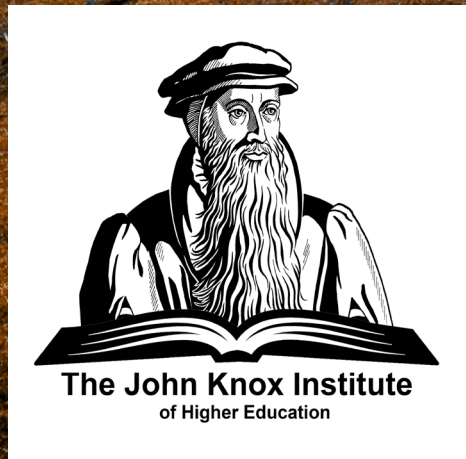


VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# PASTORAL THEOLOGY

*by Rev. Harry Woods*

LECTURE #4  
Minister's Self Watch, part 1



**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

## **John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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Lecture #4

## Minister's Self Watch, part 1

As we continue our study into *Pastoral Theology*, we come to the matter of the *Self Watch* that is *Required in the Ministry*. We take this from 1 Timothy chapter 4, verse 16, where Paul says, “Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee.” You’ll notice that there are two calls in this concern of Paul’s—there is *self watch*, and there is *watch of the doctrine*. It’s relatively easy to keep a watch of your doctrine, especially if you’re preaching before discerning Christians. If you were to come into the pulpit and teach something that contradicted a clear biblical doctrine, I have no doubt that there would be some comment made. Others would be watching for your doctrine. So it’s not entirely up to yourself, although you have a great responsibility to ensure that you preach nothing other than the Word of God. So I’m not going to deal with taking watch of your doctrine. It’s, however, easy to neglect the other concern, that is, *Self Watch* in the work of the ministry. One of the things that takes us back to the idea of a call, that those texts that refer to Christians are to be seen in the life of anyone called to the ministry. And it’s easy for us to forget that we are first called to be a Christian. We are called to live lives devoted to Christ, irrespective of the fact that we might be called to the work of the ministry.

### 1. Take Heed unto Thyself

So, it is easy for us, either in the study for the ministry or in the ministry itself, to fall into certain dangers, and here are the things that Paul is warning of.

There is, for example, *the danger of professionalism*. I believe that that is a temptation to every man who is regularly preparing sermons for preaching, because we can get absorbed in the mechanics of sermon preparation. We can get caught up in the Word studies. We can get caught up in the designing and the construction of sermon outlines, and thinking of illustrations and all sorts of things, and forget to take care of our own soul. And so, Paul connects this *Self Watch* in the ministry with *saving thyself*. That’s how important *Self Watch in the Ministry* is. It is a soul-saving issue.

Well, what are the things that we are to take care of? Well the first is to *watch that we are saved ourselves*. And that, again, takes us back to the opening comments regarding a call to the ministry. How can we hope to take care of ourselves if we are out of Christ? If we are unsaved men, how can we expect to see to the salvation of others through our preaching if we are unsaved ourselves? So, we are to make sure, right from at beginning that we are saved ourselves.

But we will be saved ourselves, but we have to *watch that we are active spiritually*, or we are *actively spiritual*. It is easy for us in the work of the ministry to rest upon past experiences, to rest on those things, perhaps, that occurred when we were first brought to the Lord; or rest on those experiences, when in the preaching of the Word, we have had that sense of the Spirit's upholding and enabling, so that we were able to preach freely and preach in a cogent manner that was helpful to the people of God. We can so easily just rest upon those past times of freedom in prayer, those past times of blessing in preaching, those past times of good spiritual visitation. But we need a living and active faith. We need not simply to rely on what has gone before. We need more than just a memory. We need to be taking care of our soul now. "Take heed unto thyself...for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself and them that hear thee."

So we are to watch that we are saved ourselves, we are to watch that we are actively spiritual, and we are to *watch that our inner life agrees with our outer life and calling*. And that came out in those qualifying traits that we mentioned, negative and positive. And there are times when, as you preach, you feel like a hypocrite. That is the very nature of preaching in a settled pastorate, a settled ministry. Week after week after week, irrespective of how you feel, irrespective of what you've been going through, irrespective of your relationship with the Lord, you are expected to have your sermons week after week. And so, there are times when we feel like hypocrites. We might be dealing with a Bible text that is so searching, we know that we are falling short of it ourselves, and yet we are exhorting others to match up to it. Sometimes it's not just a feeling of hypocrisy that afflicts us, but sometimes Satan himself, he comes, as we see in the prophecy of Zechariah chapter 3, when the high priest is standing there before the Lord, and Satan is standing at his right hand to condemn him. And that is sometimes the situation we discover in our prayer life. As we are seeking to draw near to God and to know his presence, Satan is there saying to us, "Your prayers are hypocritical, your repentance is shallow, your prayers are going no higher than the ceiling." And so he will seek to ruin our confidence in the Lord because he ruins the confidence we have in what God has called us to. There are times, perhaps, when we are cold and backslidden as pastors, and it is the Spirit convicting us that we need to watch that our inward life corresponds with our outer life and calling. Are we living an outward life that seems impeccable, that would lead people to think that we are holy and walking closely with God, when, in actual fact, we are backslidden? And so, you see how it is important that our inward life agrees with our outer life and calling, and there are many reasons why this may not be the case.

