LIFE FOR GOD

Lectures to My Students

Charles H. Spurgeon

THE ART OF PREACHING

Lecture 1. The Minister’s Self-Watch

First Series · Instalment 1



2026

LIFE FOR GOD

CHRISTIAN LIBRARY

Books in Russian and English, audio recordings, spiritual conversations and the Preacher’s Workshop.

Website

lifeforgod.church

Open the link or scan the QR code with your phone’s camera.

Read this book online

About this edition

First Series (1875). Instalment 1: the complete first lecture.

This is the complete first lecture, not the whole book. Translation of the remaining twelve lectures of the first series continues.

Russian translation prepared by Priest Sergey Koudy for Life for God.

The English transcription was collated with the Sheldon & Company printing (New York, 1875), pp. 11–34. Transcription errors were corrected, a Greek quotation restored, and the author’s footnote placed correctly. Historical wording and the transcription’s English usage are retained. The new Russian translation follows this English text.

The historical English text is in the public domain in the United States. Modern forewords, commentaries, and existing Russian translations are not included.

The theological judgments and historical examples are the author’s. Editorial notes are separate from the text. Paragraph numbers are provided for reference.

Read on Life for God →

Sources

C. H. Spurgeon, Lectures to My Students. New York: Sheldon & Company, 1875

Spurgeon HQ · First Series · The Minister’s Self-Watch (electronic transcription)

Contents

About this edition 2

Sources 2

Contents 3

Lecture 1. The Minister’s Self-Watch 4

Notes 28

Lecture 1. The Minister’s Self-Watch

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

2 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 axe, 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.

3 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 ax and weapons of war. M'Cheyne, writing to a ministerial friend, who was travelling 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."

4 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! Travelling 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.

5 IT SHOULD BE ONE OF OUR FIRST CARES THAT WE OURSELVES BE SAVED MEN.

6 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 honours have been connected rather with athletic exercises than with labours 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.

7 “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.

[8] 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 colours, 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.

9 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 honour 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?

10 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.

11 And *how unserviceable* such a man must be. He has to guide travellers 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.

12 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 marvellous 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.

13 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!

14 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 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

15 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 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.’”

[16] Richard Baxter, in his “Reformed Pastor,” amid much other solemn matter, 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 *caeteris 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 hasted 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."

[17] 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.

[18] This first matter of true religion being settled, IT IS OF THE NEXT IMPORTANCE TO THE MINISTER THAT HIS PIETY BE VIGOROUS.

[19] He is not to be content with being equal to the rank and file of Christians, 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, and to common work, common grace might perhaps satisfy him, though even then it would be an indolent satisfaction; but being elect to extraordinary labours, 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 not do 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 elevated work might place him in great danger; by all means let him keep on the ground and find useful occupation where a steady brain is less important: there are brethren who have

analogous spiritual deficiencies, they cannot be called to service which is conspicuous and elevated, 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 we as a nation be called to defend our hearths and homes, we should not send out our boys and girls with swords and guns to meet the foe, neither may the church send out every fluent novice or inexperienced zealot to plead for the faith. 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.

[20] The highest moral character must be sedulously 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 may be with mingled hope and caution received into the church; but I question, 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 an accurate enough metaphor for dishonored and characterless men, let their age be what it may. Alas! the beard of reputation once shorn is hard to grow again. Open immorality, in most cases, 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 slender. 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 as to whether God ever did place them there; and my belief is that we should be very slow to help back to the pulpit men, who having been once tried, have proved themselves to have too little grace to stand the crucial test of ministerial life.

21 For some work we choose none but the strong; and when God calls us to ministerial labour we should endeavour 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 armour of God, ready for feats of valour not expected of others: to us self-denial, self-forgetfulness, patience, perseverance, longsuffering, must be every-day virtues, and who is sufficient for these things? We had need live very near to God, if we would approve ourselves in our vocation.

