

John Owen on the Church Pulpit

Leadership Class

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I've never been very smooth at introductions to my messages and today will be no exception, but there's a couple of story-like things that I want to tell you to kind of stimulate, get your thinking started at this early hour; one of them from a church in my past, distant past, and then something from Martyn Lloyd-Jones that will kind of lead into the the topic for this morning.

When Nancy and I got married in Chicago many years ago, we were attending a church and the pianist who played for our wedding was a godly woman. She was very supportive of us and of me in the the very first teaching that I ever did in a church, and I appreciate her; she's now with the Lord. There was a congregational meeting of some kind, and she made a statement that struck me and has stood with me for all these 35 years almost, but it's kind of a different little thing. The church that we attended liked to have potlucks and liked to gather around food and things like that, and she just made this statement in the offhanded way in a broader context to the point she was making, she said, "We are an eating church." We're an eating church, and I had no context to process that, I was new to being involved in churches and all of that, but it just kind of struck me that seemed like an odd thing to say, "We are in eating church." I knew what she meant by it, but looking back in some subsequent perspective, I'm not sure that that's what a church would want to be known for. Paul said in book of Romans, the kingdom of God is not eating or drinking, but righteousness and peace in the Holy Spirit.

And so that that struck me and you just have to kind of wonder what it is we're known for and what you want to be known for, and then Martyn Lloyd-Jones, I kind of providentially stumbled across this quote a couple of days ago. It's from Iain Murray's first volume of his two volume work on on the great doctor. He quotes the doctor saying something that just warmed my heart so much yesterday, or actually two or three days ago, whenever it was I stumbled across it, and I wanted to share it with you because you've heard me say in different times, if you remember, you've heard me comment on my objection to what I thought was a pretty modern practice. You go to church websites and the pastors bios talk about what they like to do, they like to hunt, and they talk about what their favorite sports teams are, and all of that. I've been critical of that, saying that it's a superficial way to try to create a false sense of relational identity with the pastor; it creates a false sense of intimacy as a means of trying to attract people to the church. Well, lo and behold, 80 years before I was saying these things, Martyn Lloyd-Jones said

this, and again this is all just kind of getting our minds into gear for the purpose of the church because it's early in the morning and, you know, we all need a little time to get started here. Martyn Lloyd-Jones said this talking about certain kinds of pastors in his day, he said, "There are men who believe that you can get other men to come to chapel and church by playing football and other games with them. 'I'll fraternize with these men,' says such a minister, 'I'll get them to like me and to see that I'm not so different from them after all, and then they'll come to listen to my sermons.' And he tries it but, thank God, he almost invariably fails as he richly deserves. The man who only comes to church or chapel because he likes the minister is a man of no value at all, and the minister who attempts to get men there by means of that subterfuge is for the time being guilty of lowering the standard of the truth which he claims to believe, for this gospel is the gospel of salvation propounded by the Son of God himself. We must not hawk it about the world or offer special inducements and attractions as if we were shopkeepers announcing an exceptional bargain sale." And he goes on to say, "The world today is laughing at the church, laughing at her attempts to be nice and to make people feel at home. My friends, if you feel at home in any church without believing in Christ as your personal Savior, then that church is no church at all, but a place of entertainment or a social club, for the truth of Christianity and the preaching of the gospel should make a church intolerable and uncomfortable to all except those who believe, and even they should go away feeling chastened and humbled." That's from page 142 of the first 40 years, Iain Murray's biography of Martyn Lloyd-Jones. Well, you can only imagine how that warmed my heart to read that after I've said all those things to you over the years. People are critical of me for saying that. I've heard from people in a friendly way saying, "I don't agree with you on that,; but that's the way it goes.

What I want to do today kind of as a transition, then what is it then that the church is supposed to do? What is church leadership supposed to do? And specifically even more, what is a pastor supposed to do? During my sabbatical, I had the opportunity to expand my reading and to go beyond things that I would normally be able to do. Toward the end of the sabbatical, I stumbled onto a wonderful discourse by John Owen. I was looking for something else and I found this article and I was captivated by it and decided that I wanted to share it here with you today. So the topic or the title of what we're doing today is "John Owen on the Church Pulpit." John Owen on the church pulpit, and we're here to promote church leadership at Truth Community Church. We're here to kind of help cultivate a, you know, a shared philosophy about ministry that has not to do with church potlucks and social activities and not with superficial misguided efforts to get people to like us, but rather to get to the heart of what church ministry is supposed to be. And though not everyone in this room aspires to be a church leader and not everyone in this room could be a church leader, it is very healthy for us to come together, men and women, boys and girls in the church, and say what is it that the church should do, what is it that we should be aspiring after collectively regardless of who it is that's actually, you know, standing in front of the people and opening the word of God. And so I want to share with you some things today from John Owen.

Now, if you're not familiar with John Owen, that's okay. I'm no student of John Owen at all so I don't hold myself out as one today. Let me just give you a brief little summary of

his history and career. John Owen was an English pastor and theologian who was a man of great influence in British society. He lived from 1616 to 1683, so he was living some 400 years ago, and even longer, I guess. He was brilliant from his childhood and one of his brief biographers says that Owen entered college at the age of 12 and studied the classics, mathematics, philosophy, theology, and Hebrew, and throughout his teen years he studied 18 to 20 hours a day. At the age of 26, he began a writing career that spanned over 40 years and Banner of Truth today has published his works in 16 volumes, and then he has an additional 7 volumes of commentary on the book of Hebrews alone. So you could fill half a bookshelf with just the works of of John Owen if you were so inclined or a gracious friend did for me, someone gives you his works as a gift. One historian said this, said John Owen, was the greatest of Puritan theologians.

