

A Minister's Obstacles

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Chapter 9 -

THE PERIL OF PRIVILEGE

"The Christian in name has in recent years been growing cold in his devotion. Our achievement in perfecting life's material apparatus has produced a mood of self-confidence and pride. Our peril has been indifference, and that is a grave peril, for rust will crumble a metal when hammer blows will only harden it. I believe - and this is my crowning optimism - that the challenge with which we are now faced may restore to us that manly humility which alone gives power. It may bring us back to GOD. In that case our victory is assured. The Faith is an anvil which has worn out many hammers."

- John Buchan Lord Tweedsmuir.

"Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall." - Paul.

IT IS A TRUISM oft quoted that a church never rises higher than its ministry. We may object to the censure, yet in the experience of the culture of the spiritual life we are set as an example. Whenever ministers meet in conference to discuss the manifold problems confronting the church, rarely is the scrutiny of causes carried to the inner life of the preacher. Undoubtedly we are the key to the situation, for what man of us has found ourselves sufficient for the ministry? As we ponder the lives and labours of those who are given a place in the Bible, there is this noteworthy disclosure, that they were men of like passions and ready to confess their own shortcomings and sins, even as they were identified with the people. Hear Ezra (9:6) pray: **"O my God, I am ashamed . . ."** And (10:1): **"When Ezra had prayed, and when he had confessed, weeping and casting himself down before the house of God . . ."** Or Daniel 9:20, **"whiles I was speaking, and praying, and confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my supplication before the Lord my GOD . . ."**

These and many others are on record as having a sensitiveness of spirit with reference to themselves, and thus continually were cast upon GOD for His aid and grace.

The man of GOD must needs be conscious of that uprising of unrest with himself, his attainments and labours. Do we incline to assume that our work is well-established and well-ordered, and therefore successful? Are we settled upon our lees? Are we blinded by statistics, numbers, attendances at services, the initiation and maintenance of organizations? We may excel at mechanics and fail in dynamics. We may lose the vision of infinite possibilities and no longer dream our dreams or pray for that to-morrow which ought to lure us on by constant challenge and demand upon our best dedication. Our state becomes perilous when the divine discontent is

lost.

Here we touch the aspirations of life. Why do we serve the CHRIST in this ministry? Alas! it is no longer possible to assume that every man in the pulpit is there because of a sense of vocation. Other factors have entered to induce some men to give themselves to this calling and service. There may be a humanitarian urge to help the world, or the idea that this sheltered and favoured calling is best suited to one's personal gifts and temperament. Are there not students in colleges and universities, as well as some men in the ordained ministry, who confess they do not know the supreme spiritual aspiration of a divine call; know nothing of the divine constraint and urge to preach the Gospel; are ignorant of what our forefathers spoke of as a passion for souls, and certainly are never at the heart of Richard Baxter's oft-quoted words about preaching "as a dying man to dying men"?

A friend of Baxter's, Samuel Corbyn, wrote to him from Trinity College, Cambridge, deeply concerned about the spiritual condition of the ministry in the seventeenth century, and mentioned "the monstrous sin of taking up ye ministry without experimental acquaintance with CHRIST. 'Tis ye crying sin of ye University: for which I who see it could even breake my heart." Surely it is a damning sin for anyone to enter, upon the sacred calling without the Spirit's stirring within.

That awareness of grace in the soul must lead a man to search his motives. Let them be honourable and God-pleasing with a zeal for holy and high ideals in character and conduct: such will enable one to keep watch over the citadel wherein we truly live and move and have our being. Ministerial fidelity and diligence are prerequisites to the salvation of our ministry and them that hear us. There is a girding up of the loins of our mind. Self-denials will be exacted from us, for hard studies, much knowledge, intellectual stimulation, and excellent preaching are but more sinning if the end be not right.

Here is where we must guard against certain moods in which we become unreasonable. These should not be confused with the transfiguring experience of the vision of GOD and the pity felt with tragic deeps for a lost world to-day. Moodiness may be temperamental: it is to make us unreliable and lacking in control. Some of us are very touchy. We need to pray to be delivered from the sensitiveness of self-love which is dishonouring to GOD, even as we pray for the sensitivenesses of spirit which is able to sympathize with the suffering and sinning. What if our moods are just bad manners after all? Moods have been classified with respectable vices because they make many good folk unlovely and useless in the witness of the ministry. By sulking at life a minister is lacking in this self-criticism which is the spur to spiritual progress.

