

THE PASTORAL COMMAND

A SERMON

by Mister JAMES WELLS

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“Feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.” Acts 20:28

THE apostle is careful to connect with this command that which is essential to final success in the ministry, and without which a minister will prove to be as “a well without water,” as “a cloud without rain,” as “a tinkling cymbal” and “as sounding brass,” ministering the word of God *intellectually*, but not *spiritually*; “darkening counsel with words” without any vital, experimental knowledge of eternal things. Such is the state of all the “yea and nay” ministers, numerous in our day; and such, for aught I know, may be the state of some who are sound in the letter, and tolerably clear in the doctrines. But be this as it may, it is clear that the power of godliness is the only sure guide; and if a minister does not know personally something of the “horrible pit,” something of the thorns and briars of the wilderness, something of the gigantic and imperious evils of his own heart, something of the “wormwood and the gall,” something of the pardoning power of atoning blood, of electing grace, interposing and multitudinous mercy, of captivities and deliverances, of godly fear and precious love; what it is to pray for his own soul, to realize answers, and thus go on in this spirit, living a life of conflicting, purifying faith upon the Son of God; eternal things maintaining their pre-eminence in his heart and best affections; if this be not his character and his life, how shall he commend to others what he himself has neither tasted, felt, nor possessed? The apostles, knowing this, said to the elders at Ephesus, “Take heed to *yourselves*” Let matters be right, and *go on* right, between God and your *own* souls; then with assurance and decision you can minister to others, “*knowing* whom you have believed;” and you will thus, with the wholesome and solemn realities of eternity, “feed the church of God, which he has purchased with his own blood.”

First, then, *the object of pastoral care*. “The church of God.”

The original word *ecclesia*, which is translated *church* here and elsewhere in the New Testament, occurs above a hundred times; and the radical signification of the word is simply an *assembly*. Hence in the nineteenth chapter, the one preceding this, where you have an account of a tumultuous assembly, the same word is used, though it is there translated *assembly*, and not *church*.

Now the church of God are a people who are gathered together in all ages under essentially the same circumstances; to receive, contend for, and abide by essentially the same principles. And these are two essential features of “the church of the living God.” The people are gathered together by the Lord himself, called out and assembled by him, under essentially the same circumstances; and these circumstances may be expressed in few words. The first great principle is that which the gospel sets forth, repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance, as you well know, means a radical change of principle; and that change of principle must take place by

an experimental knowledge of the deceptiveness of the principles by which, we have been hitherto governed. Therefore, in all ages the people of God have been made feelingly acquainted with the “exceeding sinfulness of sin,” the “exceeding broadness” of the law of God, the helplessness of the creature, the deceitfulness of the heart, the entire emptiness and worse than uselessness of the flesh and all fleshly doings in the matter of salvation; so that when we arrive at heaven, if we were there each of us to give in an account of our views of sin and what we are as sinners, we should all perfectly agree, and you would not hear one word about free-will or creature pretensions. Whatever may have been the external circumstances connected with their calling, or the difference of their character now, whatever be the variety of means by which the Lord is pleased to awaken them, whether it be hearing the word, or reading the word, or whether it be affliction, it all comes to this point, to change and turn them entirely from the religion as well as the irreligion of nature, and make them feel that they are nothing but sin, that they have nothing but sin, and, apart from Christ, can do nothing but sin, and shall as surely sin their way into everlasting damnation as they exist, if almighty grace does not sovereignly, eternally, and effectually interpose for their deliverance. Therefore, it is said of Christ, that he came to save “the lost;” and the whole church with one voice shall acknowledge that it was in a state of entire destitution, a state of complete despair, a state of eternal perdition, considered apart from the love and salvation, power and mercy, of the living God. Now when a poor creature is brought to feel that this is his condition, he runs about, and he may join himself to this sect, and that sect, and the other; but he is sure to find out the right at last. He is sure to find out at last that, unless the Lord is pleased to open up the things of eternity, he cannot get at them; that unless the Lord is pleased to show him his name in the book of life, he never can find out whether it is there or not; that unless the Holy Spirit is pleased to manifest the efficacy of a Savior’s blood and seal a sense of forgiveness, he can never get at it. And by this experience he finds out the emptiness of all false systems. He may listen to the mere moralist, the preacher of mere ethics; and the poor creature’s language is, “I could not argue that man down; all I know is, his ministry is of no use to me.” Then he goes, perhaps, to the free-willer, who talks about conviction of sin, but does not know what it is; and again, he says, “I could not argue the man down, but his ministry is of no use to me.” Then he goes to the moderate Calvinist (all steps in the right direction); and he says, “It is like what I want, but still it is not what I want; in one part of the sermon he seems to be right, but then in another part he seems not to be right.” And therefore, his language is, “Lord, is this it, or look we for another?” And by and by the Lord sends out the victorious sword, and he cries, “Lord, give me that, for there is none like it; give me that, and I shall appear at last on Zion’s hill ‘more than conqueror.’ Give me the victor’s sword of truth, that has taken off the head of Goliath; there is none like it.” And as soon as he takes that sword in hand, he gets an ill name in the world. “What! have you joined that ragged regiment of David? What! you have come to the cave of Adullam, have you? What! David has received you, and placed a sword in your hand, has he?” “Yes, he has; ‘my soul shall make her boast in the Lord.’” Depend upon it, the Lord will make warriors of all his people. You will need a good sword, for the devil will be at you in all directions; and good shoes, for he will lay poisoned spikes for you; yes, and put on the breastplate of righteousness, for he will be sure to hurl plenty of fiery darts at you; and take the helmet of salvation, for he will take care to let some heavy accusations fall upon you. But you shall stand fast; and look unto God and acknowledge that, while you had the sword, it was his arm that wielded it, it was his favor and the light of his countenance that did it all, and therefore you are quite prepared to:

“Ascribe your conquest to the Lamb,

Your triumph to his death.”

These are the church of the living God. They are brought to know they are sinners, and feel they are sinners too; and men may say what they will against feeling, but if a man does not feel he is a sinner, he does not know it at all. If a man has not a feeling sense of hunger, or of thirst, it is no hunger; and how can you talk about realizing the love of God without feeling it? Realizations without feeling are no realizations at all.

This is the Lord’s assembly. He gathers them together. They are long driven hither and thither; they wander about, and do not know where to go; but by and by the Lord “leads them forth by the right way, that they may go to a city of habitation.” And they never go out again; no, never.

These are the people of God, gathered together in all ages under essentially the same circumstances.

These, then, are the objects of pastoral care.

Secondly: Now, in the next place, *these are to be “fed.”*

Ay, says one, but stop; we are to preach to sinners as well as to saints. Certainly. But you high Calvinists preach a one-sided gospel; you preach to saints, we admit, but you do not preach to sinners. Indeed! that is a weighty charge: then you do preach to sinners? Yes. Pray, what do you preach to saints? Why, we tell them that there is salvation in Jesus Christ, that God loves them, and that if they go on as they are, it will be well with them. And what do you preach to sinners? Why, we tell them that God the Father wants them to come, that Jesus Christ died for them, that the Holy Spirit wishes them to come, and that mercy is offered to them. Well, that is your way; but the commission from the Lord is, “Preach the gospel to every creature,” and you have something like a gospel for the saint, but quite another thing for the sinner; you preach one gospel to the saint, and another to the sinner. Were there two ways into the ark, Noah would have said, This is the only way of escape, and no other. Suppose all the world had come to Moses; would he have said, I have one pattern shown me in the mount for the Israelites, and another pattern for you? Where did he get the second pattern from? Peter knew better; he said, “There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” The fact is, the gospel accomplishes the two things at once; the great truths of the gospel are to be declared, in their origin, in their mediation in Christ, in their manifestation by the power of the Holy Ghost, and by these same truths dead sinners are quickened. If men do not succeed in the conversion of their fellow-mortals by the eternal truths of heaven, I am sure they will never succeed in any other way. And therefore, it is that most of the conversions of the present day are nothing but nominal conversions; they are brought into a profession, but they have no more taste for the real truth of God than before they were converted, as they call it; and indeed they have a greater enmity to it, and so “the last state of that man is worse than the first.”

It is “the church of God” that is to be fed: an assembly of men, that are of one mind concerning God, one mind concerning Christ, one mind concerning the Holy Spirit, and that stand fast in these principles. Did you ever have it in your heart to find fault with any one of the prophets, or any one of the martyrs, for laying down their lives rather than give up any of these truths? No; and therefore,

we are as much prepared to lay down our lives for these truths as they were. “No,” say you, “I doubt that.” Yes, but we are in the hands of the Lord, and should have the same grace.

Now the command is to “feed” this “church of God,” or, as it is called in the Old Testament, “congregation of the Lord,” “congregation of the righteous,” “congregation of the upright.” “Feeding” them supposes two things: first (figuratively speaking), *instruction*, for it is by tasting anything that we are made acquainted with its qualities; and secondly, *support*.

First, then, “feeding” supposes *instruction*. These people want to know the meaning of things. Some professors ask for the meaning, but do not like the explanation; they are very much offended. There is the music, the dancing, the fatted calf, the making merry; and the Pharisee says, “What do all these things mean?” Why, they mean that a poor prodigal, who has done nothing all his days but sin, has come to his senses, and he is brought home, and is received without one sentence of reproof, and all his rags are taken away, and the very best robe is put upon him, and a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet, and there is music and dancing because of it, and the fatted calf is killed. “Ah!” says the Pharisee, “I do not like this at all; I hate that prodigal I do not understand this like some of you, perhaps, that are almost ready to get up and go out, offended at what I am saying. But the poor prodigal knew the meaning of it. He knew what it was to try to be satisfied with husks; he knew what it was to “begin to be in want;” and he knew what it was to meet with a father’s unlimited compassion, to realize this great goodness. And so, if we ask, what is the meaning of this trial, and that, and the other, why, it is all to mortify the flesh, and bring us into the dust. You have another instance of a poor man asking the meaning of things, and he gained very much by the instruction; I mean the blind man that sat by the wayside begging. “Hearing the multitude pass by, he asked what it meant;” and they preached a very short sermon to him, “they told him that Jesus of Nazareth passed by.” Ah! then, said he, “Jesus, you Son of David, have mercy on me.” Do not leave me, Lord; you are passing by, and I cannot bear the thought of being left behind; you are passing by, and I would rather be with you than with the greatest monarch that ever reigned. And the dear Lord stood still, saying, I will not go without you. If there had been some free-will parson there, he would have said, “Come, jump up and run to him.” But the man is blind; he does not know which way to go; and therefore, “Jesus stood and commanded him to be brought unto him.” And he asked him, “What wilt you?” “Lord,” said the man, “that I may receive my sight.” And he did receive his sight, and he followed Jesus, for he was not willing to go away; and the people saw it and gave praise to God. We do not preach to please men; our object is, that mercy may be manifested to God’s elect, and the Lord’s name glorified.

This, then, is one idea included in “feeding the church:” telling them the meaning of their troubles and trials, that it is to crucify the flesh, humble the creature, and bring him to nothing, that God may be all in all. In many instances, we cannot know the meaning of our trials till some time afterwards. We may have for a time very blessed manifestations of the Lord’s mercy. It was very pleasing to Joseph, when the sun and moon and eleven stars bowed down to him, the eleven sheaves to his sheaf; but by and by, when he is thrown into the pit, how mysterious is this! “I thought God was going to exalt me; I thought there was some great thing reserved for me; what means this? Ah! it staggered him, depend upon it. Next see poor Joseph exposed in the slave market and sold; how mysterious! What means this? By and by a little cessation is realized, prosperity reigns, peace is enjoyed, and then comes Potiphar’s wife with a tremendous accusation; what means this? Mysterious indeed; it is enough to stagger him! He is cast into prison; but the Lord is

with him: yes, bless the dear name of the Lord, he never forsakes his people. Therefore, he knew how to interpret the dreams; “and now,” he says, “I shall get out, for surely the chief butler, when he is restored according to my interpretation, will remember me.” Joseph! what! have you not done trusting to men? Have you not left off looking to an arm of flesh? He will remember himself, no doubt; but he will not remember you. And so, Joseph has to stop two years longer. What means this? By and by the Lord had need of Joseph, and now he may come out. But when Joseph came to the end of these things, he saw their meaning; mysterious parables all these circumstances were, but he could give the explanation then. And therefore, he said to his brethren, “Be not grieved; it was not you that sent me to here, but God:” you *sold* me, but *God sent* me. Yes, “this sickness is not unto death.” This is the meaning of all the trials, all the temptations, all the hardness of heart, all the partial triumphs of the devil; it is for our ultimate good; “all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” Joseph, therefore, would not have been without one of his troubles for the world; they mortified the flesh, humbled him, and displayed the greatness and glory of God. But time would fail me, to bring examples how the people of God are brought into the depths, till they “reel to and fro, and stagger like a drunken man, and are at their wit’s end.” We are brought at times to understand the meaning of those words, “You know not now, but you shall know hereafter.” Our experience now is like a parable, hard to comprehend; and we cannot make out at times some of the Lord’s dealings. It does not seem to accord with free grace. But you will find out the meaning of all this stripping, emptying, humbling of the creature, and making him sick of himself, and of everything but himself.

“I asked the Lord that I might grow
In faith, and love, and every grace;
Might more of his salvation know,
And seek more earnestly his face.”

You know how it was the Lord answered the prayer:

“He made me feel
The hidden evils of my heart,
And let the angry powers of hell
Assault my soul in every part.”

Feeding, then, means instructing; and are not the people of God much puzzled as to the footsteps of the flock? and is it not bringing in some light to them, when you show them that their darkness and their trials are nothing more than the children of God now in heaven found?

“They wrestled hard, as we do now,
With sins, and doubts, and fears.”

Then the next idea is *support*. The ministry of the word may be looked to as instrumental support. The public ministry of the gospel visits the sick; it visits the prisoner, and brings him out of prison, or if not, gives him encouragement and tells him salvation is near; it comes to the stranger, and takes him into the liberty of the gospel; it comes to the poor, and shows him that there are riches for him; it comes to the hungry, and gives him food; it comes to the thirsty, and gives him drink; it is, as it were, feet to the lame, eyes to the blind, yes and “causes the widow’s heart to sing for

joy.” This is support; and so, we find the apostle writing from time to time to the people of God, in order that they should not be moved by the things through which they passed. Have you not found sometimes that you have come to the house of God as though you had almost more than you could bear, as though really one thing and another were enough to drive you mad, and some cheering word, some supporting word, has come, and you have gone away strengthened in the Lord, and realizing the truth of that scripture, “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” I know it has been so with me; and I have wondered sometimes at the manifestation of the Lord’s mercy; it has done me good for days, and weeks, and months together.

So then “feed the church of God;” open up these things to them, that they may be instructed and encouraged, and get from time to time words of support. It is really wonderful, it is almost incredible, what a word will do; I mean the word of the Lord with his power. Here is poor Isaiah under a sight and sense of his sin and uncleanness; and there is just one touch of the living coal, “Here am I, send me;” all is comfortable now. Here is Joshua, with the devil at his right hand the devil would not go away from Joshua, and Joshua could not get away from the devil; the Lord drops one word, and Joshua is free. The disciples are in the storm; one word, and all is well with them. The poor leper is in trouble; one word, and he is healed. “Feed the church of God.”

Now in this is included the glory of God. I know you will say, their own experience might instruct them; but is it not very comfortable to have the meaning of their experience told them? Have you not really found that you have gone to the house of the Lord, and the minister has actually described your experience, better than you could yourself? And is not this encouraging? Being made acquainted with these things, we see the glory of God “with open face.”

Thirdly: Now, in the last place, we notice *the importance of this subject*, “The church of God, which He has purchased with his own blood.”

