

Earnestness: Its Marring and Maintenance

IF I were asked, "What in a Christian minister is the most essential quality for securing success in winning souls for Christ?" I should reply, "Earnestness"; and if I were asked a second or a third time, I should not vary the answer, for personal observation drives me to the conclusion that, as a rule, real success is proportionate to the preacher's earnestness. . . . In many instances ministerial success is traceable almost entirely to an intense zeal, a consuming passion for souls, and an eager enthusiasm in the cause of God, and we believe that in every case, other things being equal, men prosper in the divine service in proportion as their hearts are blazing with holy love. "The God that answereth by fire, let him be God"; and the man who has the tongue of fire, let him be God's minister.

Brethren, you and I must, as preachers, be always earnest in reference to our pulpit work. Here we must labour to attain the very highest degree of excellence. . . . The pulpit is the Thermopylae of Christendom: there the fight will be lost or won. To us ministers the maintenance of our power in the pulpit should be our great concern; we must occupy that spiritual watchtower with our hearts and minds awake and in full vigor. . . . When our hearers come to the house of God, and obtain "food convenient for them," they forget a great many grievances in the joy of the festival, but if we send them away hungry they will be in as irritable a mood as a bear robbed of her whelps.

Now, in order that we may be acceptable, *we must be earnest when actually engaged in preaching.* . . . To go into the pulpit with the listless air of those gentlemen who loll about, and lean upon the cushion as if they had at last reached a quiet resting place, is, I think, most censurable. To rise before the people to deal out commonplaces which have cost you nothing, as if anything would do for a sermon, is not merely derogatory to the dignity of our office, but is offensive in the sight of God. We must be earnest in the pulpit for our own sakes, for we shall not long be able to maintain our position as leaders in the church of God if we are dull. Moreover, for the sake of our church members, and converted people, we must be energetic, for if we are not zealous, neither will they be. It is not in the order of nature that rivers should run uphill, and it does not often happen that zeal rises from the pew to the pulpit. It is natural that it should flow down from us to our hearers; the pulpit must therefore stand at a high level of ardour if we are, under God, to make and to keep our people fervent. Those who attend our ministry have a great deal to do during the week. Many of them have family trials, and heavy personal burdens to carry, and they frequently come into the assembly cold and listless, with thoughts wandering hither and thither. . . . We ought each one to be like that reformer who is described as "*Vividus vultus, vividi oculi, vividae manus, denique omnia vivida,*" which I would rather freely render, "a countenance beaming with life, eyes and hands full of life, in fine, a vivid preacher, altogether alive." . . .

The world also will suffer as well as the church if we are not fervent. We cannot expect a gospel devoid of earnestness to have any mighty effect upon the unconverted around us. . . .

Earnestness in the pulpit must be real. It is not to be mimicked. We have seen it counterfeited, but every person with a grain of sense could detect the imposition. To stamp the foot, to smite the desk, to perspire, to shout, to bawl, to quote the pathetic portions of other people's sermons, or to pour out voluntary tears from a watery eye will never make up for true agony of

soul and real tenderness of spirit. The best piece of acting is but acting; those who only look at appearances may be pleased by it, but lovers of reality will be disgusted. . . . We must be earnest in the pulpit because we are earnest everywhere; we must blaze in our discourses because we are continually on fire. . . . Be earnest, and you will *seem* to be earnest. A burning heart will soon find for itself a flaming tongue. To sham earnestness is one of the most contemptible of dodges for court- ing popularity; let us abhor the very thought. Go and be listless in the pulpit if you are so in your heart. Be slow in speech, drawling in tone, and monotonous in voice, if so you can best express your soul; even that would be infinitely better than to make your ministry a masquerade and yourself an actor.

But our zeal while in the act of preaching must be followed up by intense solicitude as to the after-results. . . . God will not send a harvest of souls to those who never watch or water the fields which they have sown. . . . Let the awful and important thought of souls being saved by our preaching, or left to perish and to be condemned to hell through our negligence—I say, let this awful and tremendous thought dwell ever upon our spirits. We are made watchmen to the house of Israel, as Ezekiel was; and, if we give no warnings of approaching danger, the souls of multitudes may perish through our neglect; then the blood of souls will be terribly required at our hands (Ezek. 3:17 ff.).

Such considerations should make us instant in season and out of season, and cause us at all times to be clad with zeal as with a cloak. We ought to be all alive, and always alive. A pillar of light and fire should be the preacher's fit emblem. Our ministry must be emphatic, or it will never affect these thoughtless times; and to this end our hearts must be habitually fervent, and our whole nature must be fired with an all-consuming passion for the glory of God and the good of men. . . .