22 Recollect, as ministers, that your whole life, your whole pastoral life especially, will be affected by the vigour of your piety. If your zeal grows dull, you will not pray well in the pulpit; you will pray worse in the family, and worst in the study alone. When your soul becomes lean, your hearers, without knowing how or why, will find that your prayers in public have little savour for them; they will feel your barrenness, perhaps, before you perceive it yourself. Your discourses will next betray your declension. You may utter as well-chosen words, and as fitly-ordered sentences, as

aforetime; 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 grey hairs here and there long before you do. Let a man be afflicted with a disease of the heart, and all evils are wrapped up in that one — stomach, lungs, viscera, muscles, and nerves will all suffer; and so 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, everyone of your hearers will suffer more or less; the vigorous amongst them will overcome the depressing tendency, but the weaker sort will be seriously damaged. It is with us and our hearers as it is with watches and the public clock; if our watch be wrong, very few will be misled by it but ourselves; but if the Horse Guards or Greenwich Observatory should go amiss, half London would lose its reckoning. So is it with the minister; he is the parish-clock, many take their time from him, and if he be incorrect, then they all go wrongly, more or less, and he is in a great measure accountable for all the sin which he occasions. This we cannot endure to think of, my brethren. It will not bear a moment’s comfortable consideration, and yet it must be looked at that we may guard against it.

23 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 place is so assailed 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. Ours may be a vantage-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 particularize 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; the temptations of the flesh, which are incessant with young unmarried men set on high among an admiring throng of young women: but enough of this, 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 as not 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 keep 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 one kicks and struggles against officialism, and yet how easily doth it 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 watch till life’s latest hour. We have noted but 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. “Take heed to yourselves,” says Baxter, “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 he hateth Christ more than any of us, because he 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 hath 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 overwit you. The devil is a greater scholar than you, and a nimbler disputant; he can ‘transform himself into an angel of light’ to deceive, he will get within you and trip up your heels before you are aware; he will play the juggler with you undiscerned, and cheat you of your faith or innocency, and you shall not know that you have lost it: nay, he will make you believe it is multiplied or increased when it is lost. You shall see neither hook nor line, much less the subtle angler himself, while he is offering you his bait. And his baits shall be so fitted to your temper and disposition, that he will be sure to find advantages within you, and make your own principles and inclinations to betray you; and whenever he ruineth you, he will make you the instrument of your own ruin. Oh, what a conquest will he think he hath got, if he can make a minister lazy and unfaithful; if he can tempt a minister into covetousness or scandal! He will glory against the church, and say, ‘These are your holy preachers: you see what their preciseness is, and whither it will bring them.” He

will glory against Jesus Christ himself, and say, ‘These are thy champions! I can make thy chiefest servants to abuse thee; I can make the stewards of thy house unfaithful.’ If he did so insult against God upon a false surmise, and tell him he could make Job to curse him to his face (Job 1:2), what would he do if he should indeed prevail against us? And at last he will insult as much over you that ever he could draw you to be false to your great trust, and to blemish your holy profession, and to do him so much service that was your enemy. O do not so far gratify Satan; do not make him so much sport: suffer him not to use you as the Philistines did Samson — first to deprive you of your strength, and then to put out your eyes, and so to make you the matter of his triumph and derision.”

[24] Once more. We must cultivate the highest degree of godliness *because our work imperatively requires it.* The labour of the Christian ministry is well performed in exact proportion to the vigour of our renewed nature. Our work is only well done when it is well with ourselves. As is the workman, such will the work be. To face the enemies of truth, to defend the bulwarks of the faith, to rule well in the house of God, to comfort all that mourn, to edify the saints, to guide the perplexed, to bear with the froward, to win and nurse souls — all these and a thousand other works beside are not for a Feeble-mind or a Ready-to-halt, but are reserved for Great-heart whom the Lord has made strong for himself. Seek then strength from the Strong One, wisdom from the Wise One, in fact, all from the God of all.

[25] Thirdly, let the minister take care THAT HIS PERSONAL CHARACTER AGREES IN ALL RESPECTS WITH HIS MINISTRY.

