The Life and Ministry of the Pastor Part 2

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[0:00] This is the First Mustang Pulpit Podcast, a podcast of the weekly preaching and teaching at First Mustang.! Thank you for joining us.!

This is the history of a pastor looking at what ministry is to look like, although this really would be true for any of us, regardless of specific role in the church.
In one sense, we should all be serving and all be doing the work of ministry. Everyone who is the leader in their home is shepherding that household.
And those of you who teach Sunday school classes or teach on Wednesday nights, who lead discipleship groups, who are making disciples, in one way or another, in one sense, we're all doing the work of shepherding.
At the heart of a pastor should be the heart of a shepherd. And so, while we may be looking in one lens through what the New Testament describes, what the life of ministry or a pastor should be, in a very real sense, these are things that describe all of us as believers and would be a good help, I think, for us to consider how to live faithful lives.
[1:38] One of the things that is very important is we want to persevere. We want to make it to the end. We don't want to burn out.

We don't want to walk out. We don't want to flame out. We want to persevere to the end. We want to be Christians who truly believe or truly in the faith, truly a part of the family of God, and that would live that and demonstrate that until the very end.
But to be able to do that, we've got to understand what this Christian life is all about.
There are so many times when people get disillusioned and discouraged and then just walk away. Now, we understand from 1 John 2, there are people who they walk away because they were never truly in the faith. We can't know that situation.
[2:43] Only the Lord would know their heart in that situation. But it means everything to us as a church to strive to make sure that all of us are truly in the faith and that all of us are truly walking with the Lord.

And as believers, we still sin. We understand that. And when believers sin, the difference between a Christian and a non-Christian is not is there sin because we're all still going to sin.
The difference is what do you do when you sin? Believers run to Christ. Unbelievers keep running from Christ. Unbelievers keep running from Christ.
And it's not just a question of can you make it to the end. We want to help everybody make it to the end. It's very important. So let's look at 1 Thessalonians 3.
Is it possible to turn? It feels a little dark to me out there. Is it possible to brighten up? Maybe, maybe not.
[4:13] Can you see okay? You look dark. Maybe you look better in the dark. I don't know. All right. Well, we'll make it. We started last week in 1 Thessalonians 3 looking at the first aspect, which was the pastor's pain.

This is important. And we drilled this last week. I'm going to do it again. At the end of chapter 2, verse 19 speaks of glory and joy.
And when you get to chapter 3, we talk about affliction. Verse 4. For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction.
So let me just remind us of what we looked at last Sunday. The Christian life has joy. Praise the Lord. Lots of joy. But it also has affliction.
And when affliction comes, when suffering comes, when persecution comes, when disappointment comes, when people that you've invested in let you down, when whatever happens may happen, you've got to remind yourself, this is no surprise, the Christian life is filled with joy, but also a life

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filled with affliction.
[5:32] So don't be surprised by that. Don't be cut off guard by that. Don't let the presence of difficulties and struggle become an alibi for disobedience.

There's pain in shepherding God's people. And whether you are doing so as a recognized leader or just shepherding God's people in any way that you can, just understand there will be great joy in that and there will be great disappointment in that.
This is always true. You've got to be able to maintain your joy in the presence of affliction. And in days of affliction, you've got to fight for your joy.
These things are always true. It's always a tremendous joy for me to get to do what God has called me to do. I love what I do.
I wouldn't trade my life for anything. I feel truly like the most blessed man in the world to get to do what I do. I literally would not trade my life for anything or with anyone.
[6:42] I have constant joy in my heart for what I get to do. That does not mean that there's an absence of pain. There's always joy and there's always pain.

That's going to be true until we go to be with the Lord. And what we have to have is a joy that is so real, so Christ-centered, a life that's been transformed by God's grace, not that it means affliction never comes, but it means that we never lose our joy.
There's a difference. We are people who shepherd God's people as best we can. But there's pain involved as we do it.
Let's look again at what we read last week, chapter 3, verse 1. Therefore, when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left behind at Athens alone, and we sent Timothy, our brother and God's co-worker in the gospel of Christ, to establish and exhort you in your faith that no one may be moved by these afflictions, for you yourselves know that we are destined for this.
For when we were with you, we kept telling you beforehand that we were to suffer affliction just as it has come to pass, and just as you know.
[8:02] And so Paul is not painting any kind of unrealistic expectation. And so for our teenagers who are here in the service with us tonight, if you're a believer and you're following Christ, you should be living a life of joy.