Now if you think about the influence of the Puritans and all of the men that have written and the books that we're still reading today 300-400 years later, for someone to be called the greatest of those theologians is enough to perk up your ears and say, "I should listen to what this man has to say," because we are not interested and Christianity is not built on, you know, trying to address as if the most important thing was addressed, the most latest fad in theology or in culture, or to consume ourselves with what the most recent controversy is in Christian circles, we need to be anchored in historical theology, we need to be anchored in the truth that transcends time and transcends our lifetimes. You know, God's truth is eternal, God's truth is unchanged and unchanged, and so part of the responsibility of the church is not so much to feed the bellies of the people who come, but to feed the minds with God's eternal truth, and I'm going to share a lot of Scripture with you in that regard in just a moment.

So as I said, I'm no student of John Owen, so I speak about him with a great deal of reserve and modesty, there are those who know him much better than I do but during my sabbatical, I came across in the 16th volume this discourse on the duties of pastors and it will help us to consider leadership and to think rightly about church leadership if we have a biblical perspective on what the duties of pastors should be. And he lists out 11 duties. You don't really need to write these down. I'll just kind of go through them because we're only going to address the first one, but I just want to give you a sense of how thoroughly he thought about issues and what he said about the duties of pastors in general, and I summarize as follows. There's eleven of them. There are 11 of them.

Number 1, and this is the sequence in which he gives them. He says, first of all, the pulpit. Secondly, pastor is to be a man of prayer. Thirdly, he administers the church ordinances, Communion, baptism. We'll celebrate Communion tomorrow here at Truth Community. Fourthly, he's concerned for the preservation of truth, you know, and establishing and keeping the doctrine that has been handed down from generation to generation. Fifthly, he should be a man who is seeking the conversion of the lost. Sixthly, he comforts the afflicted. So there's the pulpit, prayer, church ordinances, doctrine, seeking of conversions, comfort, the afflicted. Seventh, he should be a man of compassion. Eighth, is a man who visits the sick. Ninthly, there's the oversight of the church. Tenth, there's a responsibility for fellowship with like-minded churches. And then eleventh, he lists out godly life and speech that the pastor, the elder should be a man

of godly life and godly speech. And he goes through those in varying degrees of detail. I have to tell you, after reading 20 pages of that from the greatest theologian of all of the Puritans, by the time I finished reading that, by the time John Owen was done speaking in this article, I was not asking myself if I was a pastor, I was left wondering if I was a Christian. It was that biblical, that searching, and that convicting. And so upon reading those things and seeing the, you know, the impact that it had on me, I wanted to share its substance with you.

Now, most of you, as I said, do not aspire to be teaching pastors; some of you have desires to teach, and that's a good and healthy thing and I want to encourage you in that direction, but in the broader context of the room, let me explain why we are considering this material. First of all, I want the opportunity to expose you to past godly thinking. There is a tendency to just be interested in, as my friend Peter Samon said in a recent article, there's a tendency among modern Christians to just be preoccupied with what's been written in the past 10 or 20 years, what current guys are saying as if, you know, they represent the sum of wisdom. That's a very bad and unhealthy trend. We need to be familiar with the thinking of the past because the faith which we proclaim is, yes, rooted in Scripture, but the doctrine which we uphold is something that men have grown and the church has grown to understand over a period of time and over centuries, and historical theology, theology as we know it today, developed in broad sections of time as individual doctrines were contested, heresy had to be refuted, and so, you know, some of the early doctrinal controversies in the 4th century dealt with the doctrine of the Trinity and soon after that, the nature of the person of Christ and his deity and humanity. The first century believers did not have the benefit of the accumulated teaching that we had, and at the risk of being misunderstood, even the Apostle Paul was not writing from a sense of the developed theological vocabulary that we now have. These things were developed over time as men, godly men responded to false teaching and had to articulate things with greater precision.

So we see a growth in the understanding of doctrine from the close of the Canon which is to be expected. You could understand it this way, that when you first became a Christian, you had a very basic beginning understanding of truth. You knew that Christ had died for your sins, that he was raised again, and you know, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," you know, and it took you time, you know, and we're all still in the process of having started from that seed to grow in our understanding, to, as it says in 2 Peter 3:18, grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Well, what's true of you individually and what was true of you individually was true of the church generally, the church having received the completed Canon, grew in its understanding over the course of time and that's to be expected. So not all of the writings, that some people have a view that because the early church was closer chronologically to the time of Christ and the time of the apostles, therefore, they were more reliable teachers than maybe what we have today. That's a false assumption. That's not true. And there's something biblical that can help you think and understand and realize that, is that even Peter, even the Apostle Peter in Galatians 2, had to be corrected by the Apostle Paul because he was deviating in his practice from what truth was. Paul had to rebuke him, and to his credit Peter received the rebuke. Also thinking about Peter and Paul, Peter says

in 2 Peter 3, he says there are in the writings of the Apostle Paul, there are things that are difficult to understand. And so the apostles themselves showed a need to grow and to develop in their consistency in the truth, in their own practice; their writings are absolutely true and absolutely reliable, so don't equate what I'm saying to what they said in Scripture with what Scripture says about their own private practice and their own private growth in truth. There's a growth that took place over time which was true not only for us individually but true in the church as well. And so it is good for us to consider, you know, the godly thinking that we have inherited.

Now along with that, a right perspective on the office and the role of church leadership can help you think rightly and to have right expectations about church leadership and it lets you join into the spirit of it. If you know the way it should be, and if you see it practiced then you can appreciate it, if you see deviations then you can be someone of greater discernment. So today what I want to do, I only want to consider what John Owen says about the church pulpit, about the act and the office of preaching in the church, and he shows its importance by listing it first in his order of priorities.

