

The Pastor's Priorities: Watch Your Life and Doctrine

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*“Keep a close watch
on yourself and on the teaching.
Persist in this,
for by so doing you will save
both yourself and your hearers.”*
1 Timothy 4:16

If my historical hero, Charles Spurgeon, had been asked to contribute to a volume such as this one, I suspect he may have opened with these penetrating words from the apostle Paul. I have good reason for such speculation. For in his classic *Lectures to My Students*—a collection of addresses delivered to his much beloved Pastors College—the sixteenth verse of 1 Timothy 4 serves as epigraph to the opening chapter, “The Minister’s Self-Watch.”

The Prince of Preachers knew from experience that a steady grip on these two sentences would protect, guide and reassure these young men in the ministry. Yet, his weighty charge merely echoed the words of the original pastor of pastors, the author of 1 Timothy, the Apostle Paul.

Writing—as a father to his dear and true son in the faith—Paul is intimately acquainted with Timothy’s frailties and the perils of pastoral ministry in a sinful world. He opens his letter by laying a foundation of imperative doctrinal issues and critical leadership responsibilities.

But then, Paul gets personal. And not just personal with Timothy—personal with you and me. For we were all in Paul’s peripheral vision as he penned these words. You and I and every man who would ever be called by God into Christian ministry.

More importantly, the Sovereign God who inspired this passage had us in view. God, who saved us and called us into ministry, wants to have a word with us. A very personal word. The Savior wants to silence the shouts of professional demands and care for you personally with these words:

“Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this. . .”

In its essence, this is our job description as pastors; and it is followed closely by the fruit of faithful ministry.

“. . . for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.”

Do you feel the weight of this verse upon your soul? The stakes could not be higher. Nothing less than the preservation of yourself and your congregation hang upon the God-appointed means of your faithful pastoral ministry. The implications couldn’t be more serious. They are, in fact, eternal.

Our Two-Fold Task

Watch yourself and watch your teaching. Or, as the NIV renders this verse, “Watch your life and doctrine closely.” First Timothy 4:16 requires us to pay *equally* close attention to *both*. While it is appropriate, even necessary, to distinguish between life and doctrine, the two are ultimately inseparable. I cannot watch my life accurately unless I understand sound doctrine. And it does me no good whatsoever to study doctrine unless I also apply it to my life.

Thus, we must not watch one to the neglect of the other; we must give full and uncompromised attention to both. And we must watch closely and consistently, not casually or occasionally.

Then there is the matter of that little pronoun, “yourself.” First Timothy 4:16 is an expression of God’s perfect wisdom for our good, and it begins, “Keep a close watch on *yourself*. . .” But often, we behave as if this verse were directed at someone, anyone, *other than ourselves*.

We watch over the souls entrusted to our care and yet neglect our own soul. We pay close, even diligent attention to the life and doctrine of our church members all the while ignoring the inner workings of our own heart. While caring for the flock is certainly our pastoral responsibility, the command in this verse is unequivocal. Watch *your* life. Watch *your* doctrine. Watch them equally and watch them closely.

Watch Your Life

Ah, but one task is easier than the other, is it not? Don’t you find it far more appealing and enjoyable to study doctrine than to study your heart? Isn’t it much more pleasant to examine our books than to examine our motives? Aren’t we far quicker to apply ourselves to a specific text in preparation for a sermon than to apply that same text to our own heart and life? Puritan Richard Baxter wrote: “It is a palpable error of some ministers . . . who study hard to preach exactly, yet study little or not at all to live exactly.”¹

Sound Doctrine Is Not Enough

Not long ago I had the privilege to attend John MacArthur’s annual Shepherd’s Conference for pastors. At the conclusion of one of the sessions, I exited the sanctuary and immediately became aware of a charged atmosphere in the outdoor lobby. Men all around me had quickened their pace. Their faces were uniformly alert and all eyes were fixed in the same direction. In a moment, I identified the source of their excitement: free books. We all know that few things thrill the heart of a pastor more than books. Free books send us into a frenzy.

