

The Exhortations of the Ordinal

by W.H. Griffith Thomas

The sermon emphasizes the dignity, responsibility, and demands of the ministry, and the importance of prayer, Bible study, and faithfulness in fulfilling these demands.

Scripture: Ezekiel 33:6, Luke 12:42, John 14:26, Acts 20:28, 1 Corinthians 4:2, Ephesians 1:19, Ephesians 5:25, Colossians 1:28, 1 Timothy 4:16, Hebrews 13:17, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Ministerial Calling", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

W.H. Griffith Thomas preaches about the high dignity, weighty office, and responsibility of the Church of England ministry, emphasizing the essential idea that a minister is first and foremost a man of God, a servant of God to His people. The sermon highlights the roles of Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards in relation to God, the Word, and the Church, respectively. It also stresses the demands on the ministry to teach, admonish, feed, and provide for the Lord's family, as well as to seek and save the lost sheep. The sermon underscores the importance of prayer, Bible study, holy living, and concentration of purpose as conditions for ministerial power and the outflow of growth, holiness, and spiritual influence.

Transcript

In the Priests' Ordinal there is a long address which is quite unique. There is nothing like it at the Deacons' Ordination. Apart from the Questions already considered, it gives the fullest conception we possess of the Church of England ministry. It shows quite evidently that the essential idea of the ministry is not that of a paid official or administrator, or even only of a trained teacher or expert. The minister is first and foremost, and all the time, a man of God, a servant of God to His people.

Section 1. The Greatness of the Ministry.

"You have heard, Brethren, as well in your private examination, as in the exhortation which was now made to you, and in the holy Lessons taken out of the Gospel, and the writings of the Apostles, of what dignity, and of how great importance this Office is, whereunto ye are called. And now again we exhort you in the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you have in remembrance, into how high a Dignity, and to how weighty an Office and Charge ye are called: that is to say, to be Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards of the Lord: to teach, and to premonish, to feed and to provide for the Lord's family; to seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for His children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ forever."

I. The High Dignity.

Ministers are called Messengers, Watchmen, and Stewards.

1. In relation to God they are Messengers. This means that they are sent by Him and taught by Him. They are men with a message and men that possess both authority and ability. This is equivalent to the idea of Apostleship. "Even so send I you." There is the authority. And when He had said this He breathed on them and saith, "Receive ye the Holy Ghost." There is the ability.

2. In relation to the Word they are "Watchmen". This is equivalent to the New Testament idea of an Evangelist. "They that watch for your souls" (Heb. 13:17). The Old Testament prophet was also a watchman (Isa. 52:8, 56:10), and the work includes watching against evil and for good; sleepless vigilance on behalf of the souls for whom Christ died is the essential work of a Watchman.

3. In relation to the Church they are "Stewards". This may almost be said to be equivalent to the work of the Pastor. A steward is a trusted servant. He has to give food to the household. And similarly, the Christian minister as a steward is especially concerned with the household of faith.

II. The Weighty Office. 1. As Stewards the Ministers have to "teach, and to premonish, to feed and provide for the Lord's family." To "teach" he must know how. There is a vast difference between teaching and talking, between teaching and preaching. Many can preach or talk, while few can teach. And yet for Christian people teaching is absolutely essential and exceedingly important. To "premonish" he must be faithful. No one can admonish without incurring the possibility of hostility, or at any rate of some opposition and difficulty.

And yet "warning" is as much a part of his work as "teaching" (Col. 1:28). "To feed and provide" he must know where and how to obtain food for his flock. It is only too often true that "the hungry sheep look up and are not fed" because the minister has not fed himself. Many are the complaints from time to time that the clergyman does not break the bread of life to his people. "He does not feed me or my children," said one earnest man. "What am I to do?" Pastoral work is an absolute necessity and should be a prominent feature of ministerial service.

If a man says he has not time for it, then it must be said with all love and faithfulness that he must make time for it. Fewer meetings of a secular, recreative, or entertaining class, and more teaching and visiting work. Less effort expended (often fruitlessly) in providing an institutional Church, and more endeavour to feed the flock of God in Church, class, and home. The New Testament has three epithets to describe the Steward. He is wise (Luke 12:42), faithful (1 Cor. 4:2), good (beautiful) (1 Peter. 4:10).

