

A.B. Simpson:

"Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away." (1 Peter 5: 2-4.)

One cannot help seeing the personality of the man back of all his letter. All through there looms up the figure of "Simon, son of Jona," as we see him so vividly in the portraits of the Gospels. And no one can read these last words of his without hearing like an undertone the last words of his own Master to Simon yonder on the shores of the Galilean sea as by sweet, delicate indirection He just barely recalled Peter's threefold denial. Though He did not directly mention it, He just recalled enough to remind him that it was forgotten and forgiven, and then prompted him to higher service than he had ever been trusted with before, and gave him the threefold commission as a kind of salve for the threefold wound of his guilty heart, "Feed my sheep," "Feed my lambs," "Feed my feeble sheep." This is the literal force of the words given in John's Gospel. And Peter carries it out here with such tender, sacred sweetness. "Tend the flock of God that is among you, exercising the oversight thereof . . . according to God" (as the Revised Version translates it). That is just how God cares for us, just how the great Shepherd cares for you and me. "And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall receive a crown of glory, that fades not away." There are three distinct lines of thought unfolded here.

I. THE SOURCES OF THE CHRISTIAN MINISTRY

"If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God gives." (1 Peter 4: 11.) There is the source of our ministry. It is all of God. There are two points very clearly brought out here; first, the matter of it, and secondly, the manner of it. It is an oracle of God. It is not your own opinion you are to give, not your own ideas, not your own knowledge, culture, or wisdom, but you just stand as an oracle to give the message that came from heaven and that you cannot change or modify, but your sole business is to repeat it, to give to men what God has given to you; the oracle of God, the authority of God, the very message of God Himself.

It is said that David Hume used to go to hear John Brown, a devoted Scotch preacher. David Hume was an infidel of the boldest type. They asked him why he went to hear Brown. "It is a real pleasure to me," he said, "for the man believes what he says, and it is a perfect luxury to listen to a man who preaches what he believes." Someone took David Hume to hear one of the most popular preachers of the time, and when asked afterwards whether he liked it, replied, "That man preached as if he did not believe a word of it." He went to hear Brown on the same afternoon, and came away saying, "That man preaches as though he got the sentence straight from heaven, and then waited, as if Jesus was standing at his elbow, and said, 'Lord, what will I say next?'" That was the testimony of an infidel to a man that preached as the oracle of God, the voice of God, the messenger of the divine revelation. Oh, in these days when every sort of substitute is being sought for the Word of God, give us the ministry of the Word!

"Is this God's Book?" asked a little child of his mother. "Yes, dear." "Had we not better send it back to God, if it is God's Book, because we never use it?" And that might be said of a good many today.

It is very sad that so many modern preachers should waste their own and their hearers' time exploring heaven and earth for some new and original idea, when God's Word is a great mine of yet unexplored wealth and priceless treasure. God will always honor the ministry that honors His holy Word. "Preach the word."

The manner of the message. "Let him do it [minister] as of the ability which God gives." (1 Peter 4: 11.) Not only are we to give God's Word, but with God's ability, with the endowment of the Holy Ghost. We are to give it with the consciousness of our inability, and we are to seek each new message from Him, and then seek the power to speak it. How Paul constantly cried out for "utterance" to be given to him; not merely the truth -- he taught the truth, he knew his message -- but each time he wanted the fire of God to infuse it, the Holy Ghost to somehow put life into it. We may give the same message and it will be powerless if it is not in the ability that God gives. We need the flash of power every time, and especially when we are speaking the word that is to be the creating word to bring a soul from death to life.

Oh, how we need to be steeped in the very life and heart of God! God help you to help your pastor with the ministry of believing prayer, that he may go, like John Brown, with Jesus Christ at his elbow and the power of the Holy Ghost in his heart.

It is said that a church once began to complain about its minister who had lost his power, and when they came to him, he said, "Yes, and the reason is I have lost my prayer book." "Why," they said, "we thought you were a dissenting clergyman." "Yes," he said, "but my people are my prayer book; and they have stopped praying for me, and I have, therefore, lost my prayer book." God give you the ministry of prayer. You will get back just what you ask for, all the blessing you give your pastor. You will wonder how he will meet your difficulties, answer your need, and speak every word you are waiting for, and just because you prayed for him. And so may our ministry be strengthened by the ministry of prayer, and we speak "as of the ability which God gives."

