132.