

«Take Heed to Yourselves...»

from Richard Baxter's «The Reformed Pastor»¹

Richard Baxter (1615—91), Puritan, minister of Kidderminster in Worcestershire, author of *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*, tireless worker for Church unity in England. His portrayal of *The Reformed Pastor* (1656) has exercised a profound influence on the understanding of the pastor's calling in subsequent centuries.

¹ This extract is a slightly abridged version of part of Ch. 1 (pp. 70-80 of edition of London, 1860).

Let us next consider, What it is to take heed to ourselves, and wherein it must be done. And here I may well, for brevity sake, adjoin the application to the explication. Take, therefore, I beseech you, all this explication, as so much advice and exhortation to the duty, and let your hearts attend it as well as your understandings.

1. *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 workings of that gospel which you preach; and lest while you proclaim the necessity of a Saviour to the world, your own 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 the stars to those that turn many to righteousness, (Dan. 12:3) that is but on supposition that they be first turned to it themselves: such promises are meant, all other things being equal. 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 a man has 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 has 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 makes costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers, when he has 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 your hearers 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 bid you love your neighbours as yourselves, did imply that you should love yourselves and not hate and destroy yourselves and them.

2. *Take heed to yourselves, lest you live in those actual sins which you preach against in others;* and lest you be guilty of that which daily you condemn. Will you make it your work to magnify God, and when you have done, dishonour Him as much as others? Will you proclaim Christ's governing power, and yet contemn it, and rebel yourselves? Will you preach His laws, and wilfully break them? If sin be evil, why do you live in it? If it be not, why do you dissuade

men from it? if it be dangerous, how dare you venture on it? if it be not, why do you tell men so? If God's threatenings be true, why do you not fear them? if they be false, why do you trouble men needlessly with them, and put them into such frights without a cause? Do you know the judgment of God, that they that commit such things are worthy of death, and yet will you do them? (Rom. 1:32) Thou that teachest another, teachest thou not thyself? Thou that sayest a man should not commit adultery, or be drunk, or covetous, art thou such thyself? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonourest thou God? (Rom. 2:21-3) What! shall the same tongue speak evil that speaks against evil? Shall it censure and slander, and secretly backbite, that cries down these and the like in others? Take heed to yourselves, lest you cry down sin and not overcome it; lest while you seek to bring it down in others, you bow to it, and become its slaves yourselves. For of whom a man is overcome, of the same is he brought into bondage. (2 Pet. 2:19) To whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are to whom you obey, whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness. (Rom. 6:16) It is easier to chide at sin than to overcome it.

3. *Take heed also to yourselves, that you be not unfit for the great employments that you have undertaken.* He must not be himself a babe in knowledge that will teach

men all those mysterious things that are to be known in order to salvation. Oh, what qualifications are necessary for that man that has such a charge upon him as we have! How many difficulties in divinity to be opened! yea, about the fundamentals that must needs be known! How many obscure texts of Scripture to be expounded! How many duties to be done, wherein ourselves and others may miscarry, if in the matter, and end, and manner, and circumstances they be not well informed! How many sins to be avoided, which without understanding and foresight cannot be done! What a number of sly and subtle temptations must we open to our people's eyes, that they may escape them! How many weighty and yet intricate cases of conscience have we almost daily to resolve! Can so much work, and such work as this, be done by raw, unqualified men? Oh, what strongholds have we to batter, and how many of them! What subtle, and diligent, and obstinate resistance must we expect at every heart we deal with! Prejudice has blocked up our way; we can scarcely procure a patient hearing. They think ill of what we say while we are speaking it. We cannot make a breach in their groundless hopes and carnal peace, but they have twenty shifts and seeming reasons to make it up again; and twenty enemies that are seeming friends are ready to help them. We dispute not with them upon equal terms, but we have children to reason with that

