

"The Interior of the Ministry"

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The wording of our topic is borrowed. As reported in a ministerial journal, Dr. Edwin E. Aubrey used it not long ago in an address to the graduating class of an eastern seminary. "All leaders," said Professor Aubrey, "are public figures with private lives." It is those "private lives" that concern us for the moment in this gathering -- though God pity us if they do not concern us every day in the conduct of our affairs as "servants of the Word."

You will remember that this stress upon what goes on in the preacher's own soul was passed along to Timothy by the Apostle Paul: "Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine; continue in them: for in doing this thou shalt both save thyself, and them that hear thee" (I Timothy 4:16). A similar appeal, uttered with similar heat, was made by the Apostle to the elders of Ephesus: "Take heed...unto yourselves, and to all the flock" (Acts 20:28). With all apostolic ardor Paul would forestall that deadly species of ministerial failure of which Richard Baxter was to complain so vehemently long centuries later when he declared: "Many a tailor goes in rags, that maketh costly clothes for others; and many a cook scarcely licks his fingers, when he hath dressed for others the most costly dishes."

Let us talk to ourselves, then, in all candor about certain traits of the inner life which we of the clergy greatly need to nourish and to exemplify. I shall have to be content with naming four of them.

I

Take the quality of serenity. Some one has said, "There is no great art without serenity." Who has not felt, for example, that back of the turbulence and vastness of great music are the long hours of quiet brooding through which the composer passed? It is not otherwise with preaching: back of our most impassioned utterances, if they are to be anything more than "sounding brass," must be many a calm interlude in which the soul of the preacher is hushed into an awful stillness before the Lord.

The hectic strenuousness of our American way of life is poisonously contagious. It has been remarked that a three-word biography of a typical American would be: "Hurry...Worry...Bury!" The pastor, unless he has taken the vows of self-discipline, will succumb to this shallow "activism."

We are not all alike, and every man must answer to his God

for the employment of his time, but there are many of us, one fears, who are overlooking the rich pasturelands of spiritual grazing afforded by the early morning hour. What an opportunity for the listening as well as the speaking side of prayer! Think on the Word! Whisper the lines of the great hymns! And don't forget the value of setting down on paper some of the insights and suggestions that come to your brooding mind! Even in a day when "Whirl is king" there may be found an answer to our prayers:

"Drop Thy still dews of quietness
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of Thy peace."

Thus we may acquire and nourish an inner serenity that will be reflected in the poise with which we move among our people -- a poise so wholesomely subtle that often it affects them without their knowing it.

II

A second quality with which "the interior of the ministry" should be furnished is humility. "I can think," says Paul Scherer, "of no more insidious or deadly foe than self-esteem, the habit so many people have of being 'starched even before they are washed.' Yet I would hazard the guess that this is peculiarly the sin par excellence of the clergy." The sting of those words lies in the fact that they come, not from an outsider, but from one of ourselves.

To be sure, humility has its distortions -- with the clergy as with the laity. One of its caricatures may be seen in the man who prates endlessly about being humble when, alas, there permeates his every testimony and preachment a pious egotism. His life is a ministerial province bounded on the north, the south, the east, and the west by -- himself. Another warped picture of humility may be seen in the man who is forever demeaning himself as a worm. Whether as a form of self-pity or as a device for escaping responsibility and hard work, he is habitually running down himself as having no talents, no possibilities, no future.

On the other hand, if humility has its distortions it has also its demonstrations. A Bible teacher whom I loved once had a series of meetings in a church wherein was a lady whom I had long known. Meeting her some time after the series was over, I asked her about my friend's ministry. Her answer I shall always remember: "That man can put more of Christ into his ministry, and less of himself, than any man I ever heard." Besides the beauty of that tribute, there is an unconscious discernment in it that one should

not miss. The secret of humility is not to aim at it as a separate virtue which one sets himself deliberately to acquire; its secret is rather to be found in abandoning oneself to Jesus Christ. The false and unworthy ego is cancelled out in one's glorious pre-occupation with the Savior.

"If thou couldst empty all thy self of self,
Like to a shell dishabited,
Then might He find thee on the ocean shelf,
And say, 'This is not dead' --
And fill thee with Himself in stead."

But self can never cast out self. If we wait for this achievement, we shall never be filled with Him. These are not two separate and distinct processes, with one preceding the other. You do not empty a room of darkness in order to fill it with light. You simply let the light in. Whereupon the darkness goes. So with this grace of humility: when we are wide open to the light of that mind which was in Christ, the darkness of self-importance can do no other than flee.

