

LECTURES TO MY
STUDENTS

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BY CHARLES SPURGEON

With an Introduction by Michael Reeves

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INTRODUCTION

Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) was a phenomenon, a cataract bursting upon the world. As a man, he fizzed with life and good cheer; as a pastor, he was so fruitful he seems fictitious. He was just seventeen when he became a pastor, and over the next forty years until his death he would preach up to thirteen times per week. He would gather the largest church of his day (the Metropolitan Tabernacle in south London, which had over five thousand members), and could make himself heard in a crowd of twenty-three thousand people (without amplification). In print he published some eighteen million words, selling over fifty-six million copies of his sermons in nearly forty languages in his own lifetime. On top of his preaching and pastoral ministry, he established and oversaw a host of ministries including the Pastors' College, the Stockwell Orphanage, seventeen almshouses for poor and elderly women, the Colportage Association, and a day school for children. He was involved in the planting of 187 churches (94 in London or nearby, 43 in the south-east, 19 in the north of England).

His *Lectures to My Students* are a window into the soul of his extraordinary ministry—and the soul of the man behind the ministry.

Preach Christ

First, the ministry. Spurgeon gave his lectures to teach the students at his Pastors' College what it means to be a minister and what is involved in preaching. "The glory of God being our chief object, we aim at it by seeking the edification of saints and the salvation of sinners," he explained (469).¹ He wanted his students to be soul-winning heralds of Christ.

A number of the lectures are essentially practical. He would, for example, urge his students to preach in everyday, down-to-earth language rather than serving up "a delicious slice of nothing at all, decorated with the parsley of poetry, and flavored with the sauce of affectation" (97). But behind the practicalities lie deep theological convictions. He knew that proud words cannot produce humble people.

The *Lectures* present a high view of preaching as something above lecturing, moralizing or entertaining. "Remember," he told his students, "you are not sent to whiten tombs, but to open them" (438). In preaching, he wanted to see his listeners transformed, not merely in their knowledge or behaviour, but in their very hearts. But for that, he was clear, preachers themselves must be transformed men. And that is where much of the punch of the *Lectures* waits.

Prevail in Prayer

The surest sign of a man's transformation is his prayer life. For prayer is not merely one Christian activity among others: it is faith in action. Prayer is the breathing that evidences new life in Christ and a heart reconciled to God and dependent on God. Spurgeon thus taught his students that prayer must be the breath of any faithful ministry. No amount of talent or education can substitute for it. "All our libraries and studies are mere emptiness compared with our closets. We grow, we wax mighty, we prevail in private prayer" (53).

1. All quotes from this Christian Heritage edition.

LECTURE I

The Minister's Self-Watch

“Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine.” (1 Timothy 4:16)

Every workman knows the necessity of keeping his tools in a good state of repair, for “if the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength.” If the workman lose the edge from his adze, he knows that there will be a greater draught upon his energies, or his work will be badly done. Michael Angelo, the elect of the fine arts, understood so well the importance of his tools, that he always made his own brushes with his own hands, and in this he gives us an illustration of the God of grace, who with special care fashions for himself all true ministers. It is true that the Lord, like Quintin Matsys in the story of the Antwerp well-cover, can work with the faultiest kind of instrumentality, as he does when he occasionally makes very foolish preaching to be useful in conversion; and he can even work without agents, as he does when he saves men without a preacher at all, applying the word directly by his Holy Spirit; but we cannot regard God's absolutely sovereign acts as a rule for our action. He may, in his own absoluteness, do as pleases him best, but we must act as his plainer dispensations instruct us; and one

of the facts which is clear enough is this, that the Lord usually adapts means to ends, from which the plain lesson is, that we shall be likely to accomplish most when we are in the best spiritual condition; or in other words, we shall usually do our Lord's work best when our gifts and graces are in good order, and we shall do worst when they are most out of trim. This is a practical truth for our guidance, when the Lord makes exceptions, they do but prove the rule.

We are, in a certain sense, our own tools, and therefore must keep ourselves in order. If I want to preach the gospel, I can only use my own voice; therefore I must train my vocal powers. I can only think with my own brains, and feel with my own heart, and therefore I must educate my intellectual and emotional faculties. I can only weep and agonize for souls in my own renewed nature, therefore must I watchfully maintain the tenderness which was in Christ Jesus. It will be in vain for me to stock my library, or organize societies, or project schemes, if I neglect the culture of myself; for books, and agencies, and systems, are only remotely the instruments of my holy calling; my own spirit, soul, and body, are my nearest machinery for sacred service; my spiritual faculties, and my inner life, are my battle axe and weapons of war. M'Cheyne, writing to a ministerial friend, who was traveling with a view to perfecting himself in the German tongue, used language identical with our own: "I know you will apply hard to German, but do not forget the culture of the inner man—I mean of the heart. How diligently the cavalry officer keeps his saber clean and sharp; every stain he rubs off with the greatest care. Remember you are God's sword, his instrument—I trust, a chosen vessel unto him to bear his name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God."