He will be "wise" in his efforts to instruct and feed. He will be "faithful" in the discharge of duties. And he will be "good" both inwardly and outwardly (καλός) in that attractiveness which ministers and wins for Christ. 2. As Watchmen Ministers have to "seek for Christ's sheep that are dispersed abroad, and for His children who are in the midst of this naughty world, that they may be saved through Christ forever." This means evangelistic work, the work of "catching men alive".

The work of a Watchman will therefore be intensely real and definitely personal. Individual work was a prominent feature of Christ's ministry, and it should be of ours also. The solemn responsibility is made very clear in Scripture. "But if the watchman see the sword come, and blow not the trumpet, and the people be not warned; if the sword come, and take any person from among them, he is taken away in his

iniquity; but his blood will I require at the watchman's hand" (Ezek. 33:6).

"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (Heb. 13:17). 3. As Messengers Ministers have to receive and deliver their Master's message. This means that we have a message to deliver and that we mean to pass it on without addition or subtraction. "How canst thou run, seeing thou hast no tidings ready?" And this in turn involves spiritual fellowship with God.

The Holy Spirit is ever desirous of making disclosures to the soul. Do we receive them? If so, we must deliver them. "What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light." Dr. R. W. Dale well said to students for the ministry: - "Your generous impulses, your strenuous and exhausting labours, your eagerness to bless men, your natural powers, your learning, will achieve nothing in those higher regions of human life, in which alone the enduring results of our work are to be found, unless you have received the gift of the Holy Spirit."

Herein lies the supreme secret of Christian ministry: a man who knows God, who knows God's truth, who knows by experience what Christianity is, and who intends at all costs to tell what he knows and give what he has received. The man who is in doubt can never be a messenger of the Lord of Hosts.

Section 2. The Responsibility of the Ministry.

After the consideration of the Dignity, it is natural to consider the Responsibility of the Ministry.

"Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which He bought with His death, and for whom He shed His blood. The Church and Congregation whom you must serve is His Spouse, and His Body. And if it shall happen the same Church, or any Member thereof, to take any hurt or hindrance by reason of your negligence, ye know the greatness of the fault, and also the horrible punishment that will ensue. Wherefore consider with yourselves the end of your Ministry towards the children of God, towards the Spouse and Body of Christ; and see that you never cease your labour, your care and diligence, until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty, to bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge, unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and perfectness of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life."

I. The Greatness of the Treasure.

Our people are described in a threefold way: as the Sheep, the Bride, and the Body. As Sheep, they are Christ's blood-bought possession (Acts 20:28). As the Bride they are loved by Him Who "gave Himself for" them. (Eph. 5:25). As the Body of Christ they are one with Him in life and grace (Eph. 1:19-20). Nothing could well be more searching and solemn than this thought of the value of the people among whom we labour. Well does the address say, "Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge."

II. The Possibility of Danger. Two dangers are mentioned here: "Hurt" and "Hindrance". The one refers to the wounding of consciences, the other to the prevention of spiritual progress. And this is said to be due to ministerial "negligence" and is spoken of as a "great fault" to be visited by "horrible punishment". The truth of these statements will be admitted by all who have had experience of the ministry. The flock are in danger from the negligence of the shepherd. Sometimes we are tempted to "hurt" them.

Young beginners in the ministry are apt to take pleasure in "shocking" old Christians. They think the old views are narrow and impossible, and they wish to let these Christians know how far advanced the younger generation is. But if this is done, as it is often, with a disregard to old-fashioned consciences, it will serve the very opposite of its purpose. It will not do the old people any good, and it will often do the younger man harm. When next he goes to God in prayer, he will see for himself what he has done.

The fact is that no air of superiority and certainly no ridicule has a place in Christian ministry. Ridicule is only another word for sneer, and someone has said that a "sneer is an apology for an argument made by a man who does not understand." Jesus Christ, though angry, never ridiculed the views and life of those who were opposed to Him. Sometimes, too, the minister is tempted to introduce elements into his teaching which, if they do not "hurt," at least "hinder" the spiritual life of his people.

