

# The Duty of a Pastor

Preached with unction by John Owen, 8 September 1682

*“And I will give you pastor according to my heart, which shall feed you with knowledge and understanding.” – Jeremiah 3:15*

He is no pastor who doth not feed his flock. . . . It is to “labour in the word and doctrine,” 1 Tim. 5:17;—to make all things subservient to this work of preaching and instructing the church; to do it in that frame the apostle mentions in Col. 1:28. . . . Here is the frame of the apostle’s spirit (it should give dread to us in the consideration of it): “I labour diligently, I strive as in a race, I wrestle for victory,—by the mighty in-working power of Christ working in me; and that with great and exceeding power.”

What I shall do is, to show you, in some instances, what is required unto this work of teaching or of feeding the congregation with knowledge and understanding, in this duty of the preaching of the word:—

**1. There is spiritual wisdom in understanding the mysteries of the gospel,** that we may be able to declare the whole counsel of God, and the riches and treasures of the grace of Christ, unto the souls of men. See Acts 20:27; 1 Cor. 2:1-4; Eph. 3:7-9. Many in the church of God were, in those days of light, growing and thriving; they had a great insight into spiritual things, and into the mysteries of the gospel. The apostle prays that they might all have, Eph. 1:17, 18, “That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints.”

Really it is no easy thing for ministers to instruct to such kind of duties. If there be not some degree of eminency in themselves, how shall we lead such persons as these to perfection? We must labour ourselves to have a thorough knowledge of these mysteries, or we shall be useless to a great part of the church. There is spiritual wisdom and understanding in the mysteries of the gospel required hereunto.

**2. Authority is required.** What authority in a preaching ministry? It is a consequent of unction, and not of office. The scribes had an outward call to teach in the church; but they had no unction, anointing, that could evidence they had the Holy Ghost, his gifts and graces. Christ had no outward call; But he had an unction,—he had a full unction of the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces, for the preaching of the gospel. Hereon there was a controversy about his authority. The scribes say unto him, Mark 11:28, “By what authority doest thou these things? and who gave thee this authority?” The Holy Ghost determines the matter, Matt. 7:29, “He preached as one having authority, and not as the scribes.” They had the authority of office, but not of unction; Christ only had that. And preaching in the demonstration of the Spirit, which men quarrel so much about, is nothing less than the evidence in preaching of unction, in the communication of gifts and grace

unto them, for the discharge of their office: for it is a vain thing for men to assume and personate authority. So much evidence as they have of unction from God in gifts and grace, so much authority they have, and no more, in preaching: and let every one, then, keep within his bounds.

**3. Another thing required hereunto is, experience of the power of the things we preach to others.** I think, truly, that no man preaches that sermon well to others that doth not first preach it to his own heart. He who doth not feed on, and digest, and thrive by, what he prepares for his people, he may give them poison, as far as he knows; for, unless he finds the power of it in his own heart, he cannot have any ground of confidence that it will have power in the hearts of others. It is an easier thing to bring our heads to preach than our hearts to preach. To bring our heads to preach, is nothing more than to fill our minds and memories with some notions of truth, of our own or other men, and speak them out to give satisfaction to ourselves and others: this is very easy. But to bring our hearts to preach, is to be transformed into the power of these truths; or to find the power of them, both before, in fashioning our minds and hearts, and in delivering of them, that we may benefit; and to be acted with zeal for God and compassion to the souls of men. A man may preach every day in the week, and not have his heart engaged once. This hath lost us powerful preaching in the world, and set up, instead of it, quaint orations; for such men never seek after experience in their own hearts: and so it is come to pass, that some men's preaching, and some men's not preaching, have lost us the power of what we call the ministry; that though there be twenty or thirty thousand in orders, yet the nation perishes for want of knowledge, and is overwhelmed in all manner of sins, and not delivered from them unto this day.

**4. Skill to divide the word aright.** this skill to divide the word aright, is practical wisdom in considering the word of God,—to take out not only that which is substantial food for the souls of men, but what is meet food for them to whom we preach. And that,—

**5. Requires the knowledge and consideration of the state of our flocks.** He who hath not the state of his flock continually in his eye, and in his mind, in his work of preaching, fights uncertainly, as a man beating the air. If he doth not consider what is the state of his flock, with reference to temptations, in reference to their light or to their darkness, to their growth or to their decays, to their flourishing or to their withering, to the measure of their knowledge and attainments;—he who doth not duly consider these things, never preaches aright unto them.

**6. There is required, too, that we be acted by zeal for the glory of God, and compassion to the souls of men.** Having spoken these few plain words, I may say, “Who is sufficient for these things?” There is that spiritual wisdom which is necessary to understand the mysteries of the gospel, able to instruct and led on to perfection the most grown in our congregations;—that authority which proceeds from unction, and is an evidence of an anointing with the graces and gifts of the Spirit; which alone gives authority in preaching;—that experience which conforms our whole souls into every sermon that we preach, so as to feel the truth in the power of it;—that skill whereby to

divide the word aright, etc. Hence we see we have great need to pray for ourselves, and that you should pray for us. Pray for your ministers. This, then, is the first duty required of gospel ministers.



**John Owen** (1616—1683) was born in Stadham, Oxfordshire, England. He entered Queen's College, Oxford, at 12 years of age and obtained his B.A. degree in 1632 at the age of 16. He received his M.A. degree in 1635. He received his D.D. in 1653 from Oxford University. He was formally a Presbyterian, but his views differed and he was more of Independent, founding a church on Congregational principles. He was active in religious and political issues his entire life, at one time being the chaplain to Oliver Cromwell and also preaching before Parliament.

*"In younger age a most comely and majestic form; but in the latter stages of life, depressed by constant infirmities, emaciated with frequent diseases, and above all crushed under the weight of intense and unremitting studies, it became an incommensurable mansion for the vigorous exertions of the spirit in the service of its God."*