

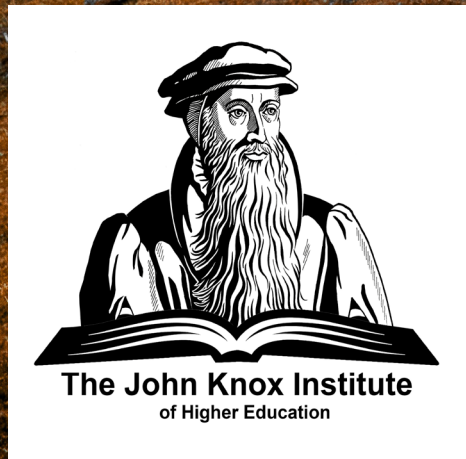
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

PASTORAL THEOLOGY

by Rev. Harry Woods

LECTURE #6

Minister's Self Watch, part 3



John Knox Institute of Higher Education

Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Rev Harry Woods recently retired as minister of Kilmorack & Strathglass Free Church of Scotland (Continuing) in Beaulie, Scotland, after having served as a minister of the Gospel since 1982. He was the editor of the monthly denominational youth magazine, *The Explorer*; for eleven years and taught Apologetics and Pastoral Theology at the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary in Inverness for eighteen years. He is married to Mairi, and has three adult children and three grandchildren.

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1. Introduction and Practical Exhortations
2. The Call to the Ministry, part 1
3. The Call to the Ministry, part 2
4. Minister's Self Watch, part 1
5. Minister's Self Watch, part 2
6. Minister's Self Watch, part 3
7. Time Management
8. Habits of Study, part 1
9. Habits of Study, part 2
10. Pastoral Visitation, part 1
11. Pastoral Visitation, part 2
12. Pastoral Visitation, part 3
13. Pastoral Leadership
14. Christian Liberty
15. The Regulative Principle

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PASTORAL THEOLOGY

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Lecture #6

Minister's Self Watch, part 3

This is our third lecture on the matter of the *Minister's Self Watch*. You'll remember that passage in 1 Timothy 4:16, "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." As we continue with the matter of *Self Watch*, I want us to look in this lecture at coping with *Failure*, at the *Temptations* that we face in the ministry, and also of *Our Life Out of the Pulpit*.

1. Failure

Look, then, at *Failure*. In just about any other occupation that we engage in, whether it's being an artist, or a builder, or an academic, we usually can see the result of our labor. A bricklayer, after a hard day's work, can look and see the bricks that he has laid. A carpenter who has been engaged to build partitions in a house can look at the finished product and go home with a degree of satisfaction. The laborer who has to dig a hole can look at the hole and be satisfied that he has done what he did, as requested, and to the glory of God. But a minister can labor year after year and see nothing tangible. He might, indeed, see a dwindling congregation. He might do much door-to-door visitation, and yet see very few positive results. He may preach sermon after sermon, and yet see no real discernible growth in the people in his congregation. And as he faces both his own life, and the life of the congregation, and the work that he's engaged in, they are a constant reminder to him of his own personal failure to grow in grace. He may have labored long. He may have labored all his life, and yet, in his estimation, no fruit has been borne.

How are we to deal with this as ministers? How are we to cope with this sense of *Failure*? Well, in response to that question, I would suggest that we remember that we are not promised success. You only need to look at Isaiah chapter 6, that wonderful chapter where Isaiah sees the LORD high and lifted up seated in the temple. He sees him in his glory and majesty. He is called, "Who will go for us? Who will preach for us?" And he said, "Here am I, send me" (v. 8). And then he is given the commission. He is to go and preach to Israel, to Judah. He is to tell them. And yet he is told that he would not see success. He would see Israel and Judah departing more and more from the things of God. What a terrible thing was he faced with! And yet he goes and preached the gospel. And indeed, the Prophecy of Isaiah contains some of the most blessed statements concerning the coming Messiah that the Old Testament has.

You think of Jeremiah—Jeremiah, called from the womb, called as a young man into the ministry. And yet, he did not see success. Many of his years were spent either in prison or in

the opposition of those to whom he had been sent to preach. And so, we are reminded by these examples that we are not promised success, but we are called to faithfulness and obedience. And that should enable us to persevere, remembering that the Lord's eyes are upon us, and he sees what we do.

Another thing that we have to remember is that the whole business we are engaged in is a spiritual business. We are told that we war against unseen things—principalities and powers, not against the rulers of this world, not against physical foes, but against spiritual enemies (Ephesians 6:12). And we are also called to walk by faith, not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7). Our perceived failure is often the result of looking by sight instead of looking by faith.