II. THE SPIRIT OF THE MINISTRY

1. It is a humble spirit. If Peter had wanted to tell the Church that he was going to be the Pope, what a splendid chance he had here! Why, Peter, you lost your opportunity; you could have let all the ages know that you were the first Pope, and that every man who came after you was going to be the lord of the whole Church of God. How could you miss your opportunity! Why, you only told the people that you were but an elder -- "I who am also an elder" and he adds, "If I want any higher honor, I was 'a witness of the sufferings of Christ.'" Perhaps he stole away that afternoon after they hung Him on the cross. Perhaps he was ashamed to be seen; but when it was all past and Jesus was hanging there, Peter came around when no one saw him, and for six long hours saw Christ dying. That was his honor -- a "witness of the sufferings of Christ." But he says he is a common elder, an ordinary minister of Jesus Christ the same as they. One is so struck with the simplicity of the Early Church, as Peter suggests it here, and this is the design of the great Head of the Church, to keep it simple, and to honor us according as we honor Him, and lay our heads in the dust at His blessed feet. God give us humility! I think it is the prayer we covet most, that God will keep our spirit lowly and broken. "Them that honor me, I will honor." (1 Samuel 2: 30.)

2. Deep sympathy with the suffering Savior; "witness of the sufferings of Christ." He was bathed in the tender sense of what it cost to redeem us, the Church of God. It was purchased with His own blood, the blood of Calvary, and this should be the inspiration of all our ministry.

3. Along with that, there is the spirit of inspiration, hope, our glorious reward, and also the privilege of being "a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed." It is no common ministry, but a high embassy, an honor before which all earthly honors are naught and not worthy to be compared. We are to be glorified with Him and bear away the crown of glory that shall never fade.

4. The shepherd spirit: feeding the flock of God, tending the flock of God. If you have ever seen a shepherd in the Scottish Highlands, or in some Eastern country, you will know something of what this means; the picture of the veteran shepherd dying with his boys around him, while the wolves are howling over in the plain and mountain and valley. And he calls them to his side as he breathes his last -- how sweetly the picture has been given to us -- and they bend down to hear his last words while he breathes them out: "Boys, be good to the sheep." That was the shepherd's last thought. He knew them all by name; he had rescued them many a time. They were personally dear to him; he had risked his life for them. It is the shepherd spirit that loves and follows and personally tends the sheep. Literally it reads, "Tend the little flock." It is not a great popular church, but a little flock. Look out for the hidden ones, the poor ones, those that belong to Him and will stand with the Lamb on Mount Zion. Jesus expresses to Peter the tenderness He would have the elders show to the little flock. "Simon, son of Jonas, do you love me more than these?" And Peter answers, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love you dearly. It is not only love, it is tenderness, Lord." But the Lord would not have it at first. He spoke to him again, using the common word of love; and Peter was hurt. "Lord, do you mean to break my heart? I love you dearly." And then Jesus takes him at his own word, and says, "Do you love me dearly?" "Lord, You know I do." And the Master tells him that He is going to test him, so He says, "Feed my feeble sheep." Go and help the people that are all broken up, and are hard to get along with, and are always getting lost and forgetting what they learn and are going astray. I love them best of all, Simon, and if you love me, dearly, that is the ministry that can only be done by a heart that has been right up to my heart.

5. It should be disinterested. "Not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind." Rotherham's translation is, "not for shameful gain, but of eager mind." That is, a mind impelled by such intense desire for usefulness, and such a genuine love for souls that it needs no other incentive for any sacrifice or service. The spirit of gain has so penetrated everything in our age that even the ministry is not free from the danger of mercenary and selfish ambition. The most sacred callings are approached by the men who think that everything has its price. One of our distinguished bishops once stated in a public address in Philadelphia that he was visited in his library by a gentleman from the West who introduced himself as the representative of a politician, and then added, "Now, Bishop, one of your preachers is giving one of my friends a great deal of trouble by attacking his moral

character, and we want you to stop him, and I am authorized to say that my friend will make it worth your while." The good Bishop quietly walked to the door, opened it and stood there holding it, while the visitor seemed unable to take in his meaning. "Does it not occur to you," said the Bishop, "that this interview is ended?" And yet, there are less glaring ways in which even the pulpit can be subsidized and its voice at least modified, if not silenced, for fear of offending wealthy and fashionable ears with too plain a message against popular forms of sin. If a man wants to be rich or successful, let him go into some other calling, but whatever else he does, let him not prostitute the ministry of Christ to sordid gain.