Now, before we get to that, before we get to what he actually said, if you're taking notes here today here's your first point for today: it's the pulpit priority. The pulpit priority, and here at the start of this I want to take you to Scripture and a handful of these verses were suggested by Owen and others are, you know, things that I've added to it, the pulpit priority, the first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by the diligent preaching of the word of God. That is the pastor's first priority. The pastor's first priority, and there's always the risk of being misunderstood when I say this, we're talking about what is first and preeminent, what his first priority is, not that other things don't matter but what the first and preeminent priority is. And the preeminent priority of a pastor is not to be the buddy of everybody in the congregation. You know, that's a small view of the role of the pastor. You know, unsaved people can find buddies at the local bar, and we can find buddies at a ball game that share our love for the hometown team or whatever, and we can buddy buddy on things like that. It should be obvious to us as biblically minded Christians, that the role of the pastor has to be transcendent above something like that, something that can be found in any corner of the earthly world. And so the first and principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by the diligent preaching of the word of God.

Jeremiah 3:15. We'll turn to a lot of passages. We won't turn to this one. Jeremiah 3:15 says, this is the Lord speaking, he says, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." The pastor is one who feeds not by bringing the meat plate to the potluck, he feeds by bringing the word of God and knowledge and understanding to the mind of believers. And when you look at the New Testament, you see over and over again that the role of the pastor, the role of the elder, his primary duty is biblical teaching. And now you want to pull out your Bibles because we're going to go through 15 or 20 passages rather quickly. We'll try to go through them in biblical order and the goal in what we're doing here is just to impress upon our minds how repeated this theme is throughout the New Testament.

You know, you can turn to the end of the gospel of Matthew. Some of these passages will be familiar, some of them not so much. Matthew 28, and as you're turning there, you know, what is it that a church member should expect first and foremost from the pastor? You know, we could think about it this way, we could think about it from the perspective of a man that aspires for ministry or a seminary student or something, what is it that he is looking to do? What should he be looking to do if he is pursuing ministry? And if the idea is, "Well, I want to go into ministry so I can help people," if I was having a candid conversation with a man who was sitting across the table from me, I would say, "You know, you should drop out of seminary if that's what you think and come back after you've had a chance to do some assigned reading for two to three or four years to rethink what the purpose of ministry is," because if it's just a matter of helping people when their car breaks down or something like that, there are other people that can do that, and you know, and that's a fine aspiration to want to be a servant to the needs of people, but just to help people in their earthly pursuits is not the primary duty of the pastor, it's more specific than that, so that in Matthew 28:20 we read. Jesus says in verse 19, he says, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." And so teaching is at the core of making disciples, and Jesus makes it at the core of what his commission is after his resurrection and before his ascension, he leaves those marching orders with the church. And don't miss the fact that he says, "teach them to observe all that I have commanded you," to teach all that Christ has commanded is obviously a long-term commitment to make to, you know, to the pursuit of ministry. The pastor has to do more than just bring brief devotional thoughts to encourage people and to give them three points in a poem at the end of the message, there is a significant doctrinal content delivered by Christ that is to be picked up and repeated faithfully to the congregation.

So in Luke 24:47, you see Luke's version of the Great Commission. In verse 45 Christ opened the mind of the disciples to understand the Scriptures. So Christ opened the mind of the disciples to understand the Scriptures and that's what a pastor is supposed to do for his people is to be an instrument by which they can understand the Scriptures better for themselves. Jesus said to the disciples, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem." Christ at this crucial time as he is about to depart from the disciples, tells them what it is that he wants them to do, and he says the doctrinal content, the teaching content of repentance and forgiveness of sins is what is to be proclaimed everywhere that you go. And so there was this teaching aspect again, that was emphasized as Christ was after his resurrection.

Turn over to John 21, John 21 in verses 15 to 17. This, of course, is the text where Jesus is restoring Peter to ministry after his resurrection. He has forgiven Peter for denying him prior to his crucifixion, and now he is restoring Peter, he is publicly restoring Peter and commissioning him to ministry and he is doing it in front of all of the disciples so that they would all understand that Peter had been forgiven and was now commissioned to leadership. So in verse 15, John 21:15, we read, "When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?' He said to

him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' [Jesus] said to him, 'Feed my lambs.' He said to him a second time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, 'Tend my sheep.' He said to him the third time, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, 'Do you love me?'" and Peter said to the Lord, "'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, 'Feed my sheep.'" Now, he's obviously not talking about a physical feeding of providing food for their stomachs as we will see shortly in the book of Acts to the extent that someone might be tempted to look at that so literally and in such a carnal way.

Turn over to the book of Acts 6, you can see Peter's own understanding of what the Lord commissioned him to do. Acts 6. As you're turning there, so in Matthew 28, "teaching them to observe all that I commanded you." Luke, 24, "repentance and forgiveness of sin shall be proclaimed in my name." John. 21, "Feed my sheep. Feed my lambs. Tend my lambs." Now in Acts 6 we read this, "when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables.'" He says, "This is not what we should be doing. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." The disciples understood that there was a hierarchy of responsibilities, there were things that were primary for the apostles to do, and that the other things, while legitimate needs, were something that someone else should do so that their attention was not diverted away from the primary responsibility of prayer and ministry of the word. And so they delegated the tending of the needs of the widows at that time to godly men so that they were free to pursue the teaching of the word.

Now and again, we're just going through Scripture, Acts 20, if you could turn to Acts 20, and all we're doing here, we're not at all trying to expound each of these passages as they deserve to be taught, what we're doing and I like to do this from time to time, sometimes it's just the cumulative impact of seeing a theme repeated so many times in Scripture that you grasp its importance from the sheer emphasis that is given over the course and across the broad sweep of revelation. That's what we're doing so that when we talk about the importance of preaching and teaching in the ministry of the local church, and when we say that it is a mistake for a man to market himself as a relational guy in order to try to attract people into the church, I want you to have a broad sense of Scripture of why that is true.