Again, in response to this question of how we are to look at *Failure*, we have to learn to take a long-term view of things. This comes out in many places in the Scripture. A long-term view, not just in time, but also in the things to be seen from an eternal and divine perspective. When you go to the book of Psalms, Psalm 37 and Psalm 73—easily remembered because 37 and 73 are just the numbers backwards—but they record the psalmist struggling with the prosperity of the wicked, and he couldn't understand these things. In Psalm 73, Asaph, he is questioning, "Is my faith in vain?" He speaks about, "As for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well nigh slipped. For...I saw the prosperity of the wicked" (verses 1–2). He is cast down by that. He's looking at the here and now, and he cannot understand why God isn't acting. And then God intervenes. He is almost on the verge of breaking out openly in criticism against God, but God takes him to the temple, and he, as it were, lifts him up, and enables him to see things from a divine perspective. He is able to conclude the Psalm, "Nevertheless continually, O Lord, I am with thee: thou dost me hold by my right hand, and still upholdest me. Thou, with thy counsel, while I live, wilt me conduct and guide; and to thy glory afterward receive me to abide" (verses 23–24).¹ What had happened? What brought this change of mind? Well, God showed him that with respect to the wicked, God had set their feet "in slippery places" (verse 18). They were like "a dream when one awaketh," they would disappear. And so, he is able to cast himself upon God, taking that divine perspective, that long-term view.

You see this also in the Book of Job. It comes out also in Habakkuk. Scripture teaches us that we are to walk by faith, not by sight. We are to weigh up things, we are to weigh up providences, we are to weigh up what's happening in the world, in the light of the known righteousness of God, and of the promised coming judgment of the wicked. So there are some suggestions as to how we should deal with *Failure*.

2. Temptations

Think then about *Temptations*, not unique necessarily to the ministry, but certainly some *Temptations* that men in the ministry may face more than others. They, of course, experience *Temptations* that are common to all Christians. Many of them, no doubt, will be mentioned here, but some of those *Temptations* that minister face I want to touch on here.

The first is *professionalism*. This is a great danger, because, if we spend our ministry, week after week, year after year preparing sermons, we might think of ourself as a professional sermon producer, a professional sermon maker, and we have to beware of this. And one of the ways to beware of this is to seek, as we prepare sermons, to have those sermons applied to ourselves, even in our study of the passages that we are looking at.

Another great *Temptation* in the ministry is *laziness*. If you work in a factory, if you work on

¹ He is quoting Psalm 73 from the Scottish Metrical Version, in *The Psalms of David in Metre*.

a farm, if you are a scholar in an academic institution, somebody is going to be checking up on you. But in the ministry, there is no human boss. You don't have a time clock to punch. You've got no human supervisor that you ought to impress. And the fact is, you can go all night in front of the television, sleep until lunchtime, and spend a few hours a week producing a sermon. But dear friends, if that is your *Temptation*, remember this—God's eye is upon you. He will judge you, and we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ.

Another *Temptation* is *neglect of self or family*. It's easy when you spend so much time in the study to become a recluse, not intermingling with your congregation, not mixing with other human beings, and even neglecting your family. And we have to beware of that. If our children come barging into the study, even in the middle of our preparation, make time for them. Don't shut them out. Don't make them think that Daddy is a person who is not to be disturbed. Rather, show compassion and love for your children and your wife.

Again, these common *Temptations* in the ministry, I want us to think about *Temptations* connected with the *internet*. Now that may seem like a strange thing, but there are real *Temptations*. Beware of becoming an internet technophile,² someone who is so clever with computers, and so clever on the internet. Now, why could that become a problem? Because you might find yourself spending days trying to work out how to construct a data base for your congregation when you only have twenty people in that congregation. It's a pointless exercise. You would be quicker sitting down and writing a list, and making a practical data base of your own. You think again about addressing an envelope. You might spend hours trying to work out how your computer and how your printer can speak together so that you get the address right side up centered on the envelope. If you're only sending one piece of material, if you're only sending one letter, write out the address instead of wasting your time making a mailing list.

Another danger connected with the *internet* is one that has been a great snare to many men. And that is the dangers of *pornography*. Many ministers have fallen through this, as have many Christian men, and no doubt many Christian women. And so, we have to be aware of this, and we have to be rigorous in seeking to avoid those things that would lead us down that path.