There is profound force in Dr. Torrey's testimony on this point. I make no apology for quoting it in full:- "It is a great temptation to a minister of the Gospel who thinks or reads some view of things that strikes him as new and original and likely to prove interesting. He thinks it is true, but he did not think it through, and he gives out that view of things he supposed true, but which he has not thought through, and he awakens someday to the awful fact that he has been preaching error instead of truth and poisoning the flock of God.

I ought to confess right here that I have had that bitter experience myself. In my earlier ministry I had certain views of things, I thought they were original. They were not; others had held them, though I did not know it at the time. I thought them fresh, and new, and original, and I was sure they were striking, and I was certain they would prove interesting. I knew they were not generally held in the Church in which I was an ordained minister, but I honestly told the people what I thought.

Brethren, it is good to be honest, but it is safe to be sure, and I beseech you, out of a bitter experience, do not for honesty's sake preach anything until you have thought it through and way through upon your knees before God. Do not for honesty's sake preach anything in this position of responsibility until you have thought it way through in the white light of God's own presence. If somebody had said this to me when I began my ministry, and I had had sense enough to pay attention to it, it would have saved me one of the bitterest experiences of my life.

I found out my error and renounced it, but that was not the bitterest part. The bitterest part was that I had led men and women into error, and I could not lead them back again to the truth when I had discovered my error. It is a great deal easier to lead people into error than to lead them back again, for the human heart loves error. I think today of a young man in my Theological Seminary who was in the class below me - the most brilliant man there, the man of the greatest promise beyond question - but not a very clear thinker.

He depended upon me, and what I thought he adopted rather than take the trouble of thinking it through for himself. And the result? I came back, but I have never been able to lead him back. And today that man, after a brief and brilliant ministry, from the human standpoint, is out of the ministry altogether. And the last conversation I had with him he said to me, 'If I were to define my position today, I think the most correct definition I could give would be - I am a Christian Agnostic.'

And that magnificent man is lost to the Church, and lost to the ministry, I think largely through my influence. I have had the joy of leading many others into the truth, but I have never been able to lead that man back. So, brethren, I beseech you, out of an aching heart, don't, don't, don't, declare anything from your position of responsibility, opportunity, and influence in which God has put you, until you are absolutely sure it is true, before you have thought it through in the white light of God's presence."

III. The Demands on the Ministry.

"Wherefore consider with yourselves the end of your Ministry towards the children of God, towards the Spouse and Body of Christ; and see that you never cease your labour, your care and diligence, until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty."

1. Constant thought. "Consider the end of your Ministry." With this in mind we cannot be negligent.
2. Unceasing diligence. "Never cease your labour, your care and diligence." The spiritual work of the ministry means work, unsparing work, unceasing work on behalf of the people.
3. Wholehearted effort. "Until you have done all that lieth in you, according to your bounden duty." Nothing left undone, nothing disregarded, but everything used in furtherance of the one object.

IV. The Goal of the Ministry.

To bring all such as are or shall be committed to your charge, unto that agreement in the faith and knowledge of God, and to that ripeness and perfectness of age in Christ, that there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life."

1. Agreement in faith and knowledge. This is an echo of Ephesians 4:13, and shows what the ministry is intended to do.
2. Maturity of experience. "And to that ripeness and perfectness of age in Christ." From faith and knowledge will come "ripeness and perfectness of age". Christian experience is one of the essential features of ministerial effort. "Unto the perfecting of the saints for their work of ministering."
3. Reality of Life. "That there be no place left among you, either for error in religion, or for viciousness in life." Truth and life are to be our ultimate goal. Character and Conduct. Holiness of heart and life.

This is the Church of England view of Ministry. As we look at it, do we not obtain the proper perspective by which to gauge the various elements that go to make up the ministerial life today? In the light of these profound spiritual realities where can amusements come in? In the face of the experiences of heart and life what need can be found for the technicalities of criticism? And in view of these fundamental requirements of spiritual life and progress how subsidiary do our ecclesiastical differences become? The more thoroughly a man will ponder these thoughts, the more clearly will he come to know the paramount idea and meaning of the ministry of the Church of England.