So in Acts 20:28, Paul admonishes the Ephesians elders and he says, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." Paul says that right after he said this in verse 27, in verse 26, he said, "I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God." Paul says, "While I was here, I gave you the whole counsel of

God," then he tells them, "You be careful to care for the church." What is Paul saying to them? You care for the church by teaching them the whole counsel of God.

Then he goes on to say in verse 31, he says, "Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified." "I taught you the whole counsel of God," Paul says. "You go and take care of the church of God. Remember that while I was with you three years day and night, that's what I did, and so now I commend you, having laid all of this out, I commend you to the word which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance." And so the teaching central to Peter, central to Paul, central to the Lord.

Romans 10 and if it's easier, you can just let me kind of go through these things because time will get away from us, as it already is doing. In Romans 10:13 through 15 we read this, "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" If there is to be faith created in the hearts of men, it must come through the preaching of the word of God. It is that central.

In 1 Corinthians 1:17, the Apostle Paul says, "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power." Paul says and you could look at his commission in Acts 22 and Acts 26, he said, "Christ sent me to preach the gospel." That's what Paul was responsible to do.

In chapter 2, verses 1 through 5 of Corinthians, he says, 1 Corinthians, he says, "I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God." And Paul is saying, "I did not put forth my natural gifts and my natural eloquence, I didn't preach to you in that capacity because your faith is not to be grounded on the abilities or the personality of the preacher." That is so essential to understand. It is not about the cleverness of the preacher. It is not about his personality. It's not even about his friendship with people in the congregation. The faith of Christ's people, the faith of the sheep of Christ is to be grounded not on man but on the word of God and what has been revealed. That is essential to understand. Men will fail us. Men will betray us. Men will take opportunity to betray those that have trusted them, speaking of spiritual leaders here now, not people in the congregation. They will take opportunity to betray those who've trusted them if they think there's some kind of opportunity for them in it, and we've seen that this week and I don't want to go any further than that, not here at Truth Community Church, what I just said has nothing to do with Truth Community Church.

My whole point being for today's purposes is to understand that your faith, your faith is to be grounded on the word and not in the person of the man behind the pulpit. In order for that goal, and that very important result to attain, the man has to be preaching the word. Not telling stories about his family. Not telling jokes that, you know, ingratiate him to the audience and make people go out feeling lighthearted and all of that. You know, you can do that, but it's a false sense of peace. It's a false sense of comfort to walk out having been entertained by a pulpit without having been grounded in the word of God in what is said.

And so you go on in the book of Ephesians 4, Ephesians 4:11 and 12, we read that Christ to the church "gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes." Christ gives to the church over the course of time over the centuries, and gives to local churches those men who serve as shepherds, those who serve as teachers. And what do they teach? They teach doctrine. They help the church grow in their understanding of the word of God and in theology so that they're not tossed about by every wind of doctrine that comes along. There should be a sense of, you know, I like trees, I like planting trees in our lot and, you know, you plant a tree as a new sapling, and its, you know, its trunk is thin and, you know, it tosses back and forth in the wind, but as a few years go by, the trunk starts to expand, the roots go deeper, and that tree stands firm because it's been grounded, it's in nutrients and it's had time to grow and it's been established so it stands firm when the wind comes and beats against it. That's a picture of what's supposed to happen in a local church with the teaching of the word of God.

Don't turn to this one but in Colossians 1:28, the Apostle Paul says, "Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ." And on it goes.

Let me just give you for the sake of time, you can look these up later on your own, in 1 Timothy you can read chapter 3, verse 2; chapter 4, verse 13 and 16; chapter 5, verse 17. In 2 Timothy, you could read chapter 2, verse 24; chapter 4, verses 1 and 2, which says preach the word in season and out of season. Titus 1:9 you see the qualification of an elder being that he's a man that's able to teach, to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. I wanted to read all of those, but time is not our friend here and you can look them up on your own. You get the point anyway, right? I mean, how many passages do we have to turn to before we start to see how much Scripture emphasizes this as the primary responsibility of church leadership? And there are others beyond what I've given to you here today.

So what are we to make of that? Okay, as we think about the life of the church, what drives the life of the church, what are we to make of that? Here's what John Owen said. Finally, I get to what I promised you. John Owen said and I quote, he said, "The first and

principal duty of a pastor is to feed the flock by the diligent preaching of the word. This feeding is of the essence of the office of a pastor so that he who does not, or cannot, or will not feed the flock is no pastor whatever outward call or work he may have in the church." He goes on to say, "A man is a pastor to those whom he feeds by pastoral teaching and to no more. He that does not so feed the flock is no pastor at all." And so guys claim to be pastors that don't really give attention to the teaching of the word of God, and what John Owen is saying is that men like that are not pastors at all, no matter whether they carry the title or not, because the essence of the pastor is that he teaches the word to a group of people over the course of time. That's what a pastor does according to John Owen.

Then he goes on to say, again, this is all under the point "the pulpit priority." We've seen, you know, almost two dozen passages of Scripture that emphasize this and now we're just seeing the inside of John Owen on the matter. He goes on to say this, he says, "It is not required only that he preach now and then at his leisure, rather, he must lay aside all other employments, all other duties in the church that would divert him from this work, that he may give himself to teaching and that he may be, in these things, laboring to the utmost of his ability." And so just as an Olympic athlete sets aside everything else in his life in order to train for the few moments of his Olympic event and he gives everything and devotes all of his energy to that one goal, what Owen is saying, prior to the development of the Olympics, of course, is saying is that the pastor lays aside, comparatively, everything else for the sake of that one essential duty that Scripture points him to that God has, in one way or another, gifted him for, and that which is most essential for the need of the flock.