I love what this episode says about pastors in general and those pastors in particular. For the pastors I know well place a high value on any resource that can provide insight into the Word of God. They understand that a knowledge of Scripture is essential to their ministry. However, we can often forget that a knowledge of Scripture alone is not sufficient.

¹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1974), 63-64.

Of course, James won't let us forget that we must "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves" (James 1:22). This verse tells us that apart from obedience, knowledge can be deceptive. This puts an interesting twist on some of the favorite activities of good evangelical pastors: attending ministerial conferences, listening to sermons, and reading doctrinally sound books. All such activities afford us the opportunity for serious progress in personal godliness and ministry effectiveness. Yet each one can also be an instrument of progressive self-deception.

The problem is when we assume that merely attending a conference, or listening to a sermon, or reading a book signifies actual change. (I understand the power of this deception. I can often feel like I'm maturing spiritually simply by *obtaining* new books!) We can even be deeply moved by profound scriptural truth, but never actually grow in godliness.

In his commentary on the epistle of James, Peter Davids elaborates, "No matter how extensive one's scriptural knowledge, how amazing one's memory, it is self-deception if that is all there is. True knowledge is the prelude to action, and it is obedience to the Word that counts in the end."²

As pastors our lives can be filled with reading, studying, sermon preparation, sermon proclamation, and counseling. Ironically, a busy schedule of absorbing and communicating truth can leave little time for *practicing* truth. But truth must be proclaimed and *then* applied, heard and *then* obeyed, preached and *then* practiced. For until I *practice* truth, I will not experience the transforming effect of truth on my soul.

Faith practices truth by crying out to God in the midst of suffering. Love practices truth by actions of kindness and patience. Humility practices truth by specific confession of sin. Forgiveness practices truth by overlooking an offense. Hope practices truth by recalling the mercies of God. Indeed, I have never truly, fully learned truth until I have *practiced* truth.

In this book, you will encounter much rich truth. I hope you read every chapter, and more than once if necessary. But please understand: according to James, if you consume truth without applying truth, you risk the false and dangerous impression that spiritual growth was achieved without application.

But it never is. Never. We must be ever wary of the self-deception of which James speaks. Let's recognize the limitations of sound doctrine, and make the practice of truth a daily priority.

Never stop watching your life.

The Consequences of Neglect

Sound doctrine is not enough, because according to Scripture, the fundamental qualification for pastoral ministry is godly character. Neither skill, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, nor reputation, nor personality, nor apparent fruitfulness of public ministry will suffice. Scan 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and you will encounter a profile of personal piety.

Yes, the pastor must be able to teach. Certainly, he must handle the Word of truth accurately and skillfully. But the foundational assumption of Scripture—both for appointment to or continuation in ministry—is that the pastor provide a godly example.

² Peter H. Davids, *New International Biblical Commentary: James* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1983), 41.

Not a *perfect* example, but an authentic example. As Spurgeon exhorted his students in “The Minister’s Self-Watch,” “Our characters must be more persuasive than our speech.”³

If we neglect the command of 1 Timothy 4:16—if we fail to watch our life closely, carefully, and uncompromisingly—negative consequences are inevitable, for ourselves, our family, our pastoral team, and our church. A marked or prolonged inattention to personal holiness in a pastor is a grave matter that must be addressed.

In Sovereign Grace Ministries, here is how we have sought to apply this passage in relation to the pastors of our local churches.

We believe that the biblical requirement for a pastor is not flawless character but mature character. We are all progressively growing in godliness. A pastor who recognizes an area of immaturity, and takes specific action towards change, demonstrates close attention to his life and doctrine. Likewise, if a particular instance of non-disqualifying sin occurs in a pastor’s life, but he genuinely repents before God and the appropriate individuals, this also honors the passage we are examining.

