

"IF I WERE YOU"

Preaching is conveying truth through personality to personality. It has to do with a body of truth on one hand and human beings on the other. It aims to bring the two together in the meaning of life.

Preaching the Gospel of Christ is the greatest task that has ever engaged the mind and energies of man. This task is great because of Him Who calls, commissions and sustains us. It is also great because it deals with that which man cannot give, nor money purchase. This glorious task challenges the very best that noble lives possess.

Preaching for Christ is the greatest work in the world. The work which you have undertaken is immeasurably the highest calling on earth. It is a solemn thing to be an ambassador of Christ, to be the representative of the God of holiness, and to be the mouthpiece of the God of truth. For the preacher who gives himself wholeheartedly to his ministry, this is a day of unparalleled opportunity.

We congratulate you upon your having received a call from God to preach the Gospel of Christ, and a call from your churches to serve as their pastor. We have no doubt whatever about your salvation by Christ, your divine call to the Gospel Ministry, or your sincerity of purpose. We hope that our Lord will give you a long, happy, useful and fruitful ministry.

We want this high and never-to-be-forgotten hour in your life to be as helpful as possible. To this end, my remarks will be in the form of very practical suggestions. As I look back across the years of my ministry, how I wish that someone had said to me, on the occasion of my ordination, what I am about to say to you, so that I might have avoided the necessity of learning these lessons the hard way. On the basis of experience, observation and study, I tell you frankly what I would do, as a minister of Christ, IF I WERE YOU.

IF I WERE YOU, I would:

1. Be an example.

In writing to Timothy, Paul said, "Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity." I Timothy 4:12.

(1) In character.

Important in every profession, character is indispensable for the preacher. He is not a guide post, but a guide. He cannot guide the feet of others in paths in which he does not go. He is not a thermometer, gauging the spirituality of his people, but he is a thermostat, largely regulating their spiritual temperature.

(2) In conversation.

(3) In conduct.

Be yourself. Don't be a hero worshiper and yield to the temptation to become like some famous preacher--Sunday, Truett, or Graham. Be sincere. The Greek for the word "sincere" means "clear to the light," or transparent. "Sincere" comes from two Latin words, "sine" meaning "without," and "cera," the word for "wax"--"without wax." In the early days they made many of our vessels of wood, hollowed out, such as a basin. Sometimes when the vessel was finished, it was found that the wood had not been seasoned properly and it cracked, and the dealer, not wishing to throw it away, would seal the crack with wax. Of course the purchaser would not use it long before discovering the defect. So, if a man was an honest tradesman, and wanted you to know that his goods were sound, he would say, "without wax." So, "sincere" means that there is nothing made up in your life.

(4) In companions.

Truly, "A man is known by the company he keeps." This is also true of a man's literary companions, his books.

(5) In convictions.

A God-called preacher believes God's Word and preaches it to a needy world. If he does not believe it, he ought not to preach. Have convictions and be true to them.

(6) In consecration.

Dr. Joseph Parker said of Dr. F. B. Meyer: "He brings a benediction with him, a better air than earth's poor murky climate, and he never leaves me without the impression that I have been face to face with a man of God."

2. Live in the atmosphere of prayer.

Prayer is an expression of man's sense of helplessness and dependence. It implies that he is capable of fellowship with God. Prayer is the greatest resource of any life. By prayer we harness God's omnipotence to our impotence. Nothing lies beyond the reach of prayer except that which lies outside the will of God. How wonderful that we can talk to God about everything!

Many preachers fail in their work because they try to do by themselves what no man can do without God's help. No matter what your needs may be, talk to the Lord about them. Always go to the private place with God before you go to the public place for Him. Unless you commune with Him in secret, no unction will rest upon your ministry regardless of how eloquent your language, or splendid your illustrations, or vehement your public appeals. You can conquer any situation through prayer, but you will not have any power without it.

3. Be a diligent student.

A call to preach includes a call to study.

(1) The Word commands you to study.

"Till I come, give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine." I Timothy 4:13. "Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them; that thy profiting may appear to all." I Timothy 4:15. "But grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." II Peter 3:18. "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth." II Timothy 2:15.

(2) The work challenges you to study.

A studyless preacher makes a tiresome pulpit. A preacher cannot run a bluff on an audience. The people know whether or not he has studied. Persistent study is the solemn duty of every preacher who ventures to stand in the pulpit as a spokesman for God and an instructor of the people. If you fail to study, your mind will soon move in a very small circle of ideas, and such a mind cannot have a message for a wide circle of people. Study has much to do with the degree of your success and usefulness. If you do not feel the need for study, and if you do not find time for it, you will close the door to personal efficiency and to greater service. As Jowett said, "Preaching that costs nothing accomplishes nothing."