And then Owen goes on to say, "For men to pretend themselves to be pastors of the church and to be unable to do this duty, or to be negligent of this work and duty, is to live in open defiance of the commands of Christ." So that's the pulpit priority. What Owen is saying is it's of the essence. These two things cannot be separated. The pastor and the responsibility to teach are so wedded together that you are not a pastor if you're not doing that, and even if you hold the title and receive the paycheck for it, if you're not given over to that, you are not being a pastor in the highest biblical sense of the term.

Now that's pretty daunting, but Owen's only getting started on the matter and that brings us to our second point this morning. We said the pulpit priority. Well, what is it if teaching is the priority, then how is the pastor supposed to do this? How is a pulpit ministry supposed to be carried out? What is necessary for a pulpit ministry? What is it that young men that are aspiring after the office, what is it that they should be aiming after? What should they be gearing their life toward setting as their goal? What should they be aiming themselves after and what is it that a congregation is entitled to look for from their pastor, or if they're looking for a pastor, what they should look for in that man? Owen lists a number of requirements for a right pulpit ministry.

1. He lists out the characteristic of spiritual wisdom. Spiritual wisdom. So what's required of a man in the pulpit? He lists out five things here, I believe is what I've got in my notes. Number 1 is spiritual wisdom. He says pastors need spiritual wisdom and understanding

in the mysteries of the gospel that they may declare unto the church all the counsel of God and the unsearchable riches of Christ. They need spiritual wisdom and understanding in the mysteries of the gospel that they may declare unto the church all the counsel of God and the unsearchable riches of Christ. Now let me read to you just a couple of passages here. Acts 20:27. The whole counsel of God comes to mind. 1 Corinthians 2:6 and 7, Paul says, "Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory." And in Ephesians 3:8 and through 11, Paul says, "To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God, who created all things, so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord."

And so when you start to think about these things with any depth at all, the way that God has set apart the teaching of the word of God to fulfill his purposes becomes a very compelling and sobering reality. We are not, the pastor is not to be a political commentator. The pastor should not be in the pulpit trying to persuade people how to vote. That is a prostitution of his office and a preoccupation with earthly matters that have nothing to do with the eternal purpose of God. These passages that we read emphasize the wisdom of God, the mystery hidden for ages. These are things of great, profound consequence, not to be preoccupied with the passing matters of earthly affairs. And so the teaching there is to be, Owen says, a spiritual wisdom that is brought to the pulpit.

Now secondly, along with that there is spiritual experience. Spiritual experience. As you are about to hear these comments, keep in mind that Scripture commands the church not to lay hands on anyone too hastily in the context of talking about elder leadership. 1 Timothy 5, do not lay hands on anyone too hastily. Do not share in the sins of others. A man before he is brought into spiritual leadership is to be proven and it is essential that this be done, and one of the ways that churches find themselves with elders that go off track and cause problems later on, is that a man, you can trace it back very often to the fact that a man was elevated too quickly. He was elevated before there had been sufficient time in the context of the maturity of a given body, he was elevated before sufficient time was given to test his ability. So it's very common in churches, Sid, you're nodding because you understand what I'm about to say, it's very common for churches to see a man who has some natural ability, maybe some professional attainment in his earthly career, and a guy who's outspoken and, you know, somewhat personable, and to latch onto that and say, "Oh, there's an elder, you know, and we need to run him through our program and spend time with him, but we need to get him into the office." And it's a wrong estimation of what actually qualifies a man for the office, and Owen is guarding against that danger when he emphasizes the importance of spiritual experience.

He says this, he says a man to be in the pulpit, to be, you know, to be in spiritual leadership, they must have experience of power in their preaching and upon their own souls. For a man to be a preacher, there has to be a prior experience of the power of God and the power of Scripture in his own soul that then he brings to bear in the pulpit. I'm going to make a general statement here that I don't intend to be applied strictly and to be all of that, I'm just making a very general statement here. In generally speaking, it is not a good idea for a man to go out of high school, into Bible college, into seminary and then right into a church, you know, because the effect of that is that his knowledge is all theoretical, he hasn't had the opportunity or the responsibility to be proven in other life circumstances. Scripture emphasizes the importance of family experience in elder qualifications. A man has to prove himself in his own household before he's qualified to be an elder because the household is the training ground that shows that he can lead others. And the Apostle Paul makes the point, I'm way beyond Owen at this point, the Apostle Paul makes the point that if a man can't manage his own household, how is he going to be able to manage the household of God? And so there has to be a life experience that shows that the truth has impacted this man, he has knowledge and power of it in his own soul, and that that has been proven in smaller circles before he's given the broader platform of leadership in the church.

And these things beloved, and here's especially in our day of smartphones and fast food drive-thrus and immediate access to everything that we want, nobody, nobody, nobody wants to take the time to do that. Everybody's in a hurry and so that even the best of churches and men that I love no doubt do this, they have a program through which they take aspiring elders and they give them material to read and all of that, and that's fine as far as it goes, but simply to take a man through a predetermined class and after he's regurgitated material back to you and done a couple of things that you've given him to do, that is not an indication necessarily that that man is ready for spiritual leadership. I'm talking just so you know, I'm talking in broad terms outside of Truth Community Church, I'm not addressing anything or anyone within the context of Truth Community Church. I'm just talking about the broader principles here. The point is that there must be time and there must be life experience and even life adversity that the man has gone through, that he is tested before those opportunities are given. And the test is not a two hour ordination exam. It is the test of life, the test of providence, the test of faithfulness and what does a man do in the prospect of of service is, you know, there's no prospect of service, is he faithful even then? Or is it just about getting his hands on what he wants to do?