For the herald of the gospel to be spiritually out of order in his own proper person is, both to himself and to his work, a most serious

calamity; and yet, my brethren, how easily is such an evil produced, and with what watchfulness must it be guarded against! Traveling one day by express from Perth to Edinburgh, on a sudden we came to a dead stop, because a very small screw in one of the engines—every railway locomotive consisting virtually of two engines—had been broken, and when we started again we were obliged to crawl along with one piston-rod at work instead of two. Only a small screw was gone, if that had been right the train would have rushed along its iron road, but the absence of that insignificant piece of iron disarranged the whole. A train is said to have been stopped on one of the United States' railways by flies in the grease-boxes of the carriage wheels. The analogy is perfect; a man in all other respects fitted to be useful, may by some small defect be exceedingly hindered, or even rendered utterly useless. Such a result is all the more grievous, because it is associated with the gospel, which in the highest sense is adapted to effect the grandest results. It is a terrible thing when the healing balm loses its efficacy through the blunderer who administers it. You all know the injurious effects frequently produced upon water through flowing along leaden pipes; even so the gospel itself, in flowing through men who are spiritually unhealthy, may be debased until it grows injurious to their hearers. It is to be feared that Calvinistic doctrine becomes most evil teaching when it is set forth by men of ungodly lives, and exhibited as if it were a cloak for licentiousness; and Arminianism, on the other hand, with its wide sweep of the offer of mercy, may do most serious damage to the souls of men, if the careless tone of the preacher leads his hearers to believe that they can repent whenever they please; and that, therefore, no urgency surrounds the gospel message. Moreover, when a preacher is poor in grace, any lasting good which may be the result of his ministry, will usually be feeble and utterly out of proportion with what might have been expected. Much sowing will be followed by little reaping; the interest upon the talents will be inappreciably small. In two or three of the battles which were

lost in the late American war, the result is said to have been due to the bad gunpowder which was served out by certain "shoddy" contractors to the army, so that the due effect of a cannonade was not produced. So it may be with us. We may miss our mark, lose our end and aim, and waste our time, through not possessing true vital force within ourselves, or not possessing it in such a degree that God could consistently bless us. Beware of being "shoddy" preachers.

It should be one of our first cares that we ourselves be saved men.

That a teacher of the gospel should first be a partaker of it is a simple truth, but at the same time a rule of the most weighty importance. We are not among those who accept the apostolical succession of young men simply because they assume it; if their college experience has been rather vivacious than spiritual, if their honors have been connected rather with athletic exercises than with labors for Christ, we demand evidence of another kind than they are able to present to us. No amount of fees paid to learned doctors, and no amount of classics received in return, appear to us to be evidences of a call from above. True and genuine piety is necessary as the first indispensable requisite; whatever "call" a man may pretend to have, if he has not been called to holiness, he certainly has not been called to the ministry.

"First be trimmed thyself, and then adorn thy brother," say the rabbins. "The hand," saith Gregory, "that means to make another clean, must not itself be dirty." If your salt be unsavory how can you season others? Conversion is a *sine qua non* in a minister. Ye aspirants to our pulpits, "ye must be born again." Nor is the possession of this first qualification a thing to be taken for granted by any man, for there is very great possibility of our being mistaken as to whether we are converted or not. Believe me, it is no child's play to "make your calling and election sure." The world is full of counterfeits, and swarms with panderers to carnal self-conceit, who gather around a minister as vultures around a carcass. Our own hearts are deceitful, so that truth lies not on the surface, but must be drawn up from

the deepest well. We must search ourselves very anxiously and very thoroughly, lest by any means after having preached to others we ourselves should be castaways.