There are, of course, some sins that are particularly serious, both in the effect they have upon others and what they reveal about the condition of the heart. Even a single instance of such sins—sexual immorality, financial impropriety, violent behavior, etc.—would automatically disqualify a man from pastoral ministry. Beyond such grave instances of sin, however, a serious ongoing pattern of disobedient deviation from biblical requirements in the life of a pastor can also be disqualifying.

For example, a single lustful look, quickly confessed and repented of is part of growing maturity. However, a pattern of pornography could be disqualifying. Similarly, an isolated instance of lying speech, promptly brought into the light, is evidence of ongoing sanctification. Repeated examples of deceptive behavior, on the other hand, call into question a pastor’s trustworthiness. Likewise, an outburst of irritation, immediately regretted and repented of is proof the Holy Spirit is at work. But a reputation for anger is not consistent with the biblical requirements for a pastor.

Where such patterns of sin exist, we believe that genuine care for a pastor and church involves a corrective process. Of course, this must be administered with all humility, gentleness, and patience. Occasions requiring the loving confrontation of a pastor in sin have been among the most difficult and painful of my ministry experience. But in the end, the corrective process has normally produced God-glorifying and fruitful outcomes in a pastor’s life, family, and church.

Let me give you one illustration from Covenant Life Church, where I had the privilege to pastor for more than twenty-seven years. In this case, we began a process of discipline and restriction of ministry for one of our pastors. Why? Because over a period of years, he had not watched certain areas of his life closely. Despite the ongoing care and correction of his friends in ministry, he persisted in serious patterns of pride and laziness. Consequently, his godly example was compromised.

This man has humbly granted me permission to relate his story and share the following portions of his written confession.

³ C.H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students*, (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1881), 13.

My pride has brought me to this place. Pride shows itself in many ways. For me it has been self-sufficiency, self-reliance, and self-righteousness and a craving for honor and admiration. . . .

My small group faithfully pointed out these things over the years, but I listened and applied their counsel only sporadically. I brought an incomplete picture to my friends who had concerns.

And when they brought those concerns, I wouldn't follow up faithfully with questions or ask for their help. This amounts to stubborn resistance. At times when the situation became egregious I would get busy, but when the crisis died down, I reverted to former patterns of laziness and pride.

On one occasion . . . as things deteriorated, my small group questioned whether I was really taking things seriously. Of course, I was sure I was. But they went around the room one by one and, to a man, all six of them said "We don't think you are." I was tempted to argue with this assessment. Sadly, that has been my pattern for many years. I would listen and put on an outward show of concurrence. But when I disagreed, I would be comfortable in my own assessment and dismissive of the concerns of others.

Six people saying one thing, and I was still inclined to trust my own assessment. That's serious stubbornness! "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice" (Prov. 12:15).

I'm happy to report that the process of discipline in this man's life has resulted in a fruitful outcome. I'm so grateful for his repentance and humility and the subsequent change in his life. Nevertheless, addressing my friend's sin and caring for his soul included many difficult and painful moments for the pastoral team at Covenant Life Church. The experience, while sobering for us all, served as a powerful reminder of the importance of paying constant, careful attention to our lives.

Watch your life. Closely.

The War Within Never Ends

We often fail to watch our lives closely because we forget that within our heart lies a dangerous enemy, an enemy dead-set against the pursuit of God and godliness.

In Galatians 5:17, Paul vividly describes the reality of our spiritual conflict: "For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do." This is no pre-conversion description of a non-Christian; rather, it is a post-conversion description of the war within a regenerated heart. Indwelling sin, or remaining sin, is present in each of us. It is tenacious, destructive, and unremitting in its opposition to grace. We are commanded to keep a close watch on our lives precisely because of this ever-active enemy within.

No one has taught me more about indwelling sin than John Owen. I agree with what I once heard J. I. Packer say in a message: "Owen showed me that there is far more than I had ever known both to indwelling sin in believers and God's gracious work of sanctification. Owen searched me to the root of my being and he brought God close to

me. No one probes the depths of the human heart with such grace, authority, and skill as Owen.”