We must by some means secure uninterrupted meditation, or we shall lose power. . . .

Earnestness may be, and too often is, diminished by neglect

of study. If we have not exercised ourselves in the word of God, we shall not preach with the fervour and grace of the man who has fed upon the truth he delivers, and is therefore strong and ardent. . . . Live on the substantial doctrines of grace, and you will outlive and outwork those who delight in the pastry and syllabubs of "modern thought."

Zeal may, on the other hand, be damped by our studies. There is, no doubt, such a thing as feeding the brain at the expense of the heart, and many a man in his aspirations to be literary has rather qualified himself to write reviews than to preach sermons. A quaint evangelist was wont to say that Christ hung crucified beneath Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. It ought not to be so, but it has often happened that the student in college has gathered fuel, but lost the fire which is to kindle it. It will be to our everlasting disgrace if we bury our flame beneath the faggots which are intended to sustain it. If we degenerate into book-worms it will be to the old serpent's delight, and to our own misery.

True earnestness may be greatly lessened by levity in conversation, and especially by jesting with brother ministers, in whose company we often take greater liberties than we would like to do in society of other Christians. There are excellent reasons for our feeling at home with our brethren, but if this freedom be carried too far we shall soon feel that we have suffered damage through vanity of speech. Cheerfulness is one thing, and frivolity is another; he is a wise man who by a serious happiness of conversation steers between the dark rocks of moroseness, and the quicksands of levity.

We shall often find ourselves in danger of being deteriorated in zeal by the cold Christian people with whom we come in contact. What terrible wet blankets some professors are! . . . If these frost-bitten men should happen to be the officers of the church, from whom you naturally expect the warmest sympathy, the result is chilling to the last degree, and all the more so if you are young and inexperienced: it is as though an angel were confined in an iceberg. . . .

Remembering then, dear brethren, that we must be in earnest, and that we cannot counterfeit earnestness, or find a substitute for it, and that it is very easy for us to lose it, let us consider for a while the ways and means for retaining all our fervour and gaining more. If it is to continue, *our earnestness must be kindled at an immortal flame*, and I know of but one—the flame of the love of Christ, which many waters cannot quench. A spark from that celestial sun will be as undying as the source from whence it came. If we can get it, yea, if we have it, we shall still be full of enthusiasm, however long we may live, however greatly we may be tried, and however much for many reasons we may be discouraged. To continue fervent for life we must possess the fervour of heavenly life to begin with. Have we this fire? . . . If not, why are we here? If a man *can* live without preaching, let him live without preaching. If a man can be content without being a soul-winner—I had almost said he had better not attempt the work, but I had rather say—let him seek to have the stone taken out of his heart, that he may feel for perishing men. Till then, as a minister, he may do positive mischief by occupying the place of one who might have succeeded in the blessed work in which *he* must be a failure.

The fire of our earnestness must burn upon the hearth of faith in the truths which we preach, and faith in their power to bless mankind when the Spirit applies them to the heart. He who declares what may or what may not be true, and what he considers upon the whole to be as good as any other form of teaching, will of necessity make a very feeble preacher. How can he be zealous about that which he is not sure of? If he knows nothing of the inward power of the truth within his own heart, if he has never tasted and handled the good word of life, how can he be enthusiastic? But if the Holy Ghost has taught us in secret places, and made our soul to understand within itself the doctrine which we are to proclaim, then shall we speak evermore with the tongue of fire. Brother, do not begin to teach others till the Lord has taught *you*. It must be dreary work to parrot forth

dogmas which have no interest for your heart, and carry no conviction to your understanding. . . .

Fan the flame as well as feed it. Fan it with much supplication. . . . There is for our brethren and ourselves an absolute necessity for prayer. Necessity!—I hardly like to talk of that; let me rather speak of the deliciousness of prayer—the wondrous sweetness and divine felicity which come to the soul that lives in the atmosphere of prayer. John Fox said, “The time we spend with God in secret is the sweetest time, and the best improved. Therefore if thou lovest thy life, be in love with prayer.” . . . There should be special seasons for devotion, and it is well to maintain them with regularity; but the spirit of prayer is even better than the habit of prayer: to pray without ceasing is better than praying at intervals. It will be a happy circumstance if we can frequently bow the knee with devout brethren, and I think it ought to be a rule with us ministers never to separate without a word of prayer. . . . It is a refreshing practice to have a minute or two of supplication in the vestry before preaching if you can call in three or four warmhearted deacons or other brethren. It always nerves me for the fight. But, for all that, to fan your earnestness to a vehement flame you should seek the spirit of continual prayer, so as to pray in the Holy Ghost, everywhere and always—in the study, in the vestry, and in the pulpit. It is well to be pleading evermore with God—when sitting down in the pulpit, when rising to give out the hymn, when reading the chapter, and while delivering the sermon—holding up one hand to God empty, in order to receive, and with the other hand dispensing to the people what the Lord bestows. Be in preaching like a conduit pipe between the everlasting and infinite supplies of heaven and the all but boundless needs of men; and to do this you must reach heaven, and keep up the communication without a break. Pray *for* the people while you preach *to* them; speak with God for them while you are speaking with them for God. Only so can you expect to be continually

in earnest. . . . Work and pray, as well as watch and pray; but pray always. . . .

Far more weighty is the advice: *keep close to God, and keep close to your fellow men whom you are seeking to bless*. Abide under the shadow of the Almighty, dwell where Jesus manifests himself, and live in the power of the Holy Ghost. Your very life lies in this. . . .

Take care, also, to be on most familiar terms with those whose souls are committed to your care. Stand in the stream and fish. Many preachers are utterly ignorant as to how the bulk of the people are living; they are at home among books, but quite at sea among men. What would you think of a botanist who seldom saw real flowers, or an astronomer who never spent a night with the stars? Would they be worthy of the name of men of science? Neither can a minister of the gospel be anything but a mere empiric unless he mingles with men, and studies character for himself. "Studies from the life"—gentlemen, we must have plenty of these if we are to paint to the life in our sermons. Read men as well as books, and love *men* rather than opinions, or you will be inanimate preachers.

Get into close quarters with those who are in an anxious state. . . . It will help to make you earnest when you see their eagerness to find peace. . . .

If you have to labour in a large town I should recommend you to familiarize yourself, wherever your place of worship may be, with the poverty, ignorance, and drunkenness of the place. Go if you can with a city missionary into the poorest quarter, and you will see that which will astonish you, and the actual sight of the disease will make you eager to reveal the remedy. There is enough of evil to be seen even in the best streets of our great cities, but there is an unutterable depth of horror in the condition of the slums. As a doctor walks the hospitals, so ought you to traverse the lanes and courts to behold the mischief which sin has wrought. It is enough to make a man weep tears of blood to gaze upon the desolation which sin has made in the

earth. . . . See the masses living in their sins, defiled with drinking and Sabbath-breaking, rioting and blaspheming; and see them dying sodden and hardened, or terrified and despairing: surely this will rekindle expiring zeal if anything can do it. The world is full of grinding poverty, and crushing sorrow; shame and death are the portion of thousands, and it needs a great gospel to meet the dire necessities of men's souls. . . . Go and see for yourselves. Thus will you learn to preach a great salvation, and magnify the great Saviour, not with your mouth only, but with your heart. . . .

Every unearnest minister is unfaithful. I would infinitely prefer to be consigned to Tophet as a murderer of men's bodies than as a destroyer of men's souls; neither do I know of any condition in which a man can perish so fatally, so infinitely, as in that of the man who preaches a gospel which he does not believe, and assumes the office of pastor over a people whose good he does not intensely desire. Let us pray to be found faithful always, and ever. God grant that the Holy Spirit may make and keep us so.

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SPURGEON~~

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Translator's Preface

This book gives us a great preacher's best thinking about preaching, but in an unusual context; for here Helmut Thielicke, whose reputation as a theologian and preacher is now world-wide, develops his homiletics against the foil of a nineteenth-century preacher's sermons and lectures on preaching, and brings us straight to the center and secret of Christian proclamation. How piquant, how wonderful, how "ecumenical" that Helmut Thielicke, the highly educated German university professor and Lutheran theologian, should find such deep and warm kinship with Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the self-educated, Victorian Baptist preacher, who to this day remains a "prince among preachers" in the English and American tradition! How strange that a man so widely separated in time and culture should rediscover these lectures on preaching which have influenced a whole line of books on homiletics for many years or more! And, after reading of his encounter with Spurgeon and rereading Spurgeon's sermons and his lectures to his students, we are grateful to Thielicke for bringing him again into the stream of our homiletical thinking.

The selection and abbreviation of Spurgeon's lectures and the two sermons were done by Dr. Thielicke. The text of the lectures has been taken from *Lectures to My Students, A Selection from Addresses to the Students of the Pastors' College, Metropolitan Tabernacle, London, First Series* (New York: American Tract Society, n.d.), and *Second Series of Lectures to My Students: Being Addresses Delivered to the Students of the Pastors' College, Metropolitan Tabernacle* (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1889). The text of the two sermons is taken from *Sermons of*

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