Look, if that sounds like that's too high of a standard, if it sounds like that takes too long and it's too hard, we have to go back and remember what it is that we are dealing with. We are dealing with the eternal truth of God. We are dealing with the eternal gospel through which alone men can be saved from their sins. We are dealing with the church of Christ which belongs to him because he purchased it with his own blood. And so it is not for us, it is not for men, it is not for aspiring young men who are impatient with life to define the terms and say, "It's time for me to have my responsibility." No, that is not the way that we are to approach this. These things are to be established so that to the best that we can possibly know, we know beforehand what a man is going to be like when he has the office of spiritual leadership, we know beforehand what he will do with the pulpit

because there is a body of life experience and life work that has been established that the history becomes prologue to what the future will be. And that can't be rushed. We can't put a man in a microwave, hit 30 seconds and have an elder pop out. It doesn't work that way. So John Owen and Don Green are kind of blending together here and that was more Don Green than John Owen, but I think he would have agreed with me.

Owen says on this matter of spiritual experience, he says, "Without this, they will themselves be lifeless and heartless in their own work and their labor, for the most part, will be unprofitable to others." He goes on to say, "A man preaches only that sermon well to others which he preaches in his own soul." Listen to that again, "A man preaches only that sermon well to others which he preaches in his own soul." The man has to know before he enters into a pulpit, the man has to know how to preach to his own soul. If he can't preach to himself in a powerful way that effects a growth in righteousness in his own life, then how in the world is he ever going to do that for the benefit of others, for the benefit of the church of Christ? And how is the church, how is a congregation to know that a man can do that unless there has been a period of life experience by which that has been manifested in his life?

You know, churches, again, I'm speaking outside of Truth Community Church here. I want to be really clear about that. We're talking at the level of principle, not in terms of operational matters inside our own local church here. Churches just have to take this to heart and to realize that as a church we are custodians, we are stewards of a great treasure, the pearl of great price in the word of God and the truth of the word of God and how that is handled, and whoever occupies the pulpit of a church has a unique responsibility for the furtherance of that purpose in Christ and in that local church. Having interacted with churches about their pulpit searches, and their searching for a pastor and all of that, 9 times out of 10 a church will sooner or later, and usually sooner, say something silly like, "Well, you know, we really want someone who can reach the youth. We want someone who can reach the youth and that's our priority. You know, we want to have a happening place," is what they're saying. They won't say it in those kinds of crass terms, but to talk about wanting somebody that can reach the youth or somebody that's good in the community and that's what you're talking about, what I hope you see, in light of what we've been looking at here today, is that that bypasses, they show by their silence the fact that they are missing the most important thing. Can this man teach the truth? Will he teach the truth? Does his life bear a mark of impact of the truth upon his life and soul? Has he led his family in one way or another in those things, and is there evidence of that? Because you know, to bypass that is just to say, you know, you might as well just go down to the YMCA and ask them to give you their activities director for your next pastor if you're not going to make truth central to the matter. I get fired up about these things. And look, beloved, you know, look at the state of the evangelical church today and you see the consequences of ignoring what Owen has said here. You know, when it's all about wanting to attract people into the church at the expense of the priority of preaching, this is what you get. You know, after, you know, 40-50 years of Willow Creek philosophy of ministry, this is what you get, you get an impotent, flailing church that doesn't know why it even exists and is a hindrance rather than a help to the advance of the gospel.

Thirdly, we're talking about, let me remind myself of what my points are, the pulpit requirement, spiritual wisdom, spiritual experience, thirdly, skill to handle the word. If a man's going to be in a pulpit, he needs spiritual wisdom, he needs spiritual experience, he needs skill to handle the word. You will remember 2 Timothy 2:15 that says this, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth." That is fundamental to the pastor and Owen says this, he says, "The pastor needs practical wisdom upon a diligent attendance unto the word of truth to find out what is real, substantial, and healthy for the souls of the hearers to give unto all sorts of persons in the church that which is their proper portion." He needs skill to handle it, meaning that there needs to be an ability to rightly interpret the word, there should be an ability, you know, there are certain mental prerequisites to being in the pulpit, you know, and an ability to read, interpret, analyze, those kinds of things are necessary, and also what the point that Owen is making is that there needs to be a skill and ability to recognize how to present that in a way that benefits those that are under a man's ministry. You need skill in handling the word in both directions.

Now just a couple of quick points here. Fourthly, Owen says this, a man in a pulpit needs diligent consideration of the state of the flock. The state of the flock. And to illustrate this, you know, as a man pastors a church, he needs to know am I dealing with largely new believers? Then he needs to keep that in mind as he delivers the word. Is he dealing with an older, mature congregation? That affects it. Is he dealing with a congregation that is largely stubborn and that he suspects and by his judgment thinks that, you know, there are a lot of people professing Christians here who do not show the marks of being regenerate. Your assessment of that is going to influence and determine the way that you preach. If you suspect that there are a lot of false Christians in your church, you're going to need to emphasize, you know, examine yourselves to see whether you're in the faith. If, on the other hand, there's vibrant life but it's young and mature, there's just going to be the need to be patient to teach fundamental doctrines so that those small saplings of a tree start to take root. And this takes, you know, this takes diligent consideration of the flock.