So let us hear from the good Puritan, that we might benefit from his gracious and skillful probing.

Many men live in the dark to themselves all their days; whatever else they know, they know not themselves. They know their outward estates, how rich they are, and the condition of their bodies as to health and sickness they are careful to examine; but as to their inward man, and their principles as to God and eternity, they know little or nothing of themselves. Indeed, few labor to grow wise in this matter, few study themselves as they ought, are acquainted with the evil of their own hearts as they ought; on which yet the whole course of their obedience, and consequently of their eternal condition, doth depend.⁴

Do you labor to grow wise about your soul? Do you study yourself as you ought? For Owen is surely right that the whole course of our eternal condition depends upon it. And there is no pastoral privilege in relation to sin. There is no suspension of sin’s temptations nor exemption from its effects for men in the ministry. There is only a heightened responsibility to consistently fight and weaken sin—and more serious consequences for the pastor who fails to do so (James 3:1). Never imagine for a moment that God will overlook your sin because of the importance of your role. Imagining you are exempt is a grave mistake.

Because you have an opponent that never rests, your war never ends. Therefore, if you do not watch your heart and life closely, you are surely in danger. If you don’t watch, you will weaken. So are you watching? Are you watching closely?

Heart work is certainly hard work. It’s humbling work. But it’s necessary work because sin is always at work. And that, my friends, is why we need one another.

We Can’t Fight the War Alone

If you’re like me, you have no problem acknowledging pervasive depravity as a broad doctrinal category. How hard is it to admit that you are one of nearly 7 billion living sinners who in terms of their fallen nature are basically all in the same boat? Sin of that sort—generalized, homogenized, the universal bottom line—isn’t very embarrassing, is it? No, it’s the specific, personal expressions of my own depravity I have difficulty admitting.

Although it is not easy to specifically confess my sin to others, the reality is that I cannot watch myself by myself. I need others. I need the discerning eyes of friends on my heart and life to fulfill this command. God in his wisdom has designed it so.

If left to myself, my discernment of sin would be deficient, and my growth in godliness limited. I would in fact resemble the man described in the following story.

As I sat with my family at a local breakfast establishment, I noticed a finely dressed man at an adjacent table: His Armani suit and stiffly pressed shirt

⁴ John Owen, *Indwelling Sin*, in *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967), 162.

coordinated perfectly with a power tie. His wing-tip shoes sparkled from a recent shine, every hair was in place, including his perfectly groomed moustache.

The man sat alone eating a bagel as he prepared for a meeting. As he reviewed the papers before him, he appeared nervous, glancing frequently at his Rolex watch. It was obvious he had an important meeting ahead.

The man stood up and I watched as he straightened his tie and prepared to leave. Immediately I noticed a blob of cream cheese attached to his finely groomed moustache. He was about to go into the world, dressed in his finest, with cream cheese on his face.

I thought of the business meeting he was about to attend. Who would tell him? Should I? What if no one did?⁵

As you and I walk through life, no matter how closely we watch ourselves, we are all getting fresh blobs of cream cheese on our faces. We all have cream cheese moments. Let me tell you about one of many such moments in my life.

It happened as I was meeting one day with the small group of men who have responsibility to care for my soul. I had two areas of sin from the previous week to tell them about. Fairly certain that I needed help understanding the second pattern of sin, I considered the first something of a formality. I desired to confess it in order to be transparent, but the nature and root of the sin seemed clear to me. I wanted to spend minimal time on that first sin so we could have ample opportunity to examine the second.

I informed the men about the first sin: a pattern of complaining in my life. As I had recently been preparing to speak at a conference, a number of small, unexpected trials had come my way. In my pride, I thought: *These inconveniences shouldn't be happening to me. I'm busy preparing to serve God's people.* I failed to remember that God has not promised to protect me from trial or suspend his work of sanctification when I am preparing a message. The root of this sinful complaining, I told them, was pride. I explained that I had already confessed this sin to God and asked for his forgiveness. But before I could move on to the second sin, one of the men asked a question about my complaining.