You should remind yourself every single day, your sin's forgiven, your eternal destination is secure, you're a part of the family of God, the Holy Spirit has gifted you with spiritual gifts to use them within the body of Christ.
You are an image bearer of the King. Your life makes a difference. Your life counts. You ought to be living a life of joy. But you should not think that just because you come to church on a Sunday evening and lead out as a part of the student choir or anything else you do, that that's going to somehow exempt you from pain.
It won't. Life will be hard. Pain will come. People will disappoint you. This is the way life is in a fallen world.
But what you can have is a joy so rich and full that though the pain of affliction is present, the reality of joy even more so.
[9:26] So there's pain as we live this Christian life. But it's a pain that cannot and will not rob us of our joy.

Not if we're trusting in the Lord. Secondly, in verse 5, that's the pastor's pain. Verse 5, the pastor's problem. The pastor's problem.
For this reason, when I could bear it no longer, I sent to learn about your faith for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you and our labor would be in vain.
He repeats in verse 5, for this reason, I could bear it no longer. Sounds all like chapter 3, verse 1, when we could bear it no longer. You can just read, you can just hear the burden in Paul's heart for this church.
He has a true interest in the spiritual development of the people. And this is the pastor's problem. That every time you're aware of good things that are happening, you're also aware of struggles people have.
[10:42] Every single Sunday, I'm just amazed at the joy of being a part of this church. I'm amazed at the thrill and the privilege we have to gather here on Sunday morning and Sunday night and to worship as the body of Christ.

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I go home on Sundays exhausted, but the best kind of exhausted. It's a joyful exhaustion. But every single Monday, I'm going to get, as all of our staff will and those in our prayer team do, the prayer requests that have been turned in.
And there's needs all over the place. And there will always be needs. And either what we become are people who are a little bit calloused to where we no longer grieve or hurt, which is a dangerous way to try to serve, or we become a people that are always sharing and bearing burdens of each other.
This is the challenge of the Christian life. This is the challenge of being a part of the church. When you just sit on the sidelines, you're not involved in ministry, you're just watching everything, things seem pretty easy.
But once you get into the game and start to invest in people and start to use your spiritual gifts as all of us should be doing, what you find out is that our church is imperfect.
[12:06] Our families are imperfect. Our people are imperfect. And there's all kinds of needs. And some of our needs come from sin because we mess up. And some of our needs come from disobedience.

And some of our needs just come because we live in a fallen world. And the more people you know at the church, the more joy you have. But the more people you know, the more burdens you carry.
And this is part of the problem. You see this as Paul writes this. He says, I can't bear this any longer. I sent to learn about your faith for fear that somehow the tempter had tempted you.
Paul says, I can't stand not knowing. I need to see how you're doing. I long to be with you because you know that I love you and I saw the sincere love you had in your heart.
But my fear is that while I've been gone, he says, that the tempters come and led some of you astray. No matter how many people join a church and we rejoice that the Lord would be so kind to us in that, you still feel the pain of those who walk away.
[13:17] We just finished a wonderful new members class. Just an amazing group of people, wide age range, lively people, just a tremendous group that just completed our most recent round of new members classes.

And I thank the Lord for every one of them. But how many new members does it take to add to your church to replace the pain of one that has gone astray?
I mean, it just, it doesn't work. It's not a math equation. These are souls. These are people. And so if you've got one person who goes astray and leaves and 15 new who come, you rejoice in the 15, but your heart is still burdened for the one.
It's just the way that ministry works. And Paul says, I'm concerned for you, not because he has had a bad report, but because he loves the people.
And his fear is that somehow the tempter had tempted them and that their labor was in vain. What this shows us is that the role of the pastor, the role of the shepherd, is not to be concerned ultimately with numbers, but with people.
[14:33] There's a difference. You don't put ministry on an Excel spreadsheet because you're not dealing with a bottom line in that sense.