Owen says this and just let me say this, in other words, the pastor needs to be mindful that he is preaching the word to people. The pulpit is not simply an opportunity for the man to teach what he likes to teach. A man isn't given a pulpit just so he can read what he wants to read and then teach it in disregard to what the needs of the congregation are. We are not talking about a seeker-sensitive thing where the audience is saying, "This is what I want," and the pastor says, "I see what you want, that's what I'll give you." No, this is a man of some maturity saying, "My assessment is, is that this is what the congregation needs," and I bring this in whatever way he chooses to bring it.

Owen says this, he says, "A pastor must know their strengths and weaknesses, their growth or defect in knowledge, their temptations and duties, their spiritual decays or thrivings, and he must know that not only generally as to the congregation as a whole, but as much as possible with respect to all the individual members of the church. Without a due regard for these things, men preach at random, uncertainly fighting like those that beat the air." You know, one other thing, you know, let's say a man's got a congregation

in front of him that's bruised, beaten and discouraged. Think back to pastors that were leading in some of the times of persecution leading up to the Reformation. Little congregations of believers who were seeing their leaders taken off and being burned at the stake for the truth that they taught. Well, a pastor to a congregation like that is going to have to be very soft, very gentle, very tender, very mindful of the wounds in their soul and preach accordingly which is a different kind of ministry than to a modern day, 21st century, rebellious, post-modern congregation that really doesn't have time for the truth. Just illustrating it in broad terms so that you see the point.

Fifthly and finally, the thing in terms of pulpit requirements, and this one could have been listed first, but who am I to correct, John Owen? He said, fifthly, zeal for the glory of God and compassion for souls. Zeal for the glory of God and compassion for souls. Owen says, "Without such zeal and compassion, the life and soul of preaching is lost." In Acts 20:32, you don't need to turn there, but you see an illustration of this in the Apostle Paul where he speaks about how he admonished them with tears and the tears being an outward evidence of the genuine concern that he had for their souls, how he longed to see the word of God developed in them, how he longed to see the lost brought to Christ, how he longed to see the glory of God manifested in them, especially through their faithfulness, and his love for their souls and his love for the glory of God manifested itself in the outward expression of his love as being shown in the tears that streamed down his face.

You know, I've thought a lot about that on my sabbatical. It disturbs me that my own ministry has not been, it's not that we have to be emotional and there's, you know, there's no inherent value in being a crybaby in the pulpit, but there's something to be said to have enough love in your heart for the people that you are preaching to that your eyes well up with tears at the momentous nature of things. You're longing for their eternal well-being, your concern and your labor over them that perhaps it might be in vain, that in the end that some of those that gathered together with you week by week might not be found together with you at the throne of Christ. You know, how can you have those things in your heart and not have it, you know, be expressed in some manner of tenderness?

Now, having listed out those five things, Owen goes on to say this. He says, "The very naming of these duties shows how great a necessity there is incumbent on all pastors of churches to give themselves unto the word, and prayer, to labor in the word and doctrine, to be continually intent on this work, to engage all the faculties of their souls, to stir up all their graces and gifts unto the constant exercises of the discharge of their duties." And then he goes on to say this, and this is Owen, the pastor, recognizing the high calling and how far short we all fall under it. Owen says, "Who is sufficient for these things? The consideration of the duties is sufficient to stir up all ministers to fervent prayer for the supplies of divine aid and assistance for that work, which in their own strength, they can no way answer. It is enough to warn them to avoid all things that would divert them from constant attention to the discharge of their duties." In other words, when you realize the fullness of what God requires of it, you set aside every encumbrance to it and apply yourself with a sense of complete inadequacy asking God to be gracious, and that the grace of God would be manifest and made perfect in your weakness. Now in words that

apply to ministries nearly 400 years later, Owen says this, "When men undertake the pastoral office and either judge that it is not their duty to preach, or they are not able to do so, or they do it as a required task, something they have to do even though they don't want to, it's a required task without that wisdom, skill, diligence, care, prudence, zeal and compassion, which it requires, the glory and use of the ministry will be utterly destroyed."

So, thirdly, let's bring it to Truth Community Church here today, the pulpit at Truth Community Church. How does all of that that we've covered here in the past 75 minutes, how does all of that cultivate leadership at Truth Community Church and how does it help you participate in the life of the body and aspire to whatever level of service the Lord might give you in the life of our body? Well, first of all, Owen has nothing to say about this because he had never heard of Truth Community Church 400 years ago, nobody had heard of Truth Community Church 12 years ago, and so these are just my inadequate ramblings. I would suggest to you, first of all, it helps you understand why we do what we do. When you come in on a Sunday or Tuesday and the music is simple, it's beautiful, it's elegant, but it's simple, it's not emphasized as a major part of the church, we do our music, but we get to the word pretty quick, beloved, that's why. It's not that we're opposed to music. It's not that we're opposed to people singing. Scripture calls us to that. But it's because Scripture and the preaching of the word is preeminent and it is that which is the instrument by which God works in your soul. That's why we do it. Music in itself accents it, but it can't be an end in itself. It's accenting something else. God has appointed teaching as the means to build up his people, and we saw that from, you know, nearly two dozen passages of Scripture.

And so we make no effort to entertain people. Ministry is serious. You know, the difference between heaven and hell, I think, is kind of important and if the word is that which awakens people to their danger and delivers them from that danger through the gospel of Jesus Christ, then we ought to treat it as such. A man who's been a clown in a pulpit, who is obviously not taking the pulpit seriously, think about it this way, is a man who has no business being at the deathbed of somebody who's on the verge of entering into eternity because you can't flip it on and off. You can't be a clown for 20 years in the life of somebody and then show up and be earnest and helpful to them at the time of their imminent passing. You can't do that. It makes a mockery of everything. Enough of that. I've said those things over time.