6. A consistent life and a holy example are the most potent factors in every ministry. The shepherd never drives, but always leads his flock, and the Chief Shepherd Himself says, "When he puts forth his own sheep, he goes before them." The true minister will always live first what he preaches. The most spiritual messages will be neutralized without a holy life. Piety gives power to the simplest messages and to the life behind our words in ways most eloquent. "Being examples to the flock." Said a native convert among the Indians of North America to an inquiring visitor, "Your white men used to come and tell us about Christianity, about the Great Spirit of the heavens, and His Son Jesus Christ, but we looked at the white men, and they drank like us Indians, and they cheated us worse than we knew how, and we did not believe their doctrine. But one day Henry Ranch came among us, and after telling us about the Great Spirit and His Son Jesus Christ who came to die for sinful men, he laid down among us with my bow and tomahawk beside him, but without a fear, and he slept like a little child, knowing that I could kill him and no one would ever know it. And he awoke and lived among us like ourselves, sharing our hardships and doing everything good, and we saw as we looked at him that his doctrine was true, and that is why we are Christian Indians."

Mr. Spurgeon once told in a sermon how he had been tormented with doubts about the Bible, and at the close of the sermon a wise old deacon said to him, "Pastor, never tell us about your doubts again; it disturbs the weak and doubting. If they think that you are unsettled, they will be unsettled much more. They look not so much to what you say as to what you are." And Mr. Spurgeon told his students never to throw the shadow of their weakness on the flock, but to stand before them in the strength of faith and holiness, and lead them as well as teach them.

III. THE REWARD OF THE FAITHFUL MINISTER

"When the chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall receive a crown of glory that fades not away"; literally, "you shall bear away the crown of glory." There is no investment like a good life. There is no reward so enduring as that which comes from the souls that we lift up and save, for the reward shall last as long as the soul which is its enduring monument. The mother who launches on the ocean of life a noble son and sees him take his place among the best of men, successful, honored, useful, blessed, and a blessing, has a reward that "fades not away." That life is her lasting imperishable recompense. The teacher who trains some splendid intellect for great achievement, and sees his favorite pupil become the leading statesman, philosopher, poet, or teacher of his time, has a "crown that fades not away," for that enduring life and its wide and lasting influence is his recompense. Thomas Arnold, the great teacher of England, lived in his distinguished pupils, many of whom became the most illustrious names of English literature and history. The soul-winner that leads someone to Christ, and then that soul in turn becomes the instrument in the conversion of a thousand more, has "a crown that fades not away," for as long as those souls shall last, he shall be identified with that service. The millions who are yet to come from the land of Sinim will be the crown of the humble Sunday School teacher in an English village who brought Robert Morrison, China's pioneer missionary, to Jesus Christ. The glory of regenerated Africa shall be the crown of the man that led the weaver of Blantyre to become the missionary David Livingstone. Occasionally here we find the fruits of our prayers and tears, and we greatly wonder at the train of blessing that has come out of some loving ministry for Christ. But oh, what will it be when we meet the accumulation of it all yonder, and when it in turn has all eternity in which to multiply! A modern writer has calculated how much money would have accumulated from a single penny invested at compound interest at the birth of Jesus Christ, and it has been discovered by a simple calculation that it would take a row of fifty-seven figures to count the interminable millions, and the pile of gold that it would make would be bigger than a world -- no, bigger than five thousand worlds! That is the investment of one penny if you give it time enough to grow. Then tell me what the investment of a soul will grow to through the countless ages of eternity! Oh, for a holy ambition to put our lives into such service, not for the reward, but for the love of Him who gave Himself for us, and who will not forget to add the glorious recompense when the great work is done.