A luminous example of genuine progress through the 'divine discontent' was Paderewski, the eminent pianist. His biographer informs us that the master's life was a story of power realised through self-discipline. His spirit chafed from an unease of which he suffered all his life. It was his own limitations that drove him on. He grew and grew in the art and knowledge of his profession. He was never done searching for new tone depths in the interpretations of the masters. There was the impulse to go back to work and perfect himself. What of our ministry?

We do well to consider that we are not labouring like other men in the markets of the world, but are freed from that in order to labour the more assiduously at our heavenly craft. What privileges are ours! We talk with the learned and the spiritually favoured, when others must be content with lesser lights. We have a week of sabbaths in which to feed upon the glories of the Christian way,

whereas others have but one day in the week for worship and meditation. We have the seclusion of our study or sanctuary in which we share the stimulus of choice spirits through a library and find delight in delving deeply into the treasury of truth revealed by GOD. Truly, we are men set apart, so that our opportunities bring us the greater responsibilities. It is James who warns against the self-seeking of becoming a teacher: we stand in the greater condemnation.

With these privileges lies the danger of worldliness attacking us. This is not something of gross action without, but of subtle atmosphere within. The environment of heavenly things is too readily invaded by the miasma of the spirit of the age. It is a lowering of the spiritual sense, that check on spiritual vitality, even as we engage in the exposition of the spiritual. It is an enervation of spirit due to the lowering of high standards and principles for the questionable canker of slackness and perfunctoriness. A man may be worldly in preaching the Gospel! Ours is the inestimable privilege of a life apart in studying and preaching CHRIST, to search into GOD's mysteries and to be daily considering His works and ways in the souls of men. We surely need to live "**in the Spirit**" as the antidote to the spirit of this age.

As we engage in the outward exercise of proclaiming the Evangel, habits of life count. There are vital moments preparatory to all service and public work. Paderewski's custom as a master musician is revealing and in line with our plea to give our best and defeat temptation. For many years it was his custom to retire immediately before a concert to the dressing-room of the stage where he appeared, there to remain undisturbed for a space of time, that he might collect himself, compose himself, prepare himself in absolute silence and solitary self-communion for his performance. Habit of years made this period of collection twenty minutes. In that twenty minutes he relaxed from all thoughts that would intrude upon the task before him, withdrew from every outward distraction, summoned all his inward forces to focus on the music he was about to play. In like manner, the minister may realize that his life is "**hid with Christ in God**" (Colossians 3:3), and that his task demands a like attention in habit, making possible the presentation of a body and mind and spirit as the fit vehicle of spiritual grace and illumination.

That "**our sufficiency is of GOD who also hath made us able ministers of the new testament**" is evident when we are confronted with these temptations. We must prove the sufficiency of our Lord and Master. Richard Baxter writes in *The Reformed Pastor*:

"Too many that have set their hand to this sacred work, do so obstinately proceed in self-seeking, negligence, pride, division and other sins, that it is become our necessary duty to admonish them . . . How can we more effectually further a reformation (which we are obliged to do) than by endeavouring the reforming of the leaders of the Church?"

Our Puritan mentor of the seventeenth century is admittedly correct in urging that the shepherd of the flock must be an exemplar to others: "all churches either rise or fall as the ministry doth rise or fall - not in riches or worldly grandeur - but in knowledge, zeal, and ability for their work." Yes, and also in experimental heart knowledge of sin and its remedy at the hands of the Divine Physician. The New Testament is clear and emphatic that "**sin shall not have dominion over you**" with the provision made in CHRIST. What is the meaning of those sublime utterances? - "**Woe is me if I preach not the Gospel!**" "**I have been crucified with Christ.**" "**It pleased God, who... called me by his grace, to reveal his Son in me, that I might preach him.**" A mysticism is postulated, but it is not mistiness, for here is the testimony of one who has

far been with CHRIST, knowing the plentitude of power as the index of our spiritual resources.

There will always be tests and temptations, but the experience of the abundant life guarantees a sufficient mead of divine grace to purify the heart, cleanse the motives, control our aspirations, that we might be "**filled with all the fulness of God.**" Through prayer, self-mortification, repeated humbling, there will come an hour when a baptised intellect is made to catch fire with CHRIST as Lord. This is the key to the situation in the ministry and in the Church. Better men: men overcoming the subtle temptations of our calling, men who go forth endued with spiritual unction and power, men who "**sanctify the Lord God in your hearts**" (1 Peter 3:15). If this be the hub of the wheel, the centre of conviction, a man will not fail to appropriate the adequate resources in CHRIST, and he will not be side-tracked.