I answered, and then someone asked a second question. As additional questions were raised, I initially feigned a patient response, but I was perplexed. *Hadn't I been clear? The root of complaining is obviously pride . . . which I had confessed . . . to God and to them. Why all these questions?*

Outwardly I acted as if I was trying to humble myself—taking notes, making eye contact, nodding and muttering “Hmm” in all the right places—but the façade was becoming difficult to maintain. “Do you think there might be anything else at the root of this sin?” someone asked. That’s when I launched into a mini-teaching on the nature of pride and how it lies at the very heart of so many of our sins. I was irritated with my friends’ questions, and my responses were not humble.

⁵ Attributed to Pastor James R. Needham in a 2004 illustration from www.preachingtoday.com.

You see, I fully expected to receive appreciation and commendation for the humility of my confession and the insightful accuracy of my self-analysis—not a succession of inquiries. *Where did this group of theological ignoramuses come from? What happened to my intelligent and discerning friends?*

But no, these were the same guys, wise and godly men. And they weren't convinced that I really understood what my complaining was all about. As we continued to talk, much more sin was revealed than I had originally perceived.

I learned a lot that day. I learned that I can tend to trust my own discernment about my sin. I learned that sin had deceived and blinded me in this area. This was obvious to them, yet invisible to me. There was, in effect, a big blob of cream cheese on my face. And I had no clue. But my friends saw it; and they were kindly trying to help me wipe it away.

Because I can often see other people's sin clearly, I assume that I can see *my* sin clearly. But it doesn't work that way. My own sin has an unusual ability to blind me, almost as if it never existed. The sin of a sinner is self-deceiving.

I love the way Paul Tripp unfolds this truth in his excellent book, *Instruments in the Redeemers Hands*:

Since each of us still has sin remaining in us, we will have pockets of spiritual blindness. Our most important vision system is not our physical eyes. We can be physically blind and live quite well. But when we are spiritually blind, we cannot live as God intended. Physically blind people are always aware of their deficit and spend much of their lives learning to live with its limitations. But the Bible says that we can be spiritually blind and yet think that we see quite well. We even get offended when people act as if they see us better than we see ourselves! The reality of spiritual blindness has important implications for the Christian community. The Hebrews passage [Heb. 3:13] clearly teaches that personal insight is the product of community. I need you in order to really see and know myself. Otherwise, I will listen to my own arguments, believe my own lies, and buy into my own delusions. My self-perception is as accurate as a carnival mirror. If I am going to see myself clearly, I need you to hold the mirror of God's Word in front of me.⁶

Since my self-perception is as accurate as a carnival mirror, I need to *ask* others to hold up the mirror of God's Word. I need to humbly, but diligently and aggressively, *seek out* appropriate individuals and implore them to help me see my sin. And I must honestly inform them about my temptations and sins instead of presenting a carefully edited or flattering version of myself. If I limit the evaluation of myself to myself, I will simply deceive myself . . . I certainly won't be fooling anybody else!

Each of us can safely assume that we have cream cheese on our face that our wives and close friends clearly see. They have observations about our character, but may be reluctant to share their concerns. Normally, to uncover these insights you must ask

⁶ Paul David Tripp, *Instruments in the Redeemer's Hands*, (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 54.

for them, and create an unhurried context in which they might be thoroughly explained and clearly understood.

We must not wait until there is a crisis in our lives, our marriage, or our parenting before we invite and involve others. For the sake of our wives, for the sake of our children, for the sake of the Savior and those in our churches for whom he died, let us aggressively pursue the observations of others.

What an opportunity this presents to put sin to death! By the very act of asking for observations, you can deal a blow to pride. And what an excellent way to watch your life closely.