cannot understand us; we have distracted men (in spirituals) to reason with, that will bawl us down with raging nonsense: we have wilful, unreasonable people to deal with, that when they are silenced they are never the more convinced; and when they can give you no reason, they will give you their resolution. We dispute the case against men's wills and sensual passions, as much as against their understandings; and these have neither reason nor ears: their best arguments are, «I will not believe you, nor all the preachers in the world in such things. I will not change my mind or life: I will not leave my sins; I will never be so precise, come on it what will.» We have not one, but multitudes of raging passions and contradicting enemies to dispute against at once, whenever we go about the conversion of a sinner; as if a man were to dispute in a fair or tumult, or in the midst of a crowd of violent scolds; what equal dealing, and what success were here to be expected? Why, such is our work, and yet a work that must be done.

SO GREAT A TASK

O dear brethren, what men should we be in skill, resolution, and unwearied diligence, that have all this to do! Did Paul cry out, «Who is sufficient for these things?» (2 Cor. 2:16) and shall we be proud, or careless and lazy as if we were sufficient? As Peter says to every Christian, in consideration of our great approaching change, (2 Peter

3:11) «What manner of persons ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness?» so may I say to every minister, Seeing all these things lie upon our hands, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy endeavours and resolutions for our work! This is not a burden for the shoulder of a child. What skill does every part of our work require, and of how much moment is every part! To preach a sermon, I think, is not the hardest part; and yet what skill is necessary to make plain the truth, to convince the hearers; to let in the irresistible light into their consciences, and to keep it there, and drive all home; to screw the truth into their minds, and work Christ into their affections; to meet every objection that gainsays, and clearly to resolve it; to drive sinners to a stand, and make them see there is no hope, but they must unavoidably be converted or condemned: and to do all this so for language and manner as beseems our work, and yet as is most suitable to the capacities of our hearers; this, and a great deal more that should be done in every sermon, should surely be done with a great deal of holy skill. So great a God, whose message we deliver, should be honoured by our delivery of it. It is a lamentable case, that in a message from the God of heaven, of everlasting consequence to the souls of men, we should behave ourselves so weakly, so unhand-somely, so imprudently, or so slightly, that the whole business should

miscarry in our hands, and God be dishonoured, and His work disgraced, and sinners rather hardened than converted, and all this much through our weakness or neglect! How many a time have carnal hearers gone jeering home at the palpable and dishonourable failings of the preacher! How many sleep under us, because our hearts and tongues are sleepy; and we bring not with us so much skill and zeal as to awake them!

O brethren! do you not shrink and tremble under the sense of all this work? Will a common measure of holy skill, and ability of prudence, and other qualifications, serve for such a task as this? I know necessity may cause the Church to tolerate the weak; but woe to us if we tolerate and indulge our own weakness. Do not reason and conscience tell you, that, if you dare venture on so high a work as this, you should spare no pains to be fitted to perform it? It is not now and then an idle snatch or taste of studies that will serve to make a sound divine. I know that laziness has lately learned to pretend the low-ness of all our studies, and how wholly and only the Spirit must qualify and assist us to the work. As if God commanded us the use of the means, and then would warrant us to neglect them! As if it were His way to cause us to thrive in a course of idleness, and to bring us to knowledge by dreams when we are asleep; or to take us up into heaven, and shew us His

counsels, while we think of no such matter, but are rooting in the earth. Oh, that men should dare so sinfully, by their laziness, to quench the Spirit, and then pretend the Spirit for the doing of it. God has required of us that we be «not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord.» (Rom. 12:11) Such we must provoke our hearers to be, and such we must be ourselves. Oh, therefore, brethren, lose no time: study, and pray, and confer, and practise; for by these four ways your abilities must be increased. Take heed to yourselves, lest you are weak through your own negligence, and lest you mar the work of God by your weakness. «As man is, so is his strength.» (Judges 8:21)