You're dealing with people. You're dealing with hearts. You're dealing with souls. Every one of you who teach Sunday school understand this. There's people you teach and you pray with and you minister to and you visit them in the hospital and then sometimes you just look up and they're just gone.
This is the problem of the ministry. This is going to always be the problem of ministry until Christ returns. Acts 20, verse 29 and 30, we read this about this same situation.
I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you not sparing the flock. From among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.
So Paul says here's the concern. Here's the problem. Sometimes you've got wolves out there and sometimes you've got wolves in here. This is why the church must always be vigilant.
[15:49] In the New Testament in some parts the Scripture warns about wolves who are coming and in other New Testament letters they are here.

the problem isn't just out there. The problem is sometimes inside the church. This is why the shepherds of a church have to continually do the work of teaching and training and confronting sin in Galatians 6.1 in a gentle way not in an arrogant way not in a heavy handed way but in a desire

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that seeks purity in the church.
And Paul warns and says that there are people who are trying to come from outside the church to lead you astray and there are some who have infiltrated the church and they're the wolves leading people astray.
And so the faithful shepherd is not consumed just with themselves but he gives himself for the spiritual good of his people.
And one of the things we see about the life of doing ministry here in verse 5 is that there's a part of your heart that never stops aching for the spiritual condition of the people you're serving.
[17:17] this must always be true. Third let's look at the pastor's promise verses 6, 7, and 8 the pastor's promise verse 6 but now that Timothy has come to us from you and has brought us the good news of your faith and love and report that you always remember us kindly and long to see us as we long to see you for this reason brothers in all our distress and affliction we have been comforted about you through your faith.

So remember what's happened here. Paul has sent Timothy to check on the church in Thessalonica. Timothy has come to report back to Paul. Paul is writing the church based on that report he received from Timothy.
Paul is relieved when he receives the good news back from Timothy though he's always concerned for the genuineness of their faith. But he specifies two things here that gives him promise.
One, they are abiding in faith. Two, they are abiding in love. These are the things that we want to be true of our church.
that we are abiding in faith and abiding in love. Every ministry of our church. How do you want to evaluate your children's ministry?
[18:52] Well, let's start here. Are our children learning to abide in faith and love? What do you want your youth ministry to be? Just a place where a whole bunch of kids come and we just kind of keep them safe?

No, we want to be a place that's safe where they are learning to abide in faith and abide in love. That's true for college ministry. That's true for adults.
That's true for music ministry. That's true for our moms group. That's true for the Men's Institute. We want those men to not just be knowledgeable. We want them to abide in faith and abide in love.
This is how we want to measure where we are as a church. It's not just about how many people are coming. It's not just about how much of an offering is given. It's not just about how many people are attending any certain program or ministry.
Are our people abiding, dwelling in, residing in faith and love? Do you see faith growing? Do you see love growing?
[19:58] And it's important here because you've got false teachers who are telling the church in Thessalonica. The reason why Paul's not there is because he must not love you.

That's not true. He was driven out. He was forced to leave. It's his love that caused him to send Timothy. His love through the Holy Spirit is inspiration that caused him to write this letter.
And he's blessed to see that even though false teachers are trying to lead the people astray, they're abiding in faith and abiding in love. So let's get personal for a minute.
Parents, when you pray for your children, how do you pray for them? If you've got students that are in college, when you call your child, you ask them how are your grades, are you going to class? It's good. But are you praying for and asking about their spiritual condition? If all of your prayers are about grades and girls or business and boys, that's all you're concerned about, that will be all your conversation is.
[21:25] But if you are praying that they would abide in faith and they would abide in love, if this is a matter of fervent prayer for you, this will be a matter of conversation for you because you will always talk about the things that you pray for.

You can't help it. Whatever you're praying for permeates your soul and it permeates your speech. And so when you call your son or daughter in college, ask them about grades.
Make sure they're going to class. Make sure they're taking care of business. That's great. If they're engaged, you probably ought to know about it. Go ahead and ask that too. But don't stop praying for the things that are the most important things, namely in this context, that they would abide in faith and that they would abide in love.