4. Thoroughly prepare my messages.

Many ministers are unsuccessful because they take the advice of Rosseau about the writing of love letters and apply it to the preaching of sermons. His instructions were: "You should begin without knowing what you are going to say, and end without knowing what you have said." That advice should never be applied to preaching. Some lazy preachers enter their pulpits and begin like Abraham, who "went out not knowing whither he went." Such preaching always leaves a bad impression. A small boy said, "Mother, can I be a preacher when I get to be a man?" The fond mother replied, "Of course you may, if you want to." "Well, I want to," said the lad, "for I guess I'll have to go to church all my life, anyway, and it's a lot harder to sit still than it is to stand up and holler." A preacher must do more than "stand up and holler."

"Empty vessels ring the loudest. Powder isn't shot. Thunder isn't lightning. Lightning kills. If you have lightning, you can afford to thunder; but do not thunder out of an empty cloud."

Special preparation is necessary for every message that is to be delivered from the pulpit. Any preacher who enters the pulpit without a prepared message thereby dis-

appoints his thoughtful hearers, defeats the purpose of the hour, disparages his ministry, and dishonors his Lord.

5. Preach the Word of God.

It is still true that "The biggest job of the preacher is to preach, in spite of the fact that the trend of the times is to make him an ecclesiastical gang-foreman." Preaching is the preeminent privilege of the minister, and his pulpit is his throne from which he is to wield the scepter of spiritual power. Do not abdicate that throne for anything else. Don't minimize the importance of preaching. Any person who disparages preaching is one who can't preach. It is always a case of being down on what he is not up on. A great pulpit ministry is the best service to which any man can give his hands, his head, and his heart.

The apostles said, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the Word." Acts 6:4. "Preach the Word." I Timothy 4:2. It is His Word that He has promised to bless. Be a scriptural preacher and the Holy Spirit can use your message. Expository preaching gives the Holy Spirit an opportunity to work. If you preach about yourself and your family, the Holy Spirit will not have anything to do with it, and the people will get tired of it.

6. Proclaim the Gospel of Christ.

Paul exhorted Timothy to do the work of an evangelist. You can preach philosophical, scientific and even Biblical truth without preaching the gospel of Christ. All the gospel is truth, but all truth is not the gospel. The good news is that God loves all men, Christ died for all men, and salvation is offered to all men. Christ's gospel is the only message we have that men need and that will produce the desired results in the lives of our hearers.

7. Warn the unsaved of their doom.

Lost sinners are on their way to hell and therefore need to be rescued and to be saved. Failure to warn them of their danger and doom is to be untrue to them, unfaithful to Christ, and pleasing to Satan.

8. Exalt the Lord Jesus Christ.

You cannot do this and talk about yourself or your family. A Spirit-filled preacher sends his hearers away saying, "What amazing grace! What a wonderful Saviour!" Any preacher has failed when the people go away saying, "Isn't he clever?" You can never exalt Christ enough, but, whatever the occasion or the audience, preach Christ in all the glories of His incomparable Person and in the manifold excellencies of His redemptive work. He is adequate for every need. Exalt Christ and your message will be glorifying to God and profitable to men.

9. Teach our Baptist doctrines.

Your people need to know them. So many are ignorant of them simply because they have not been taught. Even though everything may not be right with Baptist people, you may rest assured that there is nothing wrong with Baptist doctrines and principles.

10. Comfort the broken-hearted.

Today there are many bewildered minds and sad hearts. They need the enlightenment of divine truth and the consolations of divine grace. In practically every pew you will find a burdened soul or a broken heart. Preach more comforting sermons. There will always be an attentive audience for such a message. "Comfort ye, comfort ye, My People."

11. Encourage the people.

They have enough disappointments, discouragements and troubles without your adding to them.

12. Depend on the Holy Spirit.

He is the One to help us to understand the scriptures, to interpret them, to witness

for Christ, to evangelize the lost, to instruct the saved, and to do the Lord's work. We must not grieve the Holy Spirit by ignoring Him.

With all the earnestness of my soul, I appeal to you to be faithful to the Lord, His Word, His churches, His people, and your duty. He wants your best, He is entitled to your best, His work deserves your best, and you owe Him your best. So live and serve Him that in the end you may hear Him say, "Well done, good and faithful servant."