Another *Temptation* connected with the *internet* is emails. We have to exercise caution with emails. Don't get me wrong—emails are a great time saver, and they are so useful, and so helpful to a minister in his attempt to manage his time better. Well, what are the dangers? Well, you may be tempted to shoot off an answer right away to an email that has riled you, has upset you, or has criticized you. Never answer these kind of emails immediately. Give yourself time to calm down. Give yourself time to think through a practical response. Another practical thing is make sure the email is sent to the right person. You can cause havoc in a congregation by sending an email to someone to whom it shouldn't have gone. How can we avoid that? Well, I'm sure most of you who use email have an email program that allows you to build in a delay. I've got mine set for thirty seconds, so that there's always the opportunity for thirty seconds after you've pressed the "send" button to stop it from going. That's just a practical way of dealing with it. Again, in connection with the internet, beware, be discerning about the theological and religious material obtained from the internet, because often it is inaccurate. Often it is partial and not necessarily helpful. So these are some of the *Temptations*.

3. Life Out of the Pulpit

We've looked at *Failures*, we've looked at *Temptations*. I want us to conclude by looking at

² Technophile is an enthusiast of technology.

Life Out of the Pulpit. And just a number of exhortations in this area. Ministers are never off duty, They are watched by friends, they are watched by enemies, and they are watched by God. And with that in mind, how are we supposed to behave out of the pulpit? Well, at a general level, I would say be yourself. Don't pretend to be holier than thou. Don't pretend to be a cleric. You're not a cleric in that negative sense of the term. You are a preacher of the gospel.

Again, not only be yourself, but be sociable. I've mentioned about the dangers of being a recluse. Look at Christ's example here. Christ mingled with men and women, boys and girls. He knew what it was to be in the countryside, in the marketplace, in the synagogue, in people's houses sitting at meals with them. When there was grief, he was there. When there was opportunity, he took opportunity to speak in the gatherings of people. Be sociable.

Again, *be cheerful.* We have to be careful that we don't give the impression that a minister is a doleful man, a miserable man. To look at some ministers, sadly, that is how they look. They look as though they are so miserable. How could you expect the good news from them?

But we must beware of a false solemnity. That is no mark of piety. We see that in the Pharisees. They had a false solemnity, and yet they were inwardly like dead men's bones. Don't be afraid to laugh at something funny. Don't be afraid to show real true joy at something that is joyful.

Again, in conversation, don't always be talking. Don't dominate the conversation. You may be the most educated man in your congregation, but that doesn't mean you're the wisest man. Your saints in the congregation, perhaps, who have lived longer in the Christian faith than you have, have more experience in the Christian life than you have, may be wiser than you are.

Don't be a dummy; and what I mean by that is this—don't avoid small talk, as though there was something sinful in just passing the time of day with someone. Very often, the introduction to a serious conversation begins with observations about the weather; begins with inquiries about the state of their children or their family's health. It may be that you chat to somebody about a hobby that they have. We don't want to adopt a sanctimonious air, as though these things were beneath us.

Again, when we are in conversation, try and turn the conversation to profitable use, not in a false way, but try and get to something that is spiritual if we are able, and turn around the conversation to those things.

One of the things that James warns us of in his epistle is that we are to be partial towards the well-off or the educated. We're not to treat the rich man as though he was superior to the poor man. We're not to treat the wise man as though he was superior to the uneducated man. We are to deal with men as we find them, and deal with them as the Lord has dealt with us.

Be gentle in your arguments. If you are in a debate or an argument with people. Be gentle in the way that you deal with them. And yet, at the same time, be firm in defending the truth in all company. Sometimes this can be embarrassing when we are in company, and someone says something that is so against the truth that we cannot keep silent. Well, let us not keep silent. Don't let the truth be sold or demeaned, even if it's costly to ourselves. But we are to do this in a Christ-like way. We are to do it in a way that we remember that we were sometimes just as ignorant, or in such a way that remember that our minds were just a darkened as those that we are speaking with.

And lastly, don't get unnecessarily involved in the material matters of the congregation. It's easy for a minister, particularly if he is in a small congregation, to get involved in an enormous amount of time and work in the material upkeep of the church building. Beware this doesn't become a snare. I'm not saying don't be helpful. If you're practical, you may be happy to help, but not at the cost of your ministerial responsibilities. If you can help out in a practical way, then do so with moderation.

So here we have some basic guidelines as to how to cope with *Failure*, how to deal with *Temptations*, and what kind of *Life* we should have *Out of the Pulpit*. Thank you.