"Forasmuch then as your Office is both of so great excellency, and of so great difficulty, ye see with how great care and study ye ought to apply yourselves, as well that ye may shew yourselves dutiful and thankful unto that Lord, who hath placed you in so high a Dignity; as also to beware, that neither you yourselves offend, nor be occasion that others offend."

And in so doing he will realize the Apostolic call to "take heed". (1) He is to take heed to "himself" and his "flock" (Acts 20:28). To himself on account of his flock; to his flock by care of himself. No man set over such a charge can possibly be indifferent to the greatness and solemnity of the position. (2) And for this he will take heed to "himself" and his "doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:16). Himself first, his doctrine next, his flock next. If he is right with God, and his doctrine true to God's Word, his flock will assuredly be right, and his ministry will be an increasing blessing to his people, an increasing joy to himself, and an increasing glory to God.

Section 3. The Guarantees of the Ministry.

With the Dignity and Responsibility of the Ministry clearly and constantly in view, the natural and inevitable inquiry comes, "Who is sufficient for these things?" Whence comes the ability?

I. The Source of Power.

"Howbeit, ye cannot have a mind and will thereto of yourselves; for that will and ability is given of God alone: therefore ye ought, and have need, to pray earnestly for His Holy Spirit"

From God alone comes the power of true ministry. "Our sufficiency is of God, Who also hath made us able ministers."

And it is always through the Holy Spirit. Twice in this address is the Holy Ghost mentioned, and as we study the New Testament we see on almost every page the prominence given to the Holy Spirit in relation to life and work for God.

II. The Conditions of Power. 1. Prayer. "Pray earnestly." "Pray to God the Father, by the mediation of our only Saviour Jesus Christ, for the heavenly assistance of the Holy Ghost." Our prayer must be individual and intercessory. We must pray for ourselves and for others, and this, regularly, intellectually, and faithfully. We are in danger of being too much with men and too little with God. While we must not be ascetic, we certainly must not be too social. Forbes Robinson used to say that he could do more for a man by praying for him than by talking to him.

It is a searching question, how much time we spend a day in private prayer. "Someone has asserted - I do not believe it is true - that an average Christian does not spend more than three minutes a day in secret prayer, and the average minister not more than five minutes. I do not believe it is true, but it is a good deal nearer the truth than it ought to be. A friend quoted that statement, and an older minister came and said, 'You should not have done it.' He said, 'Try it on yourself, and come back and report.'

He said, 'I will.' But he forgot to come back, so my friend went to him and asked, 'Did you try that?' He said, 'I did.' 'What was the result?' 'I thought my watch had stopped!'" Dr. S. Tyng, one of the finest clergymen in the American Church, said: - "I do not wish I had preached more, or visited more, but prayed." And as Leighton said: - "Let prayer be not only the key that opens the day, and the lock that secures us at night, but let it be also our staff and stay throughout the whole of our daily journey, and enable us to ascend into the hill of the Lord with cheerful alacrity." 2.

Bible Study. "Doctrine and exhortation taken out of the Scriptures." "Reading and learning the Scriptures." "Daily reading and weighing of the Scriptures." This must be at once intellectual and spiritual, an endeavour to get first at the meaning and then at the message. It can be said without hesitation or fear of contradiction that ministerial weakness and, still more, ministerial unfaithfulness spring from neglect of the Bible and prayer. There are from time to time awful tragedies in the ministry; the complete breakdown of character which often involves others in ruin.

It will be found that these moral shipwrecks have been preceded by slow decay of spiritual life. The fall of large trees in the Broad Walk, Oxford, proclaimed rottenness long going on within, and I believe that moral spiritual decay is also traceable to neglect of private meditation of Scripture and prayer. 3. Holy Living. "A life agreeable to the same." "Framing the manners both of yourselves, and of them that specially pertain to you." "Ye may so endeavour yourselves from time to time, to sanctify the lives of you and yours, and to

fashion them after the rule and doctrine of Christ, that ye may be wholesome and godly examples and patterns for the people to follow."

In these solemn words we have a reminder of the New Testament distinction between sins and weights; things wrong and things doubtful; things essential and things unessential for life. 4. Concentration of purpose. