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# “Let Him Who Boasts Boast In This” – Knowing God, Studying God’s Word, Knowing God’s Truth, and Serving God’s People

*The life of the preacher is a life of study, and it has been so from the very beginning. The Apostle Paul instructed Timothy to study so that he could present himself to God as an approved worker, “a worker who has no need to be ashamed” [2 Timothy 2:15]. This instruction came within the context of Timothy’s call as a preacher and teacher of God’s Word, and Paul’s instruction to Timothy is our Lord’s instruction to all who would preach and teach the Word of God.*

**Monday, January 23, 2006**

*Thus says the Lord: “Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.”*

Jeremiah 9:23-24

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A word of honesty is necessary at this point. Any honest assessment of the contemporary church would indicate that vast numbers of ministers serving Christ’s church are derelict in this duty. They are intellectually lazy, biblically illiterate, slothful in their study habits, and they often steal the learning of others in order to hide their own disobedience. This is a scandal that robs the congregation of the learned and faithful ministry the people of God so desperately need and deserve.

The preacher’s lifetime of study begins with the moment of his call and properly ends only when the preacher breathes his last breath. Between the call and the grave lies a long and rewarding journey of learning – learning that will be put at the disposal of the congregation until we see our Lord face to face. On that day, we dare not be ashamed of our lack of study.

Thomas Murphy, once of the great faithful pastors of the nineteenth century, described the minister’s calling of study with these words: “The pastor must study, study, study, or he will not grow, or even live, as a true workman for Christ.” The minister’s life is “one of incessant study,” Murphy explained, and “mere genius” will not suffice – this is a life of constant and rewarding study.

## ***Knowing God***

The preacher’s first task is to know God – personally. The Bible has no conception of an unconverted ministry. The preacher is first of all a man who has come to know God through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and who find his greatest fulfillment in knowing God personally and redemptively.

God told the prophet Jeremiah, “let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me” [Jeremiah 9:24].

Our fundamental knowledge is a knowledge of God, and this is the central goal of all true theological education and ministry preparation. The preacher must be one who sets his sight on a vibrant personal knowledge of God. Otherwise, theological knowledge becomes a ground for personal pride and intellectual pretentiousness.

As J. I. Packer reminds us, “To be preoccupied with getting theological knowledge as an end in itself, to approach Bible study with no higher a motive than a desire to know all the answers, is the direct route to a state of self-satisfied self-deception. We need to guard our hearts against such an attitude, and pray to be kept from it.”

Furthermore, Packer correctly reminds us that we are indeed to be urgently concerned for theological orthodoxy and biblical truth, but “not as ends in themselves, but as a means to the further ends of life and godliness.” In other words: “Our aim in studying the Godhead must be to know God himself better. Our concern must be to enlarge our acquaintance, not simply with the doctrine of God’s attributes, but with the living God whose attributes they are.”

This approach to the minister’s life of study brings a godly sense of balance. Our central aim is to know God, and the aim of our ministry is to lead our people to know God also. The other aspects of knowledge are useful only in so far as they lead us into a deeper knowledge of God. A healthy theological education inculcates a deeper love for God, even as the minister grows in the knowledge of God’s Word and the comprehensiveness of God’s truth.

### ***Studying God’s Word***

Paul’s instruction to Timothy was very clear. The young minister was to study in order that he would be found “rightly handling the word of truth” [2 Timothy 2:15]. A deep and growing knowledge of God’s Word is the indispensable ground of all other true knowledge.

Put simply, the preacher is to be a devoted and skillful student of the Scriptures. This is the most important field of knowledge for the preacher, for his primary task is to preach the Word “in season and out of season,” [2 Timothy 4:2] and to teach God’s people from God’s Word.

Clearly, this strategic call represents a stewardship of truth, of souls, and of calling. Failure in this task is beyond tragedy, and the consequences are eternal. God has given us his Word and has commanded that we preach the Bible with skill, even as Ezra was “a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses” [Ezra 7:6].

This requires skill in the tasks of biblical interpretation, hermeneutics, exegesis, biblical languages, and the history of interpretation. This is a demanding calling, but nothing less than the most serious life of study will do. Those who can gain access to Bible colleges and theological seminaries that are biblically and theologically orthodox and faithful should take full advantage of these opportunities—knowing that this is a matter of faithfulness to our calling. At the same time, we must remember that many faithful preachers never had access to formal theological education. Yet, if they were faithful, they were no less studious or committed to a life of godly learning.

The centrality of the Bible is essential. As Charles Spurgeon encouraged his students: “Study the Bible, dear brethren, through and through, with all the helps that you can possibly obtain: remember that the appliances now within the reach of ordinary Christians are much more extensive than they were in our fathers’ days, and therefore you must be greater biblical scholars if you would keep in front of your hearers. Intermeddle with all knowledge, but above all things meditate day and night in the law of the Lord.”

If this was true in Spurgeon’s time, it is even more so in ours. The preacher must be more knowledgeable and more skilled than his congregation. Spurgeon’s other emphasis—that the knowledge of the Bible exceeds all other forms of knowledge in importance—also takes on a new urgency in our times. While there are many fields of knowledge and intellectual stimulation to which we could give our attention, we must keep ourselves first and foremost students of the Bible.

### ***Learning God’s Truth***

A true theological education stands on the unquestioned authority and truthfulness of the Bible and then moves to display that truth in all its comprehensiveness and to apply that truth to every dimension of life. Thus, the fields of systematic theology, historical theology, ethics, church history, and other theological disciplines all play their part in the

preparation of the preacher.

A resistance to systematic theology reflects a lack of discipline or a lack of confidence in the consistency of God's Word. We are to set out the great doctrines of the faith as revealed in the Bible—and do so in a way that helps to bring all of God's truth into a comprehensive focus. The preacher must be ready to answer the great questions of his age from the authoritative treasury of God's truth, and to teach, defend, and proclaim the faith “once for all delivered to the saints” [Jude 3].

### ***Serving God's People***

Ultimately, the preacher's calling is a call to serve the people of God. That's why a consideration of the call should include a careful analysis of the man's ability to preach, to teach, and to love the church for whom Christ died.

Once that is established, the preacher is set on a lifetime of studying in order to improve his preaching, to teach with even greater effectiveness, and to serve with even greater faithfulness.

This is no easy task. That's surely why Paul used the metaphors of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer as he described this calling to Timothy [2 Timothy 2:3-7]. We are called to the obedience of the soldier, the discipline of the athlete, and the patient endurance of the farmer.

We should note carefully that Paul describes the ministry this way just before commanding Timothy to study in order to show himself faithful. May we, like Timothy, do our best to present ourselves to God as workers who have no need to be ashamed.