How horrible to be a preacher of the gospel and yet to be unconverted! Let each man here whisper to his own inmost soul, "What a dreadful thing it will be for me if I should be ignorant of the power of the truth which I am preparing to proclaim!" Unconverted ministry involves the most unnatural relationships. A graceless pastor is a blind man elected to a professorship of optics, philosophizing upon light and vision, discoursing upon and distinguishing to others the nice shades and delicate blendings of the prismatic colors, while he himself is absolutely in the dark! He is a dumb man elevated to the chair of music; a deaf man fluent upon symphonies and harmonies! He is a mole professing to educate eaglets; a limpet elected to preside over angels. To such a relationship one might apply the most absurd and grotesque metaphors, except that the subject is too solemn. It is a dreadful position for a man to stand in, for he has undertaken a work for which he is totally, wholly, and altogether unqualified, but from the responsibilities of which this unfitness will not screen him, because he willfully incurred them. Whatever his natural gifts, whatever his mental powers may be, he is utterly out of court for spiritual work if he has no spiritual life; and it is his duty to cease the ministerial office till he has received this first and simplest of qualifications for it.

Unconverted ministry must be equally dreadful in another respect. If the man has no commission, what a very unhappy position for him to occupy! What can he see in the experience of his people to give him comfort? How must he feel when he hears the cries of penitents; or listens to their anxious doubts and solemn fears? He must be astonished to think that his words should be owned to that end! The word of an unconverted man may be blessed to the conversion of souls, since the Lord, while he disowns the man, will still honor his own truth. How perplexed such a man must be when he is consulted

concerning the difficulties of mature Christians! In the pathway of experience, in which his own regenerate hearers are led, he must feel himself quite at a loss. How can he listen to their deathbed joys, or join in their rapturous fellowships around the table of their Lord?

In many instances of young men put to a trade which they cannot endure, they have run away to sea sooner than follow an irksome business; but where shall that man flee who is apprenticed for life to this holy calling, and yet is a total stranger to the power of godliness? How can he daily bid men come to Christ, while he himself is a stranger to his dying love? O sirs, surely this must be perpetual slavery. Such a man must hate the sight of a pulpit as much as a galley-slave hates the oar.

And how unserviceable such a man must be. He has to guide travelers along a road which he has never trodden, to navigate a vessel along a coast of which he knows none of the landmarks! He is called to instruct others, being himself a fool. What can he be but a cloud without rain, a tree with leaves only. As when the caravan in the wilderness, all athirst and ready to die beneath the broiling sun, comes to the long desired well, and horror of horrors! finds it without a drop of water; so when souls thirsting after God come to a graceless ministry, they are ready to perish because the water of life is not to be found. Better abolish pulpits than fill them with men who have no experimental knowledge of what they teach.

Alas! the unregenerate pastor becomes terribly mischievous too, for of all the causes which create infidelity, ungodly ministers must be ranked among the first. I read the other day, that no phase of evil presented so marvelous a power for destruction, as the unconverted minister of a parish, with a £1200 organ, a choir of ungodly singers, and an aristocratic congregation. It was the opinion of the writer, that there could be no greater instrument for damnation out of Hell than that. People go to their place of worship and sit down comfortably, and think they must be Christians, when all the time all that their

religion consists in, is listening to an orator, having their ears tickled with music, and perhaps their eyes amused with graceful action and fashionable manners; the whole being no better than what they hear and see at the opera—not so good, perhaps, in point of aesthetic beauty, and not an atom more spiritual. Thousands are congratulating themselves, and even blessing God that they are devout worshippers, when at the same time they are living in an unregenerate Christless state, having the form of godliness, but denying the power thereof. He who presides over a system which aims at nothing higher than formalism is far more a servant of the devil than a minister of God.

A formal preacher is mischievous while he preserves his outward equilibrium, but as he is without the preserving balance of godliness, sooner or later he is almost sure to make a trip in his moral character, and what a position is he in then! How is God blasphemed, and the gospel abused!

Terrible is it to consider what a death must await such a man! and what must be his after-condition! The prophet pictures the king of Babylon going down to Hell, and all the kings and princes whom he had destroyed, and whose capitals he had laid waste, rising up from their places in Pandemonium, and saluting the fallen tyrant with the cutting sarcasm, “Art thou become like unto us?” And cannot you suppose a man who has been a minister, but who has lived without Christ in his heart, going down to Hell, and all the imprisoned spirits who used to hear him, and all the ungodly of his parish rising up and saying to him in bitter tones, “Art thou also become as we are? Physician, didst thou not heal thyself? Art thou who claimed to be a shining light cast down into the darkness for ever?” Oh! if one must be lost, let it not be in this fashion! To be lost under the shadow of a pulpit is dreadful, but how much more so to perish from the pulpit itself!

There is an awful passage in John Bunyan’s treatise, entitled “Sighs from Hell,” which full often rings in my ears: “How many souls have