

Charles H. Spurgeon
COLLECTED WORKS
LECTURES TO MY STUDENTS
LIFE IN CHRIST
EVENING BY EVENING
FAITH'S CHECKBOOK
Illustrated

LECTURES TO MY STUDENTS

Practical and Spiritual Guidance for Preachers

Volume 1

Lecture 1
The Minister

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 [forth] more strength.* If the workman loses the edge on his axe, he knows there will be a greater pull upon

his energies, or his work will be badly done.

Michelangelo, the best in 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. Like Quentin Matsys in the story of the Antwerp school, the Lord is able to work with the faultiest kind of instrumentality, as He does when He occasionally makes very foolish preaching to be useful in conversion. He can even work without agents, as He does when He saves men without a preacher at all, applying His Word directly by His Holy Spirit; but we cannot regard God's absolute sovereign acts as a rule for our action. He may, in His own sovereignty, do as He pleases, but we must act as His clearer dispensations instruct us.

One of the clearer facts is that the Lord usually adapts means to ends, from which the plain lesson is that we are likely to accomplish most when we are in the best spiritual condition. 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 our worst when they are most out of order. 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, and so I must train my vocal powers. I can only think with my own brains and feel with my own heart; therefore, I must educate my intellectual and emotional faculties. I can only weep and agonize for souls in my own renewed nature; therefore, I must 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 traveled with a goal of 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 sabre 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, we suddenly 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. When we started again we were obliged to crawl along with one piston rod at work instead of two. Only one small screw was gone. If that screw had been right, the train would have rushed along its iron road, but the absence of that insignificant piece of iron disarranged the whole. Similarly, a train is said to have been stopped on one of the United States railways by flies in the grease box of the carriage wheels. The analogy is perfect: a man fitted to be useful in all other respects 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 produce 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 flowing through lead pipes. Even so, the gospel itself, in flowing through men who are spiritually unhealthy, may be debased

until it grows harmful to its hearers.

We should fear the Calvinistic doctrine that becomes a most evil teaching when it is set forth by men of ungodly lives and exhibited as if it were a cloak for licentiousness. 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 they can repent whenever they please, and 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; thus, the interest upon the talents will be insignificantly small.

In two or three of the battles which were lost in the American Civil War, the result is said to have been due to bad gunpowder supplied by certain "shoddy" contractors to the army. Consequently, the due effect of a bombardment was not produced. So it may be with us. We may miss our mark, lose our end and aim, and waste our time by not possessing the 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, it is a rule of the uppermost importance. We are not among those who accept the apostolic succession of young men simply because they assume it. If their college experience has been more vivacious than spiritual, and if their honors have been connected more with athletic exercises than with labors for Christ, then we demand evidence of another kind than what 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 devotion to God is necessary as the first indispensable qualification. 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 rabbis. “The hand,” says Gregory, “that means to make another clean must not itself be dirty.” If your salt be unsavory, how can you season others? Conversion is essential in a minister. You who are candidates to our pulpits, *ye must be born again*. The possession of this first qualification is not a thing to be taken for granted by any man, for there is a 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 ministers 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 like a blind man elected to a profession of optics, philosophizing upon light and vision, distinguishing to others the nice shades and delicate blending of the prismatic colors, while he himself is in absolute darkness! 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 marine gastropod mollusk 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 not from the responsibilities of which his unfitness will not screen him, but because he willfully invites

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 held to that end! The word of an unconverted man may be blessed to lead to the conversion of souls, since the Lord, while He disowns the man, will still honor His own truth. How perplexed such a minister 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 useless* such a man must be when he has to guide travelers along a road which he has never trodden, or 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 or a flower without blossoms? He's like a traveler in the wilderness, thirsty and ready to die beneath the broiling sun, when suddenly he comes to the long-desired well and, horror of horrors, finds it without a drop of water. So it is 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 to abolish pulpits than fill them with men who have no experiential knowledge of what they teach.

Alas! The unregenerate pastor also becomes terribly mischievous, 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 an expensive 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 from hell

than that. People go to their place of worship, sit down comfortably, and think they must be Christians, when all along their religion consists only in listening to an orator, and having their ears tickled with music and perhaps their eyes amused with graceful action and fashionable manners. The entire affair is no better than what they hear and see at the opera; not even 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 a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof* . One 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 can be mischievous even while he preserves his outward equilibrium. Without the preserving balance of godliness, sooner or later he is almost sure to fall in his moral character, and in what a position he will be then! How God is 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 with 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?*” Can you imagine a man who has been a minister, but who has lived without Christ in his heart, going down to hell amongst all the imprisoned spirits who used to listen him, and amongst 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 forever?*” 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 often rings fully in my ears:

How many souls have blind priests been the means of destroying by their ignorance? Preaching that was no better for their souls than rats bane to the body. Many of them, it is to be feared, have whole towns to answer for. Ah! Friend, I tell thee, thou that hast taken in hand to preach to the people, it may be thou hast taken in hand thou canst not tell what. Will it not grieve thee to see thy whole parish come bellowing after thee into hell? Crying out, “This we have to thank thee for, thou wast afraid to tell us of our sins, lest we should not put meat fast enough into thy mouth. O cursed wretch, who wast not content, blind guide as thou wast, to fall

into the ditch thyself, but hast also led us thither with thee.”