[26] We have all heard the story of the man who preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again. From the imitation of such a Janus may the Lord deliver us. May we never be priests of God at the altar, and sons of Belial outside the tabernacle door; but on the contrary, may we, as Nazianzen says of Basil, “thunder in our doctrine, and lighten in our conversation.” We do not trust those persons who have two faces, nor will men believe in those whose verbal and practical testimonies are contradictory. As actions, according to the proverb, speak louder than words, so an ill life will effectually drown the voice of the most eloquent ministry. After all, our truest building must be performed with our hands; our characters must be more persuasive than our speech. Here I would not alone warn you of sins of commission, but of sins of omission. Too many preachers forget to serve God when they are out of the pulpit, their lives are negatively inconsistent. Abhor, dear brethren, the thought of being clockwork ministers who are not alive by abiding grace within, but are wound up by temporary influences; men who are only ministers for the time being, under the stress of the hour of ministering, but cease to be ministers when they descend the pulpit stairs. True ministers are always ministers. Too many preachers are like those sand-toys we buy for our children; you turn the box upside down, and the little acrobat revolves and revolves till the sand is all run down, and then he hangs motionless; so there are some who persevere in the ministrations of truth as

long as there is an official necessity for their work, but after that, no pay, no paternoster; no salary, no sermon.

27 It is a horrible thing to be an inconsistent minister. Our Lord is said to have been like Moses, for this reason, that he was “a prophet mighty in word and in deed.” The man of God should imitate his Master in this; he should be mighty both in the word of his doctrine and in the deed of his example, and mightiest, if possible, in the second. It is remarkable that the only church history we have is, “*The Acts* of the apostles.” The Holy Spirit has not preserved their sermons. They were very good ones, better than we shall ever preach, but still the Holy Spirit has only taken care of their “acts.” We have no books of the resolutions of the apostles; when we hold our church-meetings we record our minutes and resolutions, but the Holy Spirit only puts down the “acts.” Our acts should be such as to bear recording, for recorded they will be. We must live as under the more immediate eye of God, and as in the blaze of the great all-revealing day.

28 Holiness in a minister is at once his chief necessity and his goodliest ornament. Mere moral excellence is not enough, there must be the higher virtue; a consistent character there must be, but this must be anointed with the sacred consecrating oil, or that which makes us most fragrant to God and man will be wanting. Old John Stoughton, in his treatise entitled “The Preacher’s Dignity and Duty,” insists upon the minister’s holiness in sentences full of weight “If Uzzah must die but for *touching the ark of God,* and that to stay it when it was like to fall; if the men of Beth-shemesh for *looking into it;* if the very beasts that do but come near the holy mount be threatened; then what manner of persons ought they to be who shall be admitted to talk with God familiarly, to ‘stand before him,’ as the angels do, and ‘behold

his face continually;' 'to bear the ark upon their shoulders,' 'to bear his name before the Gentiles;' in a word, to be his ambassadors? 'Holiness becometh thy house, O Lord;' and were it not a ridiculous thing to imagine, that the vessels must be holy, the vestures must be holy, all must be holy, but only he upon whose very garments must be written 'holiness to the Lord,' might be unholy; that the bells of the horses should have an inscription of holiness upon them, in Zechariah, and the saints' bells, the bells of Aaron, should be unhallowed? No, they must be 'burning and shining lights,' or else their influence will dart some malignant quality; they must 'chew the cud and divide the hoof,' or else they are unclean; they must 'divide the word aright,' and walk uprightly in their life, and so join life to learning. If holiness be wanting, the ambassadors dishonor the country from whence they come, and the prince from whom they come; and this dead Amasa, this dead doctrine not quickened with a good life, lying in the way, stops the people of the Lord, that they cannot go on cheerfully in their spiritual warfare."

