

1.

The oversight of ourselves

Section 1

The nature of this oversight

1. Firstly, look after yourselves. Make sure you are truly converted yourself. Take care that while preaching Christ to others, you are not without Christ yourself. A glorious reward is promised to faithful preachers of the gospel, but you will never enjoy that reward unless you receive the gospel yourself. There are many preachers now in hell who once warned their hearers many times to escape it. Do you expect God to save you for offering salvation to others if you reject it yourself? God never promised to save preachers, no matter how gifted they are, unless they are converted.

To be unsaved is awful, but to be an unsaved preacher is much worse. Are you not afraid to open your Bible to read your own condemnation? When you preach the gospel are you not increasing your guilt by rejecting the Saviour you proclaim? Yet an unsaved preacher is usually unaware of his condition. He daily handles precious truths. He lives an outwardly holy life. He denounces sin in others and urges them to be holy. How tragic: to starve with the bread of life in your hands, urging others to eat. If this is true of you then take my advice, preach to yourself before preaching any more to others. Will it help you in the day of judgment to say, 'Lord, Lord, we have prophesied in your name,' only to hear the awful words, 'Depart from me, I do not know you.' I advise you to confess your sin before your people and ask them to pray for their minister's conversion!

It is not unusual to find ministers who are unconverted. Your preaching will be cold and lifeless if Christ is not in your heart. O that every theology student understood this. What is the point of study if it does not lead to a knowledge of God and his saving grace? If God graciously saves them they will then have such a knowledge of him they never dreamed of before. Nothing can be rightly known unless God is known. Nothing in the entire universe can be properly known until it is known in relation to the Creator.

When God made man he was perfect and lived in a perfect world. Everything revealed the glory of God. If man had not sinned, he would have increased in the knowledge of God and of himself. But, when he sought knowledge for himself, he lost the true knowledge of God and his creation. Instead, the knowledge he gained was vain and empty.

Christ's work is to restore us, by faith, to the purity, obedience and love in which man was first created. Therefore, the most holy men are the best students of God's creation. The study of science is worthless if God is not sought in it. To see and adore, to love and delight in God as revealed in his creation is the only true wisdom. It is therefore a danger in education to place other subjects before the study of God. Theology should come first and guide us in all our studies. Nature should be read as one of God's books which he made to reveal himself. The books of Job and Psalms teach us that science and theology are not so unrelated as some think.

I therefore urge all Christian teachers to tell their pupils about God and his salvation alongside the sciences. Do not think they are too young to understand the Word of God. You have little idea what lasting impressions your words might make. You are in a uniquely privileged position of having young people willing to listen. When religion is treated like any other subject, godliness is stifled! How few students are serious and godly! What greater service could you do than if you could be the means, under God, of their conversion?

2. Be diligent to keep yourselves in a spiritually fit and healthy condition. Preach your sermons to yourself first. Your people will notice if you have spent much time with God and they will benefit. What is most in your hearts is likely to be most in their ears. I confess that when my heart is cold, my preaching is cold. If our love or faith or reverence declines it soon shows in our preaching, maybe not in what we preach but in the way we preach it, and our people will suffer. However, if we are filled with love, faith and zeal then our ministry will bring spiritual refreshment and encouragement.

Brethren, watch your hearts. Keep them free from lusts and passions and worldliness. Maintain your faith, love and zeal. Spend much time with God. If you do not then everything will be wrong. You must fetch from him the heavenly fire to consume your sacrifices. If your fervour is artificial you cannot expect God's blessing. Shameful sins and heresies usually start in a small way. Satan often appears as an angel of light to draw you back into darkness. If you yield to pride or fall into error you will become a curse instead of a blessing to God's people. Therefore watch, for your own sakes as well as for others.

I think a minister should be especially careful of his heart before public ministry. Read some spiritually stimulating book, or consider the great importance of your message, or think of your people's great spiritual needs. Go in the zeal of the Lord so that those who come along cold may have their hearts warmed before they leave.

3. Make sure your lifestyle agrees with your teaching. If it does not you will undo all the good you have done. If our lives are inconsistent people will think there is little truth in Christianity and our preaching is just 'hot air'! If we mean what we say then we will surely do what we say. One proud word, one flash of temper, one selfish action can soon destroy all your labours. If you do not long for the success of the gospel what are you doing in the ministry? Are you not prepared to endure insult or injury, to control your temper, to curb your pride, or befriend the lowly to win souls? How strange that some preach so carefully yet live so carelessly. We should take great care that we 'do what the word says' and are not speakers only, 'and so deceive ourselves' (see James 1:22). We should be as careful about the way we live as the way we preach. If we want to win souls then this will be our aim whether we are in the pulpit or out of it! Be diligent to use everything that you have for God, as well as your tongue!

Maintain a manner of conduct and speech that is beyond reproach. Your lives should condemn sin and inspire godliness in every way. If you want your people to care well for their families then care well for your own. There is nothing like meekness and self-denial for overcoming prejudice. Resist the temptation to use your authority to pressurise people into respect and submission. Be a friend to everyone especially the poorest members. This can be an efficient way of doing much good!

I urge you to be generous and compassionate. Use your material resources to meet the needs of others. Buy spiritually edifying books for your people. He is no true Christian who has anything he is not ready to give away, if Christ asks for it. If more ministers practised self-denial it would open more hearts to receive their message than all their preaching. Religion without self-denial is hypocrisy. We do not need to live in a monastery, but we should use all we have for Christ.

4. Make sure that you do not fall into those sins you condemn in others. How can you exalt Christ as Lord if you break his laws? It is easier to condemn sin than to overcome it. Take care that you 'keep under your bodies, and bring them into subjection: so that after you have preached to others, you yourself will not be disqualified for the prize' (see 1 Cor.9:27).

5. Make sure you have what it takes to be a good minister of Jesus Christ. There are many difficulties to resolve, even in the basics of Christianity. We have duties that are too difficult for many to do. We have to warn our people about many subtle temptations so they can escape them. We have much prejudice and obstinacy to overcome. Great skill is needed to make the truth plain to everyone's conscience! Much ability is required to answer all the devious arguments against the truth. Great wisdom is needed in counselling. Is all this something anyone can do? Do you not think you need to make every effort to equip yourself for such demanding work? Skimping your studies will not help you to be a good preacher. God alone can equip us and help us. But if we are lazy and neglect the means he has given we will quench the Holy Spirit. Therefore, waste no time! Study and pray, investigate and practise! That is the way to improve our skills.