Richard Baxter, in his book *The Reformed Pastor*, amid many other solemn matters, writes as follows:

Take heed to yourselves lest you should be void of that saving grace of God which you offer to others, and be strangers to the effectual working of that gospel which you preach; and lest, while you proclaim the necessity of a Saviour to the world, your hearts should neglect him, and you should miss of an interest in him and his saving benefits. Take heed to yourselves, lest you perish while you call upon others to take heed of perishing, and lest you famish yourselves while you prepare their food. Though there be a promise of shining as stars to those that turn many to righteousness (Daniel 12:3), this is but on supposition that they be first turned to it themselves: such promises are made *ceteris paribus, et suppositis supponendis*. Their own sincerity in the faith is the condition of their glory simply considered, though their great ministerial labours may be a condition of the promise of their greater glory. Many men have warned others that they come not to that place of torment, which yet they hastened to themselves; many a preacher is now in hell, that hath an hundred times called upon his hearers to use the utmost care and diligence to escape it. Can any reasonable man imagine that God should save men for offering salvation to others, while they refused it

themselves, and for telling others those truths which they themselves neglected and abused?

Many a tailor goes in rags that maketh costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarce licks his fingers, when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes. Believe it, brethren, God never saved any man for being a preacher, nor because he was an able preacher; but because he was a justified, sanctified man, and consequently faithful in his Master's work. Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first, that you be that which you persuade others to be, and believe that which you persuade them daily to believe, and have heartily entertained that Christ and Spirit which you offer unto others. He that bade you love your neighbours as yourselves, did imply that you should love yourselves and not hate and destroy both yourselves and them.

My brethren, let these weighty sentences have due effect upon you. Surely there can be no need to add more, but let me pray you to examine yourselves and so make good use of what has been addressed to you.

Having settled this first matter of true religion, it is of the next importance to the minister that his piety, or godliness, be vigorous.

He is not to be content with being equal to the rank and file of Christians in general. He must be a mature and advanced believer, for the ministry of Christ has been truly called "the choicest of His choice,

the elect of His election, a church picked out of the church.” If he were called to an ordinary position, to common work, then common grace might perhaps satisfy him, though even then it would be an indolent satisfaction. But being elected to extraordinary labors and called to a place of unusual peril, he should be anxious to possess that superior strength which alone is adequate to his station. His pulse of vital godliness must beat strongly and regularly; his eye of faith must be bright; his foot of resolution must be firm; his hand of activity must be quick; his whole inner man must be in the highest degree of sanity.

It is said of the Egyptians that they chose their priests from the most learned of their philosophers, and then they esteemed their priests so highly that they chose their kings from them. We require to have for God’s ministers the pick of all the Christian host; such men indeed, that if the nation wanted kings, they could do no better than elevate them to the throne. Our weakest-minded, most timid, most carnal, and most ill-balanced men are not suitable candidates for the pulpit. There are some works which we should never allot to the invalid or deformed. A man may not be qualified for climbing lofty buildings, his brain may be too weak, and such elevated work might place him in great danger. By all means, let the unqualified man keep to the ground and find useful occupation where a steady brain is less important. There are brethren who

have comparable spiritual deficiencies, yet they cannot be called to a service which is visible and prominent, because their heads are too weak. If they were permitted a little success, they would be intoxicated with vanity – a vice all too common among ministers and, of all things, the least becoming in them and the most certain to secure them a fall. Should the time come that we as a nation be called to defend our hearths and homes, we would not send out our young children with swords and guns to meet the foe. Neither should the church send out every confident novice or inexperienced zealot to plead for the faith, for the fear of the Lord must teach the young man wisdom, or he is barred from the pastorate. The grace of God must mature his spirit, or he had better tarry till power be given him from on high.

The highest moral character must be zealously maintained. Many are disqualified for office in the church who are well enough as simple members. I hold very stern opinions with regard to Christian men who have fallen into gross sin. I rejoice that they may be truly converted and, with mingled hope and caution, received into the church, but I gravely question whether a man who has grossly sinned should be very readily restored to the pulpit. As John Angell James remarks, “When a preacher of righteousness has stood in the way of sinners, he should never again open his lips in the great congregation until his repentance is as notorious

as his sin.”

Let those who have been shorn by the sons of Ammon tarry at Jericho till their beards be grown. This has often been used as a taunt to beardless boys to whom it is evidently inapplicable. It is, however, an accurate-enough metaphor for dishonored and characterless men, no matter what their age may be. Alas! The beard of reputation once shorn is hard to grow again. In most cases, open immorality, however deep the repentance, is a fatal sign that ministerial graces were never in the man's character. Caesar's wife must be beyond suspicion, and there must be no ugly rumors as to ministerial inconsistency in the past, or the hope of usefulness will be slim. Into the church such fallen ones are to be received as penitents, and into the ministry they may be received if God puts them there. My doubt is not about that, but rather, did God ever place them there in the first place? And my belief is that we should be very slow to put men back into the pulpit who, having been once tried, have proved themselves to have too little grace to stand the crucial test of ministerial life.