## **2. How Are We to Take Heed to Our Souls?**

So we are to take care. We are to watch over our selves, because these things happen to those who are genuine, devoted Christians. Well, how are we to take heed to our souls? I am just looking at the spiritual aspect here, because, God willing, when we next look at this, we will look at other aspects of this text. *How Are We to Take Heed to Our Souls?*

Well, the first thing is that we should *keep up the habit of secret prayer, Bible reading, and meditation*—and I'm speaking about biblical, spiritual meditation. And the reason I emphasize these things is because, in a cold and backslidden state, these are often the first things to go. Now the exact timing of devotional times may be dependent upon your circumstances, but in order to keep up the habit of prayer, and Bible reading, and spiritual meditation, is to get into the habit of studying the Bible for your own soul, and not just for the production of sermons. That is the great temptation of the minister, it is to study the Bible only with a view to preaching the verses we are reading. We need to have reading that is separate from our Bible preparation. I'm not saying

don't study the Bible for preparation, but we need to have devotional Bible reading, if I may use that term, where we are reading, perhaps, using some plan of a daily reading, reading through the Scriptures, ideally for the pastor once a year through the whole of Scripture; reading through the Scripture and learning from it, and being blessed through it.

And then, it is not simply the habit of Bible reading, we need to keep our own souls in direct contact with the Word. So often, when we are pursuing a plan of Bible reading, we end up just reading the required passage, and that is not, in itself, a bad thing. But when it is done mechanically, it is no blessing to our soul. And so, we must ask God to apply it to us. We must ask the Spirit to take of the things of Christ and apply them to us. Again, we are to seek to preach to ourselves, not only from the passages we are preparing, but from our daily Bible reading, preach to ourselves. What does the Word of God have to say to me? How is the Word of God challenging me? How am I to overcome this temptation? and so on. So *keep up the habit of secret prayer, Bible reading, and meditation.*

Again, *keep short accounts with God.* It is often the case when we fall into sin, and especially when we are backslidden, we delay the confession of our sins. And the reason for this is that we don't feel fit to come to God. But the fact is, we are never going to be fit to come to God, and we should be prepared to flee to the Lord as soon as we become conscious that we have fallen into this or that sin. And so, we must not delay daily confession of sin, daily repentant. We need to maintain these daily, and we need to maintain them dependent upon the grace of God.

Again, as we seek to take heed to our souls, we have to *keep our heart tender with gospel motives.* This is a very important aspect. Why are we seeking to keep ourselves? Why are we coming to God? Are we obeying God's commands out of a legalistic motive?—I'm backslidden; God will chasten me if I don't do this or that or the next thing. Dear friends, that is Phariseeism; that is living in a legal frame of mind. We are to obey the commands out of love. Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). We are not to see the law as something that is a burden. We are to see the law as a wonderful gift given by Christ that will enable us to follow after him, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." We are to be faithful ministers because we love Jesus who called us to the ministry, "The Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). We are not to be preaching the gospel because that's what ministers are supposed to do. We are to be preaching it because Christ is calling us to it and we desire to obey his will.

### **3. Some Hindrances to Keeping Watch**

Well, what are some of the hindrances we are going to face if we try to keep watch and take heed to ourselves? One of the first things is what I've already mentioned, and that is *professionalism.* The main thing week by week is not that you demonstrate your wisdom, your originality, or your zeal in the preparation and preaching of sermons, but that Christ is lifted up and sinners are called to him. That is to be our chief aim, not the demonstration of our learning, not the evidence that we have slaved all week in the study, and we've got a good grasp of this text—these things are irrelevant in the long run. What we should be seeking to do is put Christ first. Raise him up—"And I, if I be lifted up...will draw all men unto me" (John 12:32). So, *professionalism* will keep us from watching over our own souls.

Another thing that will keep us from watching over our own souls is *studying the Bible for others.* It's very easy for us to sit in the study, as we pour over this text or that text, and think to ourselves, "Oh, this is just what Mrs. So-and-so needs, and that's what Mr. So-and-so needs."<sup>1</sup> And

<sup>1</sup> So-and-so is a phrase that means an unnamed or unspecified person or thing.

so, we find ourselves preparing sermons because the text seems to indicate that so-and-so in the congregation needs teaching on this matter. But we are to put ourselves, each time we study the Scriptures, under its authority, its transforming authority. Is there a rebuke in the Word of God?—then we are to seek to apply it to ourselves. Is there an encouragement?—then we are to seek to be encouraged. Is there instruction as to what we should do?—we should be seeking to implement it. So beware of *studying the Bible for others*, and not seeking to be under its authority yourself.

