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Preaching 3 The Devotional Life of the Preacher

The importance of the subject

“Is prayer fundamental or supplemental?” asks the title of the old tract. There can be no doubt about the authentic Christian answer to that question. Apart from the extensive Biblical teaching about the central place which prayer should occupy in the life of the man of God, we have the challenging example of the prayer life of our Lord and His apostles. In the midst of a very busy life, Jesus spent much time in communion with His Father (Mark 1:21-35) and, as the Gospel of Luke in particular reminds us, prayer was on His lips at all the major events of His life (Luke 3:21, 5:16, 6:12, 9:18,28, 22:32,41, 23:34,46). The Acts of the Apostles and the Epistles make clear how faithfully the apostles followed the example of their master.

During the course of Christian history, the same emphasis on the place of prayer is found in the teaching and practice of the outstanding spiritual leaders of all denominations. Consider these estimations of its importance – “Prayer, meditation and temptation make a minister” (Martin Luther); “Prayer must carry our work as well as preaching. In our insufficiency we must maintain a believing dependence on the Lord” (Richard Baxter); “God does nothing but in answer to prayer” (John Wesley); “What a minister is on his knees in secret before almighty God, that he is and no more” (Robert Murray McCheyne); “All that a college course can do for a student is coarse and external compared with the spiritual and delicate refinement obtained by communion with God” (C.H.Spurgeon); “He will never talk well and with real success to men for God who has not learned well how to talk to God for men” (“M.Bounds). And surely Thomas Chalmers got to the heart of the matter when he pointed out that most failures in the ministry were due not to a lack of visiting, of study or of organisational activity but to a lack of prayer.

The first responsibility of the preacher and one of the best services he can render to his people is to cultivate thoughtfully and conscientiously his personal devotional life. The quality of his relationship with God will undoubtedly influence every aspect of his life and ministry. It is the mainspring of all effective service, and no one who has ever done a great and enduring work for God ever neglected whole-hearted communion with Him in the secret place. All the preaching and public activity in the world will never make up for neglect of the devotional life. Yet all pastors know that it is desperately easy to care for the souls of others but to neglect one’s own.

In the midst of a very busy life with countless calls being made upon him – the preacher must each day fence off a definite time when he is at his best for unhurried prayer and the devotional reading of the Scriptures. This is not something into which a man will drift automatically or thoughtlessly. It requires determination, commitment and discipline. No easy alternative to this exists. As the years go by, this time will have to be constantly and jealously guarded lest step by step it is gradually eroded by other duties, is pushed into a corner, and finally loses its value completely. It should be added that during the course of the day the preacher will also endeavour to keep in

the spirit of prayer and to respond to every impulse as it is prompted by the Spirit. The preacher, says Spurgeon, will pray as an ordinary Christian else he would be a hypocrite, and he will pray more than an ordinary Christian else he would be disqualified for his office. "If you become lax in secret devotion not only will you need to be pitied, but your people also."

Prayer and the Preacher's Life and Ministry

A moment's reflection will quickly reveal how crucial is a vigorous spiritual life for the man in the ministry. His prayers are not an empty religious exercise which are required as part of his professional duties. He prays because he is a poor needy creature who has to undertake very solemn duties, shoulder enormous responsibilities and face daunting temptations about which his people often know very little. In prayer he confesses his utter inadequacy and powerlessness. However much human conceit or pride of intellect may rebel against such a confession, no man will discover God's abundant resources until it is made. It has been strikingly pointed out that when a man strikes rock bottom in his sense of nothingness he suddenly finds he has struck the Rock of Ages.

One who is constantly giving out to others will survive spiritually only as he is simultaneously taking in from God. Phrases like "mechanical professionalism", "ministerial backsliding", and the "hardening influence of spiritual things" are often used to give expression to grim realities with which the man in the pulpit is only too well acquainted. His major problem is often to keep his soul alive and his spiritual life keen in the face of many adverse influences. Henry Martyn once complained in words which will find an echo in many a preacher's heart that want of private devotional reading and shortness of prayer, through incessant sermon making, had produced much strangeness between God and his own soul. In the light of such a threat the only effective antidote is to be found in a daily surrender of the life of God, a daily appropriation of the power of the Holy Spirit and daily walk with God. Prayer freshens the heart, keeps it in tune with God and in sympathy with the people and so gives continual vigour and reality to the work of the ministry.

Dependence on previous prayers and experience of the grace of God is of no use for the present hour for as Hanley Moule once put it – there is no substitute for a living and present trust in a living and present Lord. An incident towards the end of Andrew Bonar's life illustrates this point. When asked about the secret of a consecrated life he simply replied, "I can only say to my younger brethren that for forty years there has not been a day that I have not had access to the mercy seat."

It ought to be said in passing that the spiritual dangers and problems of men in the ministry are not understood or appreciated as much as they should be by those to whom they minister. It is frequently imagined that the pastor or the visiting missionary is a sort of spiritual giant who is quite immune to the trials and temptations of ordinary mortals. If the true facts were more realistically faced by diaconates and church members there would be a great deal less irresponsible criticism and a great deal more sympathetic prayer support on behalf of God's servants.