For some work, we choose none but the strong, and when God does call us to ministerial labor, we should endeavor to get grace that we may be strengthened into fitness for our position, and not be mere novices carried away by the temptations of Satan, to the injury of the church and our own ruin. We are to

stand equipped with the whole armor of God, ready for feats of valor not expected of others. To us, self-denial, self-forgetfulness, patience, perseverance, and longsuffering must be everyday virtues. And who is sufficient for these things? We need to live very near to God if we would approve ourselves in our vocation.

Remember, as ministers, your whole life, especially your whole pastoral life, will be affected by the vigor of your piety. If your zeal grows dull, you will not pray well in the pulpit. You will pray even worse in the family, and worst while in study alone. When your soul becomes lean, your hearers without knowing how or why will find that your prayers in public have little savor for them. They may perhaps feel your barrenness before you perceive it yourself. Your discourses will then betray your decline. You may utter well-chosen words and fitly ordered sentences as before, but there will be a perceptible loss of spiritual force. You will shake yourselves as at other times, even as Samson did, but you will find that your great strength has departed. In your daily communion with your people, they will not be slow to mark the all-pervading decline of your graces. Sharp eyes will see the gray hairs here and there long before you do.

Let a man be afflicted with a disease of the heart, and all evils will be wrapped up in that one organ; stomach, lungs, internal organs, muscles, and nerves will all suffer. Likewise, let a man have his heart

weakened in spiritual things, and very soon his entire life will feel the withering influence. Moreover, as the result of your own decline, every one of your hearers will suffer more or less. The most vigorous amongst them will overcome the depressing tendency, but the weaker sort will be seriously damaged. It is the same with us and our hearers as it is with watches and the public clock. If *our* watch be wrong, very few besides ourselves will be misled by it, but if the Greenwich Observatory should go amiss, half of London would lose its reckoning. So it is with the minister; he is the parish clock. Many take their time from him, and if he be incorrect, they are all in danger of going off course, more or less. He is greatly accountable for all the sin which he causes. This we cannot endure to think of, my brethren. It will not bear a moment's comfortable consideration, yet it must be looked at if we would guard against it.

You must remember, too, that we have need of very vigorous piety, *because our danger is so much greater than that of others* . Upon the whole, no position is so attacked with temptation as the ministry. Despite the popular idea that ours is a snug retreat from temptation, it is no less true that our dangers are more numerous and more insidious than those of ordinary Christians. Our position may be advantageous ground for height, but that height is perilous, and to many the ministry has proved a Tarpeian rock. If you ask what

these temptations are, time might fail us to enumerate them, but among them are both the coarser and the more refined. The coarser are such temptations as self-indulgence at the table, enticements to which are superabundant among a hospitable people; or the temptations of the flesh, which are incessant with young unmarried men set on high by an admiring throng of young women, and so forth.

Your own observation will soon reveal to you a thousand snares, unless indeed your eyes are blinded. There are more secret snares than these from which we can less easily escape; and of these the worst is the temptation to *ministerialism* : the tendency to read our Bibles as *ministers* , to pray as *ministers* , to get into *doing* the whole of our religion not as ourselves personally, but only relatively concerned in it. To lose the personality of repentance and faith is a loss indeed. "No man," says John Owen, "preaches his sermon well to others if he doth not first preach it to his own heart." Brethren, it is eminently hard to hold to this. Our office, instead of helping our piety as some assert, is, through the evil of our natures, turned into one of its most serious hindrances; at least I find it so. How we kick and struggle against *officialism* ! And yet how easily it does beset us like a long garment which twists around the racer's feet and impedes his running! Beware, dear brethren, of this and all the other seductions of your calling, and if you have done so until now, continue

still to be on guard till life's latest hour.

We have noted only one of the perils, but indeed they are legion. The great Enemy of souls takes care to leave no stone unturned for the preacher's ruin. Baxter, again, gives good advice:

Take heed to yourselves, because the tempter will make his first and sharpest onset upon you. If you will be the leaders against him, he will spare you no further than God restraineth him. He beareth you the greatest malice that are engaged to do him the greatest mischief. As the devil hateth Christ more than any of us because Christ is the General of the field and the "Captain of our salvation," and doth more than all the world besides against the kingdom of darkness; so doth he note the leaders under him more than the common soldiers, on the like account, in their proportion.

He knows what a rout he may make among the rest, if the leaders fall before their eyes. He has long tried that way of fighting, *neither with small nor great*, comparatively, but these; and of "smiting the shepherds," that he may scatter the flock. And so great has been his success this way that he will follow it on as far as he is able. Take heed, therefore, brethren, for the enemy hath a special eye upon you. You shall have his most subtle insinuations, and incessant solicitations, and violent assaults. As wise and learned as you are, take heed to yourselves lest he outwit you.

The devil is a greater scholar than you, and a