4. *Moreover, take heed to yourselves, lest your example contradict your doctrine,* and lest you lay such stumbling-blocks before the blind as may be the occasion of their ruin; lest you may unsay that with your lives which you say with your tongues, and be the greatest hinderers of the success of your own labours. It much hinders our work, when other men are, all the week long, contradicting, to poor people in private, that which we have been speaking to them from the Word of God in public; because we cannot be at hand to manifest their folly: but it will much more hinder if we contradict ourselves, and if your actions give your tongue the lie, and if you build up an hour or two with your mouths, and all the week after pull down with your

hands! This is the way to make men think that the Word of God is but an idle tale, and to make preaching seem no better than prating. He that means as he speaks will surely do as he speaks. One proud, surly, lordly word, one needless contention, one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon, and blast the fruit of all that you have been doing. Tell me, brethren, in the fear of God, do you regard the success of your labours, or do you not? Do you long to see it upon the souls of your hearers? If you do not, what do you preach for, what do you study, and what do you call yourselves the ministers of Christ for? But if you do, then surely you cannot find in your heart to mar your work for a thing of nought! What! do you regard the success of your labours, and yet will not part with a little to the poor, nor put up with an injury or a foul word, nor stoop to the meanest, nor forbear your passionate or lordly carriage—no, not for the winning of souls and attaining the end of all your labours? You much regard the success, indeed, that will sell it at so cheap a rate, or will not do so small a matter to attain it!

DIVORCE BETWEEN PREACHING AND PRACTICE

It is a palpable error in those ministers that make such a disproportion between their preaching and their living, that they will study hard to preach exactly, and study little or not at all to live exactly.

All the week long is little enough to study how to speak two hours; and yet one hour seems too much to study how to live all the week. They are loath to misplace a word in their sermons, or to be guilty of any notable infirmity, (and I blame them not, for the matter is holy and of weight;) but they make nothing of misplacing affections, words, and actions in the course of their lives. Oh, how carefully have I heard some men preach, and how carelessly have I seen them live! They have been so accurate as to the wordy part in their own preparations, that seldom preaching seemed a virtue to them, that their language might be the more polite; and all the rhetorical, jingling writers they could meet with were pressed to serve them for the adorning of their style, and gauds were oft their chiefest ornaments. They were so nice in hearing others, that no man pleased them that spoke as he thought, or that drowned not affections, or dulled not or distempered not the heart, by the predominant strains of a fantastic wit. And yet, when it came to matter of practice, and they were once out of church, how careless were the men, and how little did they regard what they said or did, so it were not so palpably gross as to dishonour them! They that preached precisely would not live precisely! What difference between their pulpit speeches and their familiar discourse! They that are most impatient of barbarisms, solecisms, and paralogisms, in a

sermon, can easily tolerate them in their conversations. Certainly, brethren, we have very great cause to take heed what we do as well as what we say. If we be the servants of Christ indeed, we must not be tongue servants only, but must serve Him with our deeds, «and be doers of the word, that in our deed we may be blessed.» (James 1:25) As our people must be «doers of the word, and not hearers only,» so we must be doers, and not speakers only, lest we be «deceivers of ourselves.» (James 1:22) A practical doctrine must be practically preached. We must study as hard how to live well as how to preach well. We must think and think again how to compose our lives as may most tend to men's salvation, as well as our sermons. When you are studying what to say to them, I know these are your thoughts, or else they are naught and to no purpose, «How should I get within them? and what shall I say that is likely most effectually to convince them, and convert them, and tend to their salvation?» And should you not diligently bethink yourselves, «How shall I live, and what shall I say and do, and how shall I dispose of all that I have, as may most probably tend to the saving of men's souls?» Brethren, if saving souls be your end, you will certainly intend it as well out of the pulpit as in it. If it be your end, you will live for it, and contribute all your endeavours to attain it; and if you do so, you will as well ask con-

cerning the money in your purse as the words of your mouth, «Which way should I lay it out for the greatest good, especially to men's souls?» Oh that this were your daily study — how to use your wealth, your friends, and all you have for God, as well as your tongues! And then we should see that fruit of your labours which is never else likely to be seen. If you intend the end of the ministry in the pulpit only, then it seems you take yourselves for ministers no longer than you are there; and then I think you are unworthy to be esteemed such at all.