While the preacher will commit every area of his work to God, - his visiting, his correspondence and his relationships and so on – he will be particularly anxious to experience the power of God in his ministry of the Word. He knows that prayerless preaching and professional praying can be the bane of the evangelical pulpit as much as any other. He remembers, however, that the preparation of his own heart must precede the preparation of his sermon. Only when he knows the truth at first hand as a living power in his own soul can he effectively communicate it to others. Only what comes from the heart will reach the heart and only what comes from a living conscience will pierce the consciences of others. Yet, sadly, experience teaches that it is far easier to fill the head than prepare the heart.

In the actual preaching of the Word the minister faces an impossible task. Men who are spiritually blind and dead are beyond human help and will never respond merely to human persuasion, rhetoric and reasoning. As Spurgeon once said, “I shall not attempt to teach a tiger the virtues of vegetarianism; but shall as hopefully attempt that task as I would try to convince an unregenerate man of the truth revealed by God concerning sin and righteousness and judgment to come.” Men will be moved and changed only by the life-giving power of the Holy Spirit and so it is upon his work that the preacher of the Word relies. His confidence will not be on his own personality, gifts or fluency but his dependence will be utterly upon the Holy Spirit who alone can create light and life. It is for this reason that more than one preacher, as he has mounted each step into the pulpit, repeatedly made the confession, “I believe in the Holy Ghost.”

As sermons are preached with the unction and authority of the Holy Spirit they become living and life-giving, powerful and arresting. Often the freshest and best thoughts will come to a preacher as he is actually ministering in the power of the Spirit. Wilbur Chapman once claimed that his whole life had been altered by one sentence of F.B.Meyer when the latter urged that usefulness in God’s service is largely affected by the question whether we work for God or whether we allow God by His Spirit to speak and work through us.

It is, however, important at this point to present a balanced picture. His absolute dependence on the Holy Spirit should never cause a man to neglect careful and thorough sermon preparation. It is not a question of “either-or” but of “both-and”. The paradox is perhaps best expressed saying that the preacher will work as if his whole success depended upon himself, but he will pray and actually depend wholly on Christ knowing that apart from Him man can do nothing. An old writer once suggested that the preacher must learn to combine the dictum of Luther, “Bene orasse est bene studisse” – “To have prayed well is to have studied well” – with the exhortation of Paul – “Meditate upon these things; give thyself wholly to them that thy profiting may appear to all.” (1 Timothy 4:15).

The preaching of the Word must, of course, be accompanied by earnest prayer for those who receive the message. Members of the church and congregation and those who have been reached through the witness of the church will all be remembered in turn. This does not mean merely asking the divine blessing to rest on the congregation collectively. It entails prayer for individuals and families in their particular responsibilities and problems. This duty involves method and system and can prove very demanding. Yet it is something which no faithful pastor can neglect. Very often

during the course of such intercessory prayer sympathy is deepened and practical ways of help are suggested as the individual circumstances are visualized.

An Illustrious Example

It is one thing to discuss these ideas in an abstract way but it is another to see them being lived out in a human life. Christian biography furnishes many examples of outstanding men of God who really knew Him in the secret place. Their example instructs the reader but at the same time brings with it a deep sense of shame and a conviction that most of us have scarcely begun our Christian service. Of many whose prayer life could be cited perhaps none is more challenging than that of Andrew Bonar. He had two outstanding ministries during the last century – the first in a rural parish in Perthshire and the other in a busy Glasgow congregation. His diary and life story were edited by his daughter and can be read and re-read with increasing delight and profit. For a moment let us look over his shoulder as he writes in his diary:

I desire to lay down the rule not to speak to men until I have spoken to God; not to do anything with my head until I have been on my knees, not to read letters or papers until I have read something of the Holy Scriptures.... In prayer in the wood having set apart three hours of devotion... Have been enabled these two days to go apart for some hours into the wood and meet God there. Less than I could have wished... Yesterday got a day to myself for prayer. With me every time of prayer begins with a conflict. It is my deepest regret that I pray so little... I see that unless I keep up short prayer every day throughout the whole day I lose the spirit of prayer.... God has been impressing much upon me the way of redeeming time for prayer by learning to pray while walking or going from place to place... Fellowship with God is not a means to an end but is to be the end itself... There are few ministers anywhere who preach Christ fully and truly. Few of us like to be told our faults, few of us correct them when we are told, few of us pray over discovered sins, few of us have grieved at the want of success in others, few of us pray for one another and for the Holy Ghost coming down upon every minister every time he goes forth to preach... I have prospered as to getting sermons and help in them ever since I made it a rule not to fix upon a subject till I had prayed somewhat fully for particular help as to the subject, doctrine, illustration and application... very few men and very few ministers keep up to the end the edge that was on their spirit at the first”

No doubt words like these leave most, if not all of us, with a very uneasy conscience.

Conclusion

It has to be conceded that compared with earlier periods in the life of the Christian church, our age does not appear to be conspicuous by its prayerfulness. In one of his books Professor James Stewart asks a very disturbing question. He wonders if it is too much to say that revival in the church depends upon the prayer life of its ministers. Undoubtedly several responses could be made to this enquiry, but nevertheless his words contain a challenge which deserves to be taken very seriously.

Those of us who are preachers loudly proclaim that we believe in prayer. We commend it to others and we preach about it to our congregations. But the big question is this – do we ourselves really pray?