You see the word “*God*” is used here. I like that very much, because the blood of Christ was the blood of his person. His life was not the work of a mere man, but the act of an incarnate God. Atonement was not the act of a mere man, but the act of an incarnate God. Redemption was obtained by the death of one who was God and man in one person; and the work of Christ is the triumph of an incarnate God. His ascension was the ascension of an incarnate God; “*God* is gone up with a shout.” I know very well some can hardly see with me in this, because it seems speaking of the Deity of Christ in a way that does not belong to it. The fact is, we must not speak of God according to our ideas, but according to the way in which he is revealed to us. The Holy Ghost is said to have descended in the form of a dove; I enter into no explanation; God has revealed himself in that way, and I would rather have one declaration in the Bible than ten thousand devices of the imagination of man. And therefore, while I would not insinuate that the Deity of Jesus Christ could undergo death, and while I would ever draw a distinction between the Deity and the humanity, yet at the same time I must contend, that whatever, Christ did, he did by virtue of his whole person, and therefore we must look at his work as being the work of his whole person. “Feed the church of God, which he has purchased with *his own blood*.”

Now the Greek word here translated *purchased*, signifies to obtain and to hold. Look at the wonderful love of God in both these senses.

God the Father obtains his people, obtains the absolute possession of them, in accordance with the perfections of his nature, by the gift of his Son; and such was his love, that he does not withhold that gift. The Lord Jesus Christ could obtain us only by the shedding of his own blood; and he has undergone that sacrifice for us. The Holy Ghost obtains us only by the shedding of the blood of the Lord Jesus. "He shall take of mine and show it unto you." The creation and production of the universe did not cost the Lord Jesus Christ his blood; but our salvation did. All the wonders of Providence from age to age did not cost the Lord Jesus Christ his blood; but our salvation did. And therefore, what must be the value of the soul, what must be the love of God, what must be the interest he has in us? And when we are thus led to see that it is the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ that meets our sins, our miseries, our death, that meets the devil, the law, and the curse, and swallows the whole up, and leaves neither adversary nor evil, so that our sins shall be sought for and not be found, then we see we might just as well talk of God Almighty being lost, as to talk of one object of his everlasting love being lost. Why, it is the love of the God-man Mediator. Has it not penetrated deeper than hell? Has it not gone as high as heaven? Is it not longer than the earth, and broader than the sea? Are not its qualities self-existence, infinity, eternity, unfathomableness, and everything expressive of the glorious being, and counsels, and perfections of the living God? Talk of a man being lost! Oh! let me know that God my Father is mine here, that God my Redeemer is mine here, that God the Holy Ghost is my teacher here, and I should tremble at the thought of imputing anything like such an awful lie to the atonement of Christ, as in saying that the blood of an incarnate God was shed for a sinner's salvation and shall not accomplish it at last. If ever the devil put on a daring face, he did it when he propagated this damnable lie. Those of you that are brought to feel that this is the only way in which we obtain eternal life, sure I am that you must feel at times, as the Lord manifests his power, thankful to God for having delivered you from error and from lies. Well might the apostle Peter with such sweet emphasis say, "You were redeemed with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot, who truly was foreordained before the foundation of the world." And therefore, it is called "the blood of the everlasting covenant." "As for you," says God the Father, and the language stands in a form expressive of infinite ease and peculiar pleasure, "as for you, by the blood of your covenant, I have sent forth your prisoners out of the pit wherein is no water."

"Feed the church of God, which he has *obtained* with his own blood." And the more I read the words, the more I love them. For if I look to a poor mortal, a lump of sin like myself, and think how he might have said, "Now you must produce one good word, one good thought;" I see it must all have been eternal despair. But, bless his dear name,

"Jesus sought me when a stranger,
Wandering from the fold of God;
He, to save my soul from danger,
Interposed his precious blood."

It is precious to the saints of God, even while on earth; and what will it be when they come into his open presence, and realize it in all its uses, and all its properties? Oh! with what beauty, with what harmony, with what strength, will that song begin, go forward, and roll on all to eternity, "Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and has made us kings and priests unto God and his Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever!" Will a single

mortal lift his feeble voice, and say, "Nay, I got rid of a great many of my sins by my own doings"? No; as we said, the church was brought together under essentially the same circumstances, so they will all acknowledge that they got rid of their sins by the same blood.

If ever you are brought to receive salvation, you will turn your back upon every other hope. Half sinners may have other hopes; but those that know what they really are, will glory in redemption through his blood.