The writer can never forget the wise counsel at his ordination given out of ripe experience. Among many outstanding things were these:

"To keep the motives pure, the faith strong, the aim high. To be responsible first and last as a servant to the Lord. To remember the experimental knowledge of CHRIST, which counts as well as any intellectual knowledge in preaching CHRIST, to preach to the people the most exalted things concerning this life and the next, concerning sin and grace, concerning impenitence and judgment, concerning Christian character and service. To preach the great things: feeding the people with the finest of the wheat. Not to consider what they want, but what they need, for in all likelihood, their wants will largely correspond to their needs. And to expound to them the great eternal verities of the Christian faith."

If we are proving the adequacy of CHRIST in this sage counsel, then the confession of *The Reformed Pastor*, by Richard Baxter, will not be ours. We note it by way of warning:

"How few ministers do preach with all their might! . . . Alas, we speak so drowsily or gently, that sleeping sinners cannot hear. The blow falls so light that hard-hearted persons cannot feel it . . . What excellent doctrines some ministers have in hand, and let it die in their hands for want of close and lively application. O Sirs, how plainly, how closely and earnestly should we deliver a message of such nature as ours is, when the everlasting life or death of men is concerned in it . . . There is nothing more unsuitable to such a business than to be slight or dull. What, speak coldly for GOD and for man's salvation! . . . If you give the holy things of GOD the highest praise in words and yet do it coldly, you will seem in the manner to unsay what you said in the matter . . . The manner as well as the words must set them forth. If we are commanded, whatever our hand findeth to do, to do it with all our might, then certainly such a work as preaching for men's salvation should be done with all our might - that the people can feel us preach when they hear us."

The preacher's task is a superlative task. We are to make people know, for a little at least, something wholly different from, and something infinitely better than, even the best that ordinary life can offer them, something which they have known is, but which they have not been able to touch, to grasp. We must make them aware, for a little while anyway, that man is a spiritual being. We must challenge them, strike at them, hurt them with the hurt of spiritual consciousness, spiritual growth; we must make their souls inside the crusted chrysalis of mere existence stir toward light. We must soothe them too, after the hurt; heal them, excite them, exalt them, bathe them in the refreshment of a luminous effulgence of harmony with GOD; open their

inner eyes and make them see themselves in the presence of CHRIST, the Son of GOD.

Because this is our task, we dare not trifle with the temptations which so readily meet us in the ministry. The day of accounting will come for us, the final test of character and service. What then? Only the discipline of grace in the constant culture of our spiritual life will temper the present in the light of that hour. We live and labour, work and witness in that holy light. The Day shall declare of what sort is the service we render. Then we shall realize that the true waste of life is the life we have not given, the service we have not rendered, and the sacrifice from which we have drawn back. It is well to believe that we are even now serving before that Judgment Seat of CHRIST and that the Head of the Church moves among those who are the messengers of the churches.

Brethren, there is no discharge in this conflict with sin. As long as we are engaged in the work of the ministry we shall be tempted, even as all Christians, and that with subtlety and acuteness. We must live like others and yet live differently. We must move in society, buy and sell, marry and bring up families, just like the rest of men, and at the same time be thought superior to the world. Our problem will be to live a really unworldly life in an age which will not suffer any marked external separation from the world. This generation will test us through the temptations connected with our private and public lives, and note, not without triumph, how we fall short.

The world has its own estimation of the clergyman: Fielding's Parson Adams, Goldsmith's Vicar of Wakefield; Scott's Dominie Sampson, Dickens's Chadband and Stiggins, Thackeray's Honeyman, Eliot's Amos Barton, and Hawthorne's Dimmesdale. Caricature and truth are realistically portrayed across the pages of literature that we know full well.

To lose sight of the redemptive mission of CHRIST, to lose our evangelical passion, to become self-satisfied in our calling - this is the way to lose the clean hands, the righteous lips, and the pure heart. It is by the discipline of the struggle within our own hearts that we learn to become helpers of others to whom we would minister. And in humility of spirit we proceed with our work: we plod on and still keep the passion fresh. One day we shall be satisfied when we have finished our task.

~ end of chapter 9 ~

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