[29] The life of the preacher should be a magnet to draw men to Christ, and it is sad indeed when it keeps them from him. Sanctity in ministers is a loud call to sinners to repent, and when allied with holy cheerfulness it becomes wondrously attractive. Jeremy Taylor in his own rich language tell us, "Herod's doves could never have invited so many strangers to their dovecotes, if they had not been besmeared with opobalsamum: but, *ἐὰν μύρῳ χρίσῃς τὰς περιστερὰς, καὶ ἔξωθεν ἄλλας ἄξουσιν*, said Didymus; 'make your pigeons smell sweet, and they will allure whole flocks;' and if your life be excellent, if your virtues be like a precious ointment, you will soon invite your charges to run '*in odorem unguentorum,*' 'after your precious odors:' but you must be excellent, not '*tanquam unus de populo,*' but '*tanquam homo*

Dei;' you must be a man of God, not after the common manner of men, but 'after God's own heart;' and men will strive to be like you, if you be like to God: but when you only stand at the door of virtue, for nothing but to keep sin out, you will draw into the folds of Christ none but such as fear drives in. '*Ad majorem Dei gloriam*' To do what will most glorify God,' that is the line you must walk by: for to do no more than all men needs must is servility, not so much as the affection of sons; much less can you be fathers to the people, when you go not so far as the sons of God: for a dark lantern, though there be a weak brightness on one side, will scarce enlighten one, much less will it conduct a multitude, or allure many followers by the brightness of its flame."

[30] Another equally admirable episcopal divine[1] has well and pithily said, "The star which led the wise men unto Christ, the pillar of fire which led the children unto Canaan, did not only shine, but go before them. (Matthew 2:9; Exodus 13:21.) The voice of Jacob will do little good if the hands be the hands of Esau. In the law, no person who had any blemish was to offer the oblations of the Lord (Leviticus 21:17-20); the Lord thereby teaching us what graces ought to be in his ministers. The priest was to have in his robes bells and pomegranates; the one a figure of sound doctrine, and the other of a fruitful life. (Exodus 28:33, 34.) The Lord will be sanctified in all those that draw near unto him (Isaiah 52:11); for the sins of the priests make the people abhor the offering of the Lord (1 Samuel 2:17); their wicked lives do shame their doctrine; *Passionem Christi annunciant profitendo, male agendo exhonorant,* as St. Austin speaks: with their doctrine they build, and with their lives they destroy. I conclude this point with that wholesome passage of *Hierom ad Nepotianum.* Let not, saith he, thy works shame thy doctrine, lest they who hear thee in the church tacitly answer, Why doest thou not

thyself what thou teachest to others? He is too delicate a teacher who persuadeth others to fast with a full belly. A robber may accuse covetousness. *Sacerdotis Christi os, mens, manusque concordent;* a minister of Christ should have his tongue, and his heart, and his hand agree."

[31] Very quaint also is the language of Thomas Playfere In his "Say Well, Do Well." "There was a ridiculous actor in the city of Smyrna, who, pronouncing *O coelum!* O heaven! pointed with his finger towards the ground; which when Polemo, the chiefest man in the place, saw, he could abide to stay no longer, but went from the company in a great chafe, saying 'This fool hath made a solecism with his hand, he has spoken false Latin with his finger.' And such are they who *teach* well and *do* ill; that however they have *heaven* at their tongue's end, yet the *earth* is at their finger's end; such as do not only speak false Latin with their tongue, but false divinity with their hands; such as live not according to their preaching. But he that sits in the heaven will laugh them to scorn, and hiss them off the stage, if they do not mend their action."

[32] Even in little things the minister should take care that his life is consistent with his ministry. He should be especially careful never to fall short of his word. This should be pushed even to scrupulosity; We cannot be too careful; truth must not only be in us, but shine from us. A celebrated doctor of divinity in London, who is now in heaven I have no doubt — a very excellent and godly man — gave notice one Sunday that he intended to visit all his people, and said, that in order to be able to get round and visit them and their families once in the year, he should take all the seatholders in order. A person well known to me, who was then a poor man, was delighted with the idea that the minister was coming to his house to see him, and about a week or two before he conceived it would be

his turn, his wife was very careful to sweep the hearth and keep the house tidy, and the man ran home early from work, hoping each night to find the doctor there. This went on for a considerable time. He either forgot his promise, or grew weary in performing it, or for some other reason never went to this poor man’s house, and the result was this, the man lost confidence in all preachers, and said, “They care for the rich, but they do not care for us who are poor.” That man never settled down to any one place of worship for many years, till at last he dropped into Exeter Hall and remained my hearer for years till providence removed him. It was no small task to make him believe that any minister could be an honest man, and could impartially love both rich and poor. Let us avoid doing such mischief, by being very particular as to our word.