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If you've got little children at home, you pray for them to make good grades, you pray for them to grow and to develop in their minds to get smarter and to learn these skills they're working on. You pray for them to make friends. You pray for them to not be alone if they're sick. You pray for them to get healthy. I'm not asking you to pray less for any of those things. Just make sure that you're also praying for things that will still be important the day after the other things get resolved. [22:52] If you've got a child at school and he's not making friends, absolutely pray for that. Lift that up to the Lord. But if two weeks later he makes three best friends, there's still something that's even more important.

Is your child walking with Jesus? And so many times, it's not that our prayers are wrong, it's just that our prayers are so incomplete. There's nothing wrong with praying for earthly needs, not at all. Just make sure that the primary thing you're praying for is that which is most important for them. And if you are praying for your family to abide in faith and love, you're going to talk about the Lord. You're going to talk about His Word. verse 7, for this reason, brothers, in our distress and affliction, we have been comforted about you through your faith.

There's a promise here, there's hope here. Another part of the promise for a faithful pastor is the faith of the congregation strengthens the pastor even in times of distress.

[24:13] Do you notice how this works here? Paul wants to strengthen the church by teaching them and ministering to them, but the church is strengthening Paul as they walk in obedience and live in faith.

And this is the way that it should work. The pastors, the leaders of the church should give their lives to the congregation, not worry just about how many people are here, but worried about how do we faithfully discharge our duties to shepherd, to teach, to feed, to protect, to serve, to love the flock that they would abide in faith and abide in love.

And while that is a tiring, exhausting work, when the pastor does that and he sees evidence of the body of Christ living in that, it strengthens the shepherd.

So the shepherd empties himself and then the flock he serves in obedience strengthens the shepherd. And so when you see shepherds that burn out, give out, whatever it may be, the answer is not that they quit because the work was hard.

The work's always hard. Being a school teacher and then on Sundays teaching Sunday school and loving that class and serving that group of students, that's hard too.

[25:54] Having a 40-hour-a-week job and then coming to choir practice on Wednesday night to get ready to come serve and lead on Sunday, that's hard too. Being a stay-at-home mom and raising your children or going to work in the office wherever you may work and then also coming to the church to serve and to invest in people, that's hard too.

It's not like it's just the pastor's job that's hard. All of you who serve, it's hard for all of you. Wednesday night, there are so many of you that go to work and you're faithful employees at your work and you run home and get a quick bite to eat and then you pound the memory verse for your kids for Awana into their head in the drive so they get their star, their stamp, or if not, you're in trouble and you go and you're teaching your class and you're down in the gym for game time and you're helping them check in and you're listening to Bible memory verses.

That's hard too. That's exhausting too. And you don't even pay to do it. But for all of us using our spiritual gifts, there's some struggle, there's some challenge.

Some of our students, they go to school, they work hard, then they've got band practice or football practice or volleyball practice or cheerleading practice and they've got to come straight from that to elevate on Wednesday nights.

It's hard. It's hard. But as you give yourself away in ministry, when you see the people you love and see the people you serve abiding in faith and abiding in love, it energizes you.

[27:44] It restores you. It refreshes you. Verse 8 says, for now we live if you are standing fast in the Lord.

In other words, Paul says, I'm in affliction, there's suffering, there's persecution, I was driven out of the town, I long to see you, I wish I could be with you, I want to know how you're doing, I'm concerned if someone tempted you and led you astray, I'm concerned if there are false teachers who are creeping in, but I've heard the report from Timothy, you're abiding in love, you're abiding in faith, and it's as if Paul says, I can breathe, I can breathe, I'm refreshed, I'm exhausted, and I'm refreshed.

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I'm worn out, and I'm strengthened. It's all of those things. I go home on Sunday nights and just almost every single Sunday, I'm just overflowing with joy.
Admittedly, also exhausted. It's both of those. But our staff gathers back here on Monday mornings, 835, first thing we'll do, do it tomorrow morning, we do it almost every single Monday morning, 835, Bible's open, we're reading the scripture out loud.
And we have a guest coming to lead us in Bible study. Trying to fill our hearts and our minds back up with the Word of God. And one of the things that generally happens every Sunday night, out of nowhere, a name will come to my mind, and I'll ask Marcy, did you see so-and-so today?
[29:40] Or she'll say, have you seen so-and-so the last couple of weeks? And it's like after a day where you just truly give everything you've got, you never stop being concerned with who's not there.

