

# A Message to Preachers

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In this message we purpose to treat of those things which have a particular bearing upon those whom God has called to preach and teach His Word: those whose whole time and energies are to be devoted unto seeking the spiritual and eternal welfare of souls, and the better equipping of themselves for that most blessed, solemn and important work. Their principal tasks are to proclaim God's Truth and to exemplify and commend their message by diligently endeavoring to practice what they preach, and setting before their hearers a personal example of practical godliness. Since it be the Truth they are to preach, no pains must be spared in seeing to it that no error be intermingled therewith, that it is the pure milk of the Word they are giving forth. To preach error instead of Truth is not only grievously to dishonor God and His Word, but will mislead and poison the minds of the hearers or readers.

The preacher's task is both the most honorable and the most solemn of any calling, the most privileged and at the same time the most responsible one. He professes to be a servant of the Lord Jesus Christ, a messenger sent forth by the Most High. To misrepresent his Master, to preach any other gospel than His, to falsify the message which God has committed to his trust, is to sin of sins which brings down upon him the anathema of heaven, (Gal. 1:8) and will be visited with the sorest punishment awaiting any creature. Scripture is plain that the heaviest measure of divine wrath is reserved for unfaithful preachers (Matt. 23:14; Jude 13). Therefore the warning is given, "be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (James 3:1) if unfaithful to our trust. Every minister of the Gospel will yet have to render a full account of his stewardship unto the One who he claims called him to feed His sheep, (Heb. 13:17), to answer for the souls who were committed to his charge. If he fails to diligently warn the wicked, and he dies in his iniquity, God declares "his blood will I require at thine hand" (Ezek: 3:18).

Thus the chief and constant duty of the preacher is to conform unto that injunction, "Study to how thyself approved unto God a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). In the whole Scripture there is no exhortation addressed to preachers which is of greater import than that one, and few equal. Doubtless that is why Satan has been so active in seeking to obscure its first two clauses by raising such a cloud of dust over the last one. The Greek word for "study" here signifies "give diligence": spare no efforts, but make it your paramount concern and constant your Master. Seek not the smiles and flatteries of worms of the earth, but the approbation of the Lord. That is to take precedence to everything else: unless it is, attention to the second thing mentioned will be in vain. Entirely subordinate all other aims to commending thyself unto God—thine own heart and character,

thy dealing with and walk before Him, ordering all thy ways according to His revealed will. What are your "service," your ministrations, worth if He is displeased with thee?

"A workman that needeth not to be ashamed." Be conscientious, diligent, faithful, in the use you make of your time and the talents God has entrusted to you. Give unremitting heed to that precept, "Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might" (Eccl. 9:10)—put your very best into it. Be industrious and assiduous, not careless and slovenly. See how well you can do each thing, not how quickly. The Greek word for "workman" is also translated "laborer," and in twentieth century, English might well be rendered "toiler." The ministry is no place for triflers and idlers, but for those who are prepared to spend and be spent in the cause of Christ.

The preacher ought to work harder than the miner, and to spend more hours per week in his study than does the man of business in his office. A workman is the very opposite of a shirker. If the preacher is to show himself approved unto God and be a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, then he will have to labor while others sleep, and do so until he sweats mentally.

"Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all. Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (1 Tim. 4:15, 16). This is another part of the mandate which Christ has laid upon His official servants, and a most comprehending and exacting one it is. He requires them to put their hearts into the work, to give the whole of their thoughts to it, to lay themselves completely out in it, to devote all their time and strength thereto. They are to keep clear of all secular affairs and worldly employments, and to show all diligence in the task assigned them. That it is an arduous task appears from the different designations given them. They are called "soldiers" to denote the exertions and fatigue which attend the proper discharge of their calling; "overseers and watchmen" to intimate the care and concern which accompany their office; "shepherds and teachers" to signify the various duties of leading and feeding those committed to their charge. But first and foremost they are to take heed to their personal growth in grace and piety, if they would minister effectually unto others.

Particularly does the minister need to attend unto this injunction "take heed unto thyself" in his study of the Scriptures, reading them devotionally ere he does so professionally; that is, seeking their application and blessing to his own soul before searching for sermonic materials. As the saintly Hervey expressed it, "Thus may we always be affected when we study the Oracles of Truth. Study them not as cold critics, who are only to judge of their meaning, but as persons deeply interested in all they contain. Who are particularly addressed in every exhortation, and directed in every precept. Whose are the promises, and to whom belong the precious privileges. When we are enabled thus to realize and appropriate the contents of that invaluable Book, then shall we taste the sweetness and feel the power of the Scriptures. Then shall we know by happy experience that our divine Master's words are not barely sounds and syllables, but that "they are spirit and they are life." No man can be constantly giving out—that which is fresh and savory—unless he be continually taking in. That which he is to declare unto others is what his own ears have first heard, his own eyes seen, his own hands have handled (1 John 1:1, 2).

The mere quoting of Scripture in the pulpit is not sufficient—people can become familiar with the letter of the Word by reading it at home; it is the expounding and application of it which is

so much needed. "And Paul, as his manner was . . . reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, opening and alleging that Christ must needs have suffered, and risen from the dead" (Acts 17:2, 3). But to "open" the Scripture helpfully to the saints requires something more than a few months' training in a Bible Institute, or a year or two in a seminary. None but those who have been personally taught of God in the hard school of experience are qualified to so "open" the Word that divine light is cast upon the spiritual problems of the believer, for while Scripture interprets experience, experience is often the best interpreter of Scripture. "The heart of the wise teacheth his mouth, and addeth learning to his lips," (Prov. 16:23), and that learning cannot be acquired in any man's school. No one can learn what humility is by means of the concordance, nor secure more faith by studying certain passages of Scriptures. The one is acquired through painful discoveries of the plague of our hearts, and the other is increased by a deepening acquaintance with God. We must ourselves be comforted of Him before we can comfort others (2 Cor. 1:4).

"To seek after mere notions of Truth, without an endeavor after an experience of its power in our hearts, is not the way to increase our understanding in spiritual things. He alone is in a posture to learn from God, who sincerely gives up his mind, conscience, and affections to the power and rule of what is revealed unto him. Men may have in their study of the Scriptures other ends also, as the profit and edification of others. But if this conforming of their own souls unto the power of the Word be not fixed in the first place in their minds they do not strive lawfully, nor will they be crowned. And if at any time, when we study the Word, we have not this design expressly in our minds, yet if upon the discovery of any truth we endeavor not to have the likeness of it in our own hearts, we lose our principal advantage by it" (John Owen). It is much to be feared that many preachers will have reason to lament in the day to come, "They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but mine own vineyard have I not kept" (Song of Sol. 1:6)—like a chef preparing meals for others and himself starved.

While the preacher is to pander the Word devotionally, he is also to read it studiously. If he is to become able to feed his flock with "the finest of the wheat" (Psa. 81:16), then he must needs study it diligently and daily, and that to the end of his life. . . . Alas, that so many preachers abandon their habit of study as soon as they are ordained! The Bible is an inexhaustible mine of spiritual treasures, and the more its riches are opened to us (by hard digging) the more we realize how much there is unpossessed, and how little we really understand what has been received. "If any man think that he knoweth anything, he knoweth nothing yet as he ought to know" (1 Cor. 8:2).

The Word of God cannot be understood without a constant and laborious study, without a careful and prayerful scrutiny of its contents. This is not to say that it is recondite and obscure. No, it is as plain and intelligible as in the nature of things it can be, adopted in the best possible manner to give instruction in the holy and profound things of which it treats. But none can be instructed by the best possible means of instruction who will not take pains with the same. Promise of understanding is not made to the dilatory and indolent, but to the diligent and earnest, to those who seek for spiritual treasure (Prov. 2:3, 5). The Scriptures have to be searched, searched daily, persistently and perseveringly, if the minister is to become thoroughly familiar with the whole of what God has revealed, and if he is to set before his hearers "a feast of fat things." Of the wise preacher it is said, "he still taught the people knowledge, yea, he

gave good heed, and sought out," even "sought to find out acceptable words" (Eccl. 12:9, 19), as if his whole soul was engaged in the discovery of the best mode as well as the best substance of instruction.