So let's get practical. Let me recommend that you present your wife with a gift, a gift in the form of a question. Sit down with her in some pleasant environment, free from distractions, and with ample time for a lengthy conversation. Then ask her this: *"What are three areas of character in which you would most like to see me grow by the grace of God?"*

Then listen, very closely and very patiently. This is likely to be a cream-cheese moment for you, so take notes. Speak only to draw out further observations and to express your appreciation for her thoughts. This is no time for you to raise objections, make rationalizations, or dismiss or challenge her observations. You need your wife like you need no one else, because she sees you like no one else. Recognize that you are undoubtedly blind to some of your sin, and receive her insights with gratitude.

Next, ask the same question of the men on your pastoral team—or if you serve alone, with two or three men whom you respect for their godly character and whom you trust to care for your soul. Again, welcome every response and abstain from all explanation and justification of your actions. Take more notes. Then ask them these additional questions:

- Do I confess specific instances of sin?
- Do I make you aware of my present temptations and my patterns of sin?
- Am I easy to correct?

You have nothing to lose and everything to gain. Your humility will result in an experience of God's grace (James 4:6). Their observations will help you grow. And your example will provoke others to greater godliness.

Finally, don't keep the fight with sin private. Acknowledge to your congregation your daily battle with sin. Don't allow the church to assume erroneously that you are above those temptations common to man. Where appropriate, inform them of your temptations and sins from the pulpit. Regularly use personal illustrations of your failings when making application in your sermons. Make sure the members of your congregation know that the pastoral team is aware of your current temptations and is providing care for your soul.

We can't fight the war alone. We can't watch ourselves by ourselves. But if we aggressively pursue the observations of our wife, pastoral team, and even the members of our church, we can know that we are fulfilling the mandate of 1 Timothy 4:16. By the grace of God, and with the help of others, we can watch our lives closely.

A Model for Your Consideration

In our ministry we have sought to establish a set of practices whereby pastors can help one another watch their lives closely. The fruit from these practices has been immeasurable. While I am not recommending a strict emulation of our model, I do strongly exhort every pastoral team to create and implement a clearly defined structure for the application of 1 Timothy 4:16. If not, obedience to this command will surely take a back seat to the daily demands of life and ministry responsibilities. This highest responsibility—to watch your life—will get lost in the shuffle.

It all begins at the local-church level. Pastoral teams and their wives meet together in small groups for the purpose of watching one another's lives closely. At Covenant Life, we meet monthly as a small group of couples, plus there are two separate monthly meetings—one for the men in pastoral ministry and another for their wives. Much interaction also occurs outside of these meetings.

The primary purpose of each meeting is growth in godliness. This is not a time to evaluate the church or discuss strategic direction. The focus is intentionally narrow: to watch ourselves closely and to welcome the eyes of our friends upon our hearts and lives.

Additionally, we schedule a three-day retreat each year. This provides an unhurried atmosphere in which we can give undivided attention to each couple on the pastoral team. Again, the focus is care for one another and growth in godliness, with special concentration on marriage and parenting.

In my experience, few practices have proven more helpful than the ones I've described in the preceding paragraphs. Three decades of counseling, praying for, encouraging and correcting one another have been absolutely indispensable to our efforts to obey 1 Timothy 4:16.

So I will ask you directly: *Are you watching closely?*

- Are you persisting?
- Were you more diligent about matters of your heart early in your ministry, yet less concerned now?
- Are you informing your wife and fellow pastors about your present temptations and sins, or are you attempting to hide a certain sin from those closest to you?
- Are you convicted even as you read these words?

If so, please humble yourself immediately before God and the appropriate individuals by specifically acknowledging your sin. To those who arrogantly presume they can successfully hide their sin, Scripture warns that “Whoever conceals his transgressions will not prosper.” However, this verse also contains a wonderful promise for the man who humbly admits his sins: “but he who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy” (Prov. 28:13).

Given the continual presence of indwelling sin, our tendency to self-deception, and the eternal stakes for ourselves and our congregations, Paul's exhortation should never be far from our minds.

“Watch your life.”

Watch it closely. Watch it continuously. Until your dying breath, never stop watching your life.