But as the original word *purchase* signifies to obtain as by price, so it signifies to hold; and as the Lord obtains his people in this way, so he holds them in this way. How does God the Father hold us? By the blood of the Lamb. Then there is nothing to loosen the hold; the dear Lord might well say, "None is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand." How does the dear Redeemer hold us? By his own atonement, and nothing shall "pluck us out of his hand." How does the Holy Spirit hold us? By the atonement of Christ. How does eternal life hold us, and we hold that? By the same precious blood. I do not wonder that the apostle, after reminding us that "it is God that justified," "Christ that died," should exclaim, "Who shall lay anything to the charge of" such a people as this? "who shall separate" from such love as this in Christ Jesus? Look at the gospel of God; how little we know of it, compared with its heights and depths, its lengths and breadths, its boundless wonders and its mysteries!

"I hate every false way" with my whole soul. "Yes," says one, "and I dare say you hate other people as well." I do; and I will give you a scripture for it, that will puzzle you. David says, "Do not I hate them, O Lord, that hate you? I hate them with perfect hatred." Do you agree with David in that? I do, entirely. But let us have a little explanation. I do not hate them civilly; in that sense, I say let one man have the same privileges as another. I do not hate them domestically; in that sense, let one man enjoy his fireside as well as another. I do not hate them naturally; in that sense they are my brethren, they are my sisters, fellow-mortals with myself. But I hate them in a spiritual sense, in their religion. They are "of their father, the devil;" and therefore, as far as their religion is concerned, I hate them. Not to commit any violence, not to do them any injury; that would be Satanic; but I understand the Psalmist to mean, that he hates their ways and their delusion with a perfect hatred.

But just observe the greatness of this subject. If the eternal God has obtained us in this way, by "his own blood," and if we obtain eternal things in this way, I ask, is error to be trifled with? And here I must bring in a scripture, which seems to me to place the truth in very solemn form: "they that are in the flesh cannot please God." Why not? Because they cannot appreciate God in his new-covenant character, in eternal election, the mediation of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, the inheritance reserved for us, and our preservation thereunto; and, says the apostle, "which things the angels desire to look into:" which things the natural man cannot appreciate and esteem. They that are in the flesh may please themselves, and please the world, but they "cannot please God." But those that are brought out of the flesh, and can appreciate these things, do please God. Abel brought a more excellent offering than Cain; and it comes to this point, he pleased God. Enoch obtained witness that he pleased God. There is but one way to please him. "Ay, it is the way the Lord pleases me."

But to conclude. The Lord has by this great work, the shedding of his blood, wrought a great salvation. Creation is nothing, a mere glow-worm, compared to the salvation of our God. The Lord has wrought a great victory; and he has prepared for all his people a great feast. As it began in greatness, and goes on in greatness, it shall be perfected in greatness. He began in great love; he goes on in great grace and in great power; and there shall be great glory at the last. May the Lord, in his dear mercy, reveal to us more and more of these truths, and enable us to stand fast in them.

The following letter was read to the congregation on New Year's Morning:

To the Deacons of the Surrey Tabernacle.

DEAR AND HIGHLY ESTEEMED BRETHREN IN THE LORD,

I am grieved to say that I am still in deep and painful bodily affliction. I did this week, up to Friday, indulge the fond hope that I should be in the pulpit again on New Year's morning, but that hope is now destroyed, but my medical attendant gives me every encouragement to believe that I shall again be raised up. It is a great trial for the Church and Congregation, but as heretofore they have acted most nobly in keeping together, as also by their great and wonted liberality to the poor, and by their sincere prayers to the God of all grace for my restoration to them. I cannot fix any time when it is probable I can again be with them, but I will hope from week to week, and trust the friends will do all they can to keep together, as I cannot believe that they will forsake the Surrey Tabernacle in my absence, nor forget me, their humble but sincere servant, any more than I can forget them or cease to pray for them. The Deacons in your present trying and responsible position will be encouraged to go on until it shall please, the Lord to turn my captivity. Great grace be with you all.

Yours in the dear hope of eternal life,

JAMES WELLS.

VASSALL ROAD,
December 31, 1870.