No preacher should be content with being anything less than "a man mighty in the Scriptures" (Acts 18:24). But to attain thereunto he must subordinate all other interests. As an old writer quaintly said, "The preacher should be with his time as the miser is with his gold—saving it with care, and spending it with caution." He must also remind himself constantly whose Book it is he is about to take up, so that he ever handles it with the utmost: reverence, and can aver "my heart standeth in awe of Thy word" (Psa. 119:161). He must approach it in lowly-mindedness, for it is only unto such that the Lord "giveth more grace." He must ever come to it in the spirit of prayer, crying "that which I see not teach Thou me" (Job 34:32): the enlightening grace of the Spirit will, often open mysteries to the meek and dependent which remain closed to the most learned and scholarly. A holy heart is equally indispensable for the reception of supernatural truth, for the understanding is clarified by the purifying of the heart. Let there also be a humble expectation of divine help, for "according to your faith be it unto you" holds good here, too.

It is only by giving heed to the things which have been pointed out in the preceding paragraphs that the necessary foundations are laid for any man's becoming a competent expositor. The task before him is to unfold, with clearness and accuracy, the Word of God. His business is entirely exegetical—to bring out the true meaning of each passage he deals with, whether it accords with his own preconception or no. As it is the work of the translator to convey the real sense of the Hebrew and Greek into English, so the interpreter's is to apprehend and communicate the precise ideas which the language of the Bible was meant to impart. As the renowned Bengel so well expressed it, "An expositor should be like the maker of a well: who puts no water into it, but makes it his object to let the water flow, without diversion, stoppage, or defilement." in other words, he must not take the slightest liberty with the sacred text, nor give it a meaning which it will not legitimately bear; neither modifying its force nor superimposing upon it anything of his own, but seeking to give out its true import.

To comply with what has just been said calls for an unbiased approach, an honest heart and a spirit of fidelity on the part of the interpreter. "Nothing should be elicited from the text but what is yielded by the fair and grammatical explanation of its language" (Patrick Fairbairn). It is easy to assent to that dictum, but often difficult to put into practice. A personal shrinking from what condemns the preacher, a sectarian bias of mind, the desire to please his hearers, have caused not a few to evade the plain force of certain passages, and to foist on them significations which are often quite foreign to their meaning. Said Luther, "We must not make God's Word mean what we wish. We must not bend it, but allow it to bend us, and give it the honor of being better than we can make it." Anything other than that is highly reprehensible. Great care needs ever to be taken that we do not expound our own mind instead of God's. Nothing can be more blameworthy than for a man to profess to be uttering a "Thus saith the Lord" when he is merely expressing his own thoughts. Yet who is there who has not, unwittingly, done so?

If the druggist is required by law to follow exactly the doctor's prescription, if military officers

must transmit the orders of their commanders verbatim or suffer severe penalties, how much more incumbent it is for one dealing with divine and eternal things to adhere strictly to his textbook! The interpreter's task is to emulate those described in Neh. 8:8, of whom it is said, "they read in the book of the law of the Lord God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading." The reference is unto those who had returned to Palestine from Babylon. While in captivity they had gradually ceased to use Hebrew as their spoken language, Aramaic displacing it. Hence there was a real need to explain the Hebrew words in which the Law was written (cf. Neh. 13:23,24). Yet the recording of this incident intimates that it is of permanent importance, and has a message for us. In the good providence of God there is little need today for the preacher to explain the Hebrew and the Greek, since we already possess a reliable translation of them into our own mother tongue though occasionally, yet very sparingly, he may do so. But his principal business is to "give the sense" of the English Bible and cause his hearers to "understand" its contents. His responsibility is to adhere strictly to that injunction, "let him speak My word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord" (Jer. 23:28).

-Arthur W. Pink