Secondly, how does this help at Truth Community Church? Well, number 1, it helps you understand what we do, why we do. Oh, and secondly, I think it helps you understand the spirit of leadership and the way that we approach leadership. When I spoke last fall, I emphasize patience and faithfulness for those that have desires for leadership and encouraged people in the direction of patience and faithfulness. This is why, it's because given the calling, we don't hurry men into leadership. And that's not a restraint in the sense that it's a, you know, we're just trying to keep people in their place. It's for the sake of the man, and it's for the sake of the flock. We don't rush these things. The Lord's got his time and I have something to say about that with a couple of illustrations here. One of the things that I had opportunity to think about on my Sabbatical, I thought about a lot of

things on my Sabbatical, we don't hurry men into leadership, and in fact, speaking broadly and across the course of the church, men who are in leadership and have exercised a biblical, you know, tried to exercise a biblical ministry, they may look back and see that they weren't as prepared for it as they thought they were when they entered into the office. You kind of reinterpret things. You reinterpret your life after a while. John Knox, who lived in the 16th century, Martyn Lloyd-Jones at one point called John Knox the founder of Puritanism, which that's a pretty remarkable thing to be attributed to you. John Knox, the leader of the Reformation in Scotland, he entered ministry at the age of 24, and at about the age of 40, after 16 years of ministry and lots of challenges, he said this, he said, "I now realize how small was my learning and how weak I was of judgment when Christ Jesus called me to be his steward." So he entered into ministry at the age of 24. Over 15 years later, he looks back on that and he says, "What was I doing? What was I doing at that time? I was so weak and I knew so little. I thought I was ready. But, you know, in retrospect..." For Knox, that was no false modesty. After he said that, John Knox, John Knox, the courageous Reformer later went to Geneva and spent time with John Calvin to develop his thought and perspectives on the church and ministry. So he's been in ministry and there's a lot of his life is very interesting to read about, a lot of challenges and running from persecution and trying to find his place, but 15 years in the ministry and an acknowledged leader at that, he has the humility to go to Geneva and sit at the feet of Calvin to learn from ministry. Iain Murray says this about that, he said, "It was during Knox's exile, and especially in the final years in Geneva, that the master principles which governed his thought on Reformation came to maturity." This is 15-20 years into his ministry that his thought matured and the principles that would govern the future Reformation, the establishment of the church in Scotland was established.

That's 20 years into his ministry, beloved, and I say this, it's possible that young men outside of our church will one day hear what I'm saying here: young men training for ministry are often in too much of a hurry to get there. They don't know what they don't know. They're too full of self-confidence to minister in the power of the Holy Spirit. Time is your friend. If you aspire for leadership, don't view the delay as a hindrance or an obstacle. Take it as a gift. Spurgeon said, "If God has truly called you to ministry, you won't long remain silent. As surely as the man wants his hour, so surely the hour wants his man." But it's in the timing of God and the timing of God shown in Scripture is one of patience and establishment of experience.

And I suppose I should close with this. I would not have been able to say this some years ago. These things of being in a hurry, these things, the spirit that John Knox expressed about looking back at the start of his ministry, it's certainly true of me in the way that I now evaluate my life and my prior life. There's 10 year increments, in rough terms, I started seminary when I was 30. These ages are not precise. I finished seminary when I was 40. I preached for a while and then Truth Community Church came knocking at the age of 50. And now I'm 60. So you know, there's these decade long increments. When I finished seminary at the age of 40, I chafed at the lack of opportunity that I had. I mean, I had been an attorney, I had two seminary degrees, and I was ready to go, I thought. And you know, and opportunities came but they were slow, they were meager, and they weren't at all the prominent things that I thought that I was entitled to by my vast learning

and life experience. Yeah, you know, I'm just being brutally candid with you, you know? And you know, I spent a decade in that, and then when the opportunity for Truth came, you know, pretty modest circumstances in the way that things came. Now at age 60, I look back and I see the rightness and the wisdom of God in it. I was not ready at the age of 40 to lead a church. I was not. I did not know what I didn't know. I did not realize how undeveloped my theology was, how much more life experience I needed, how much more family experience I needed in leading my family, and the process of reading and growing and developing in a pulpit. You know, probably now when I'm, you know, ask me in 10 years when I'm 70 and say what do you think about yourself when I was 60? And I'll probably say, "Man, that was pathetic. I don't know what I was doing."

But all of that just to help you see, beloved, that God builds a man over a long course of time. It's incumbent upon the man to trust the providence of God more than his own judgment about his self-assessment about what he's ready for. If God withholds ministry from a man, if God delays leadership for someone who aspires after it, he's not being unkind and he's not being unfair, he's exercising his wisdom for the good of the church preeminently, and ultimately for the good of the man as well. And so we sadly, for now, we need to close the book on John Owen. These kinds of things are better with Q&A opportunities, but I'm happy to talk afterwards. But for now, let me close this aspect and then if there are questions, we can take them or you'll be free to go as you wish.

Let's pray.

Father, the monologue here has been long, but we trust that in some way you've made it useful for your purposes. We pray, Father, for those young men who are preparing for ministry. We ask you that you would build in them the principles, the commitments, the life experience, the knowledge, the doctrine that is necessary for them to be effective for a long life of ministry. We pray for churches around our country, around the world, that aspire after the word of God. Father, we're all insufficient for the task of what your word calls us to. We pray for your grace to be abundant upon each congregation, each man, and here within our own church, Father, thank you for those that have interest and desires and concern for true spiritual leadership, as shown by their presence here with us today. We pray that you would encourage them, use them and build them up for your purposes and accomplish your goals in their lives, whatever that may be. And may you bless Father, the teaching of your word in this place for your glory and for the good of your saints and for the evangelization and conversion of the lost. In the name of Christ our Lord, we pray. Amen.

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