33 We must remember that we are very much looked at. Men hardly have the impudence to break the law in the open sight of their fellows, yet in such publicity we live and move. We are watched by a thousand eagle eyes; let us so act that we shall never need to care if all heaven, and earth, and hell, swelled the list of spectators. Our public position is a great gain if we are enabled to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit in our lives; take heed, brethren, that you throw not away the advantage.

34 When we say to you, my dear brethren, take care of your life, we mean be careful of even the minutiae of your character. Avoid little debts, unpunctuality, gossipping, nicknaming, petty quarrels, and all other of those little vices which fill the ointment with flies. The self-indulgences which have lowered the repute of many must not be tolerated by us. The familiarities which have laid others under suspicion, we must chastely avoid. The roughnesses which have rendered

some obnoxious, and the fopperies which have made others contemptible, we must put away. We cannot afford to run great risks through little things. Our care must be to act on the rule, “giving no offence in anything, that the ministry be not blamed.”

35 By this is not intended that we are to hold ourselves bound by every whim or fashion of the society in which we move. As a general rule I hate the fashions of society, and detest conventionalities, and if I conceived it best to put my foot through a law of etiquette, I should feel gratified in having it to do. No, we are men, not slaves; and are not to relinquish our manly freedom, to be the lacqueys of those who affect gentility or boast refinement. Yet, brethren, anything that verges upon the coarseness which is akin to sin, we must shun as we would a viper. The rules of Chesterfield are ridiculous to us, but not the example of Christ; and he was never coarse, low, discourteous, or indelicate.

36 Even in your recreations, remember that you are ministers. When you are off the parade you are still officers in the army of Christ, and as such demean yourselves. But if the lesser things must be looked after, how careful should you be in the great matters of morality, honesty, and integrity! Here the minister must not fail. His private life must ever keep good tune with his ministry, or his day will soon set with him, and the sooner he retires the better, for his continuance in his office will only dishonor the cause of God and ruin himself.

37 Brethren, the limits of a lecture are reached, and we must adjourn.

Notes

1. Bishop Reynolds. Spurgeon’s note identifies the theologian quoted here. ↑

2. The 1875 printing gives Job 1:2. The challenge described is in Job 1:11; compare 2:5. The inaccurate reference is retained from the original. ↑

3. The words about God being sanctified in those who draw near correspond to Leviticus 10:3. The historical printing cites Isaiah 52:11, which concerns the purity of those bearing the Lord’s vessels. Its reference is retained. ↑

4. The contrast between the apostles’ acts and their sermons is rhetorical. Acts contains speeches by Peter, Stephen, Paul, and others; Spurgeon’s words should not be taken as a literal denial of this. ↑

5. Feeble-mind, Ready-to-halt, and Great-heart are allegorical characters in Part II of John Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress. Spurgeon uses their names as images of spiritual weakness and strength. ↑

6. The Tarpeian Rock was a cliff on Rome’s Capitoline Hill from which condemned people were thrown. Here it is an image of an elevated position becoming a place of destruction. ↑

7. Amasa was a commander killed by Joab. His body, lying in the road, caused passing soldiers to stop (2 Samuel 20:9–13). ↑

LIFE FOR GOD

CHRISTIAN LIBRARY

Books in Russian and English, audio recordings, spiritual conversations and the Preacher’s Workshop.

Website

lifeforgod.church

Open the link or scan the QR code with your phone’s camera.

Read this book online