III

Let me name sensitivity as a third trait which the preacher should sedulously cultivate as he tends his inner life. In many ways our work is repetitious: it therefore, and easily, breeds both monotony and callousness. Services to lead, sermons to prepare and deliver, funerals to conduct, marriages to perform, counseling to be done, calls to be made: so the cycle runs! And the first thing you know, you are in a rut, which some one has described as a grave with the ends knocked out.

Let every minister beware the curse of callousness. There is the callousness of habit: the first time you did it you were fresh, but the five hundredth time -- well, you describe it. There is the callousness of professionalism: gradually lower motives take over and the highest one backs blushing into a corner. There is the callousness of distance: some pastors seem never to be stirred by the brokenness and bleakness of life that lies beyond the little circle of their own parish. One Sunday morning, at the breakfast table, I told my three children about a hunger-and-starvation scene in Europe, which a friend of mine had witnessed with his own eyes. The children listened politely, but it would be an exaggeration to say they were stirred. An hour later, on the way to church, a cocker spaniel pup darted in front of our car, and we killed it. All three of the children were moved to tears. The first scene was incalculably more tragic, but their childish eyes did not bring it close up. Hence the absence of emotion. But woe be to the mini-

ster who is childish, who sees not and feels not the wasting evil and the ghastly sorrow of a whole world in need of Christ. The light should never be allowed to go out on that inner altar where he prays:

"God -- let me be aware.
 Let me not stumble blindly down the ways,
 Just getting somehow safely through the days,
 Not even groping for another hand.
 Not even wondering why it all was planned,
 Eyes to the ground unseeking for the light,
 Soul never aching for a wild-winged flight,
 Please, keep me eager just to do my share.
 God -- let me be aware.

"God -- let me be aware.
 Stab my soul fiercely with others' pain,
 Let me walk seeing horror and stain.
 Let my hands, groping, find other hands.
 Give me the heart that divines, understands.
 Give me the courage, wounded, to fight.
 Flood me with knowledge, drench me in light.
 Please, keep me eager just to do my share.
 God -- let me be aware."

IV

Consider one more quality that should characterize "the interior of the ministry": importunity. Perhaps a quick glance at the vocabulary of the average man. The adjective form of it -- "importunate" -- is defined as "urgent in character, pressingly solicitous, insistent." It comes to light but once in the New Testament: in the story of the man who came at midnight to beg bread from his neighbor, as recorded in the 11th chapter of Luke. "Though he will not rise and give him," says Jesus, "because he is his friend, yet because of his importunity he will rise and give him as many as he needeth." In place of "importunity" both Goodspeed and Moffatt prefer the word "persistence."

Not always do the parables of our Lord teach by comparison. Sometimes they teach by contrast. Jesus is not telling us that our heavenly Father is like that reluctant and churlish neighbor upstairs in bed. Rather is He telling us that we are to be like that fervently persistent man downstairs at the door. He is instructing us further that if such a man, untiring in his quest, got what he needed from his reluctant friend, how much more certainly will

whole-hearted praying get large results from an infinitely wise and willing heavenly Father.

That is the teaching. But what shall we say of our observance of it? Against the door of my own heart, if not against yours, I lay the humbling charge that too little goes on within that burns with this intensely beseeching quality. I cannot forget the day I stood at the door of the prayer room of John Knox in Edinburgh. My blood rushed a bit faster as I recalled the cry of his soul which again and again was heard upon his lips: "O God, give me Scotland, or I die!" Look within, will you? Think back, please! Have your parish needs and mine, have your community sins and mine, produced within your heart or mine any such anguished importunity as that? The answer? Well, that's between you and the Man with the blanched face who once sank in a passion of prayer in a garden called Gethsemane.

This heat of importunity, moreover, if it is to circulate through our sermons as well as our prayers, must be generated within our spirits when we are alone with God. In prayer we importune God; in preaching, men. James S. Stewart, in his stirring preacher-volume called Heralds of God, has a passage near the end in which he quotes John the Baptist: "I indeed baptize you with water...but he that cometh after me is mightier than I...He shall baptize you with fire." "And the weakness," says Stewart, "of many an otherwise competent ministry is that it has been content with the first baptism and neglected the second, has tried to do with water what can be accomplished only with the fire of Christ." He then quotes, appropriately, a testimony that Frederic W. H. Myers once bore to the influence upon his life of Josephine Butler. Said Myers: "She introduced me to Christianity as by an inner door: not to its encumbering forms but to its heart of flame."

That, my brothers, becomes the stupendous task of every man of us: to introduce other people, waiting out there in our congregations, to Christianity's "heart of flame." But alas for us if we try to do it before our own hearts have been so ignited by the truth and the love of Christ that in our pulpits we are veritable incendiaries of the Lord to set afire the souls of men. So Myers himself must have felt, else he would not have written: