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Classical Pastoral Practice for Today:

For Love



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*T*he good news of predestination, in other words, carries with it a warning: Be careful if you want to be one of God's elect insiders. It will make your life harder, not easier. It will not give you everything you want; it will demand everything you have. It will not put you on the side of the powerful and righteous of the world but on the side of the powerless and undeserving sinners. The privilege it brings is not that of enjoying material and spiritual blessings denied others; it is the privilege of living in self-giving love for them.

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"I don't know how you do it." "I couldn't do it." These comments and others like them are occasionally said to ministers of the gospel. They are expressions of empathy, appreciation, and concern from people who look at what ministers do and wonder how and why they do it. Sometimes, such things are expressed more boldly in the words, "I wouldn't do it for love nor money." (Sometimes ministers say this to themselves.) The facts are these. If a minister does what he does for money he falls under apostolic condemnation. And, if he does it for anything but love, he falls under the same. In light of such facts, we might be tempted to say, "I wouldn't do it at all. Period."

So, on the one hand, there are a score of difficulties and discouragements to be faced in the work of the ministry. And, on the other hand, there are standards to be upheld and an awesome accountability to be faced. Real awareness of such things will make us cry out with Paul, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Such awareness will, paradoxically, keep us out of the ministry, or, in it.

The faithful minister of the New Covenant does what he does from one central, all-encompassing motivation. He does it for love.

The real pastor loves the work itself. He is constitutionally

hard-wired for it. Such things as altruism, idealism, bookishness, studiousness, and seriousness characterize the real minister. Add to this an introspective and philosophical turn of mind, a love for and desire to help people, a sense of history, a sensitivity to the dramatic nature of everyday occurrences, and a profound sense of the importance of time and eternity. There are few careers where such things find such a welcome place to grow and thrive as the Christian ministry. Whether in study or visitation, preaching or teaching, counseling or leadership, the pastor finds himself in his native habitat. He takes to such things "like a fish to water." And there is more good news. Here is an ideal environment for a man to cultivate all these things. This leads to tremendous happiness in our work. No wonder that many of us are still somewhat awestruck when we are handed our monthly salary check. "You mean, we get *paid* to do this?"

The real pastor loves to preach and teach. He loves the study and the preparation that goes into preaching and teaching. He loves the challenge of biblical investigation; the wonder of discovering things within the world of the Bible that he did not even suspect existed. He loves the craft of building the sermon and the struggle for relevance in applying the text to the needs of the congregation. He loves the act of preaching with its risky aim of connecting with the people in front of him. He loves that sense of God's presence that is known by every preacher when the Holy Spirit is pleased to come and honor the spoken word about the Word, so that something more than a human act is realized and recognized by the one who speaks and those who hear. He loves to see the effect of the preaching and teaching of the Word of God in the changing lives of his hearers.

Ministers of God love the people they are responsible for. Things can get stickier here. I can never forget something that Walter J. Chantry wrote to me as a young pastor in my first church. "It is far easier to love preaching than to love those we preach to." This is not a problem just for young pastors. The fact is that all persons involved in service careers to people struggle with a measure of ambivalence and conflict. (This is

why those involved in such careers frequently engage in "dark humor" concerning the wonderful and exasperating humans they serve. This is a form of mental and emotional relief; it is a pressure valve. People who indulge in serving others as a hobby find such humor offensive, but this just reveals how shallow their engagement really is!) But, in all of this, the minister of the gospel is guided by a higher motive. These people he serves, bears with, forgives, rejoices in, and at times wants to choke (if only figuratively), are "the flock of God which he purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). These are people loved by the Lord Jesus Christ, people so loved by him that he has purchased them with his life's blood! We may forget this momentarily, but we can never forget it for long! These are a special people and even the most provocative and exasperating one among them is someone "for whom Christ died" (Romans 14:15). Most of the people we serve are easy to like, some are a joy to know and love, a few are trying to the most loving of pastors, and one or two may demand our efforts and repentance until either they, or we, die. But they all require our love, and when we love them we experience again the truth of Acts 20:35, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." To love many, even with a struggling and imperfect love, is to be a happy man.

Ultimately, like every Christian in every calling, the minister of God does what he does out of love for God. It is simply a fact that the ministry, with all its blessings, joy and perks, can be an emotionally demanding, draining, and destructive work. Some have been utterly destroyed by it. The unique nature of ministry is such that it exposes its practitioners to abuse by the very people we are trying to help. One of my ministerial friends told me recently of a woman who literally spat in his face as well as threatening him and his family with bodily harm. We can find our emotional and spiritual resources under great pressure at such times. (This is the origin of the hackneyed preacher joke: Young preacher: "Do you ever feel like quitting?" Old preacher: "Every Monday morning!") At such times of duress, we find ourselves going back to the foundations of our sense of calling, our sense of purpose,

our sense of being. And underneath all the layers, the strata of motivation, design and drive is this: We do what we do out of love for God in Christ. We cannot rid ourselves of the perception that when Jesus speaks to Peter with the words, "Simon, do you love *me*? Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17), he is somehow speaking to *us*. This is the foundation. But, something goes back beyond this. It goes back beyond all foundations, even the foundation of the world itself. For underneath all foundations is not our love for God, but his love for us. It is this that keeps us in place; it is this that renews our energy; and it is this that revives our fainting love. In Paul's words, "For the love of Christ constrains us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died; and that He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again" (2 Corinthians 5:14-15). We do what we do for love, and, penultimately this love is love for God—but because it is the *Christian* ministry that we are talking about, the *ultimate* reason that we do what we do is the love of God in Christ for us and for those whom we serve.

In light of such things, even the darker things, the Christian minister reviewing his life and career must say, "I wouldn't have done anything else!" Or, in the words of the hymn, "Had I a *thousand* lives to live, Lord, they should *all* be Thine!"

All this comes from knowing the secret. It comes from knowing the secret answer to such remarks as "How can you stand to do what you do?" or "I couldn't do it." That secret is found in two words—"For love."