Another hindrance that, again, is so easy for us to fall into, is *assuming that all is well with our own souls*. As we think about the ministry, and we think, “Well, what better thing can a man be doing than to preach the gospel? I must be alright.” Remember what the Bible tells us—“The heart is deceitful...and desperately wicked” (Jeremiah 17:9). And the preacher’s heart is deceitful and desperately wicked. And the preacher’s heart will tell him that there is no problem when he is walking contrary to the will of God. And so, we must prevent ourselves from assuming that all is well with our own souls. And we must ask the Spirit to search us, even as David, in Psalm 139, when he’s speaking about that searching activity of the Holy Spirit. We are to seek that in our own lives.

Again, a hindrance to keeping watch over our own souls is *the fear of man*. There is always this fear of raising enmity, and raising anger or hostility from someone who is sitting and listening. And this is particularly dangerous as a trap for the minister if he is a sensitive man. Some men can just deal with that. Others, if they see opposition, they shy away from it. There is the fear of preaching certain doctrines, because we know that they apply particularly to someone in the congregation. There may be fear of losing this family or that family, because they’re such good givers to the congregation’s finances. And we must remember that we are called to fear, but we are to fear him who can kill both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28). We’re not to be afraid of those that can kill the body. We’re not to be afraid of those who may have influence and power in the natural world. We must remember that we are answerable to God himself.

Again, not only is the fear of man a hindrance, but *having no one to unburden our souls to*. Your people, when they have problems, can come to you as the pastor. You have no one in the congregation, perhaps, you can go to. If you are married, you will be able to unburden yourself to your wife. But there will be lots of things that you will come across in your ministry that you cannot share with your wife, things that are so confidential, things that are so private that you cannot share with anyone. And this may lead you to discouragement. Because in many respects, the life of the minister is a lonely life. It is a life where you are often alone. You may have to stand alone. Remember Athanasius<sup>2</sup>—we have the saying, “Athanasius against the world.” He seemed to be the only theologian who stood against the prevailing views, and he was right. But it couldn’t have been easy for Athanasius. It’s not easy for ministers, if they have no one to unburden themselves to. “Of course,” you say, “unburden yourself to the Lord. That is what you’re called to do.” But even the Lord himself, when he was in the garden of Gethsemane, sought human companionship, and it’s not an unusual or a strange thing that we should seek the same.

#### **4. Some Helps to Keeping Watch**

Well, I want to conclude with looking at *Some Helps to Keeping Watch* over your own soul. The first is that we have to remember that we, of all people, know how to do it. We should know

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<sup>2</sup> Athanasius I of Alexandria (AD c. 296/298–383) was a Christian theologian and 20th patriarch of Alexandria over 45 years, including 5 exiles under 4 different Roman emperors. As a church Father, he was the chief proponent of the Trinity, arguing against Arianism proposed by Arius.

best of all how to keep watch over our own souls, if we are constantly studying the Word and doctrine, we should be experts in the mechanics and theory of it. The problem is not the *what* or even the *how*. The problem is *the willingness to perform what we know*—that’s the problem. Our Christian lives—you don’t need to be a pastor for this—our Christian lives are full of things that we do that we know we ought not to do. But ministers have this added privilege of studying the Word of God and doctrine constantly. So we have the *means* for keeping watch over our own souls, because we know from the Scriptures *what to do*, and *how to do it*.

The second help is this—*remember you have access to the throne of grace*. You’ve been set aside to the ministry of the Word and prayer, and you don’t have the burdens of ordinary daily affairs of a secular occupation. And we must never forget that called to the ministry full time means that we are given the great privilege of spending our time in the things of God. So if we are looking to watch over our own souls, we not only have the *means* in knowing the how and the what to do, but we have the *opportunity*—the *means*, the *opportunity*.

And then, *remember that we are engaged in a great work*. We’re engaged in the salvation of souls. We’re engaged in the extension of the kingdom. We’re engaged in storming the gates of hell. We have a heaven to be gained, and a hell to be shunned. We have great privileges as undershepherds, glorious opportunities to serve our Master, treasures laid up in store for us if we are faithful—that “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” that we desire to hear on that day (Matthew 25:21). We have the *motive*.

We are called to keep watch over our own souls. We have the means. We know how to do it, and what to do. We have to keep watch over our souls, because we have the opportunity. We are not caught up in secular pursuits. And we are engaged in this great work. We have the motive to watch over ourselves, to take heed unto ourselves and unto the doctrine. Thank you.