Watch Your Doctrine

Because the rest of this book equips pastors in sound doctrine, there is little need for me to elaborate on this point. I simply want to accent one aspect of Paul's admonition.

As we watch our doctrine, we must never forget that which is central to our doctrine: the gospel of Jesus Christ. If you fail to keep the gospel at the core of your life and ministry, you have ceased to watch your doctrine closely. "The preachers' commission," writes J. I. Packer, "is to declare the whole counsel of God; but the cross is the center of that counsel, and the Puritans knew that the traveler through the Bible landscape misses his way as soon as he loses sight of the hill called Calvary."⁷

In all our preaching, we must never lose sight of the hill called Calvary, where the Son of Man was killed in our place. Regardless of the text or topic at hand, there must be some view of Calvary in every sermon. Your congregation should experience the amazing and comforting sight of the crucified Savior each and every time you preach. They should anticipate the sight of Calvary in every sermon, and rejoice when it comes into view. And all the more, when the cross is not immediately obvious in the text. "Where is the hill?" they should be asking. "Where is that blessed hill on which our precious Savior died?" We should exalt Christ's finished work in our sermons so as to comfort the converted and convict the unbeliever.

Spurgeon's example should inspire us: "I received some years ago orders from my Master to stand at the foot of the cross until he comes. He has not come yet, but I mean to stand there until he does."⁸ Let us stand with the Prince of Preachers, gentlemen. As we preach the whole counsel of God, let us keep the cross central—by doing so, we will indeed be watching our doctrine.

Watch the Savior Work

As we watch our life, and as we watch our doctrine—closely, persistently, and with the help of others—we can expect a most astonishing outcome. For at the end of 1 Timothy 4:16 is an unexpected promise:

"Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers."

To be sure, Paul is not teaching self-atonement, for we cannot and do not save ourselves. Instead, he is accenting God-ordained human agency in the experience of salvation. It is in this seemingly curious phrase that we encounter the effect of godly leadership.

God, who can do all things without assistance, has nevertheless chosen to do some of his work through us. In commenting on this verse, George Knight writes, "Thus we see that the New Testament speaks of human agents in addition to the ultimate and absolute source, God himself."⁹ R. C. H. Lenski notes, "God alone saves, yet he saves by

⁷ J.I. Packer, *A Quest for Godliness*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1990), 286.

⁸ C.H. Spurgeon, "The Old, Old Story", *The Spurgeon Archive*, <http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0446.htm> (accessed July 2006).

⁹ George Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greet Text* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 212.

means, and it is thus that one who uses and applies these means can very properly be said to save himself and others.”¹⁰ Finally, Calvin comments, “Although salvation is God’s gift alone, yet human ministry is needed, as is here implied.”¹¹

Simply stated, God uses human ministry and godly leadership as a means of grace. So as you and I obey the conditional elements of verse 16 we may have every confidence that God will preserve us and those whom we serve for that final day. Here’s why: this promise, like every promise of salvation found in Scripture, is guaranteed in and fulfilled by the finished work of the “one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5).

Pause and consider this as you face the daunting demands of pastoral ministry. Who stands behind and guarantees the fruitfulness of your labors? Our Mediator. What assures you that by “watching your life and doctrine,” men and women will spend eternity with God? The work of our Savior. What empowers your close watching and diligent persistence? The cross of Christ.

Indeed, were it not for Christ’s finished work, the burden of this verse would be too much to bear. But because of the Savior, you can have hope for ultimate fruitfulness in your pastoral ministry. You can have hope that your life will increasingly reflect the transforming effects of the gospel. You can have hope that your preaching will faithfully proclaim your Savior. And you can have hope that your ministry will contribute to the preservation of yourself and the congregation under your care.

As you watch your life, and as you watch your doctrine, you can be confident, that *you will see the Savior work.*

¹⁰ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 650.

¹¹ John Calvin, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Pastoral Epistles*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing company, 1984), 99.