Who have we missed? Our staff will say, has this person been here? Yes, they're here. They're doing great. Does anybody know where this family is? I heard that they're having trouble and we're trying to reach out to minister to them.
You just never stop. That's how it is as a parent. You love your kids. You pray for your kids. You give your life away for your kids.
And the very next day, you thought everything was good. And lo and behold, the seventh grader's life is falling apart. It wasn't this morning, but that was a long time ago.
This is the afternoon now. Things have changed drastically during the day. You remember? You've been there. But the promise, the promise is when you see evidence of spiritual fruit.
[30:47] You know, one of the things that I hear a lot, if I get to go and preach somewhere or speak somewhere, when people say something to me about, wow, you've been there 24 years.

Well, that's such a great thing. That's such a great thing to give so many years to the church. I always remind people, there's a reason why pastors stay in this church for a long time.
It's because you are a joy to shepherd. I mean, people don't say to church 24 years if there's no joy. And you look at our staff, we've got a couple of us been here for 24 years.
We've got a couple other ones that are learning. They're just like year 14, year 15, but they're coming. We've got others that are coming behind them. I mean, at our church, if you've been here on South 14 years, like you can't even start to climb up the pecking order because people tend to come and stay.
Why is that? Well, humanly speaking, that's because of you. That's because the work is always hard, but you're a joy to serve the Lord with.
[32:01] Now, it's true. We want our staff to be committed to you, and we don't want guys that are coming here and just looking to leave the first time some different offer comes around. We want guys that are committed to you, to this local church.

But let's be really clear. Every pastor doing the work God's called us to do, every one of us, are strengthened as we see you abide in faith and abide in love.
I tell people all the time, I think all ministry is hard, and you make this a wonderful place to do hard work. Rest assured, outside of God's grace, if there's any credit, so to speak, for somebody staying here for a long time, it's because you are a delight to serve.
And that's what Paul is saying. He's saying, I think about you, I pray for you, I'm concerned about people that may be leading you astray, but ultimately he says, you're standing fast.
It's a military term. This is a soldier who does not retreat. You're standing fast. You're at your position.
[33:17] You're at your door greeting every week. You're in your class teaching every week. You've got your place in the choir loft every week. You're at the preschool counter every week.

You're getting the prayer request to pray over them every week. You're in the class there early to meet people and greet people, help people feel welcomed. You're at your post. You're at your spot.
Before service, I was getting my microphone on. I had my coat off and Jeremy came. He was afraid something was wrong. He said, you don't have a coat on.
Are you going to preach without a coat? He thought the world was coming to an end. There's some of you, I would feel that way. If you're not here, if you're not at your spot, you're not at your door, you're not in your class, you're not in the prayer group, like I would think something's wrong because you're so dependable.

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What's going on? Paul says what strengthens him is that you're standing fast. As a spiritual soldier, you're at your spot. You're at your post.
[34:18] You're dependable. You're trustworthy. You're abiding in faith. You're abiding in love. And though the life of ministry for all of us has affliction, it has joy when God's people abide in faith and abide in love.

And of course, ultimately, we understand the Bible tells us we love because Christ first loved us. The joy, the unity we have in the church is a unity we have because of the bond of peace.
And our peace ultimately is found in Christ. And so, truly, every blessing we enjoy comes down to this, that as God's people, we have been welcomed into His family, welcomed at His table.
And it's not just us. We are saved into a family where everyone who knows Christ is our spiritual brothers and sisters. That's what the church is all about.
That's what ministry is all about. That's what we're doing here. We're not in the entertainment business. We're not in the competition business.
[35:37] We're in the shepherding business. Shepherding souls, all of us together as best we can. Teaching, praying, restoring, pursuing, hand in hand, arm in arm, shoulder to shoulder, striving to help each of us run the race faithfully.

And to make it to the end. I want to make it to the end. I want you to make it to the end.
I want us all to be there. I want us all to abide, to persevere in faith. And to persevere in love.
And the way we do that is by reminding ourselves every single day that our greatest needs have already been met by Christ on the cross.
And though affliction is real, joy is greater. Because His grace is greater than our sin. Amen? Let me ask you to take a moment to pray, if you would, as the deacons join me here at the front.
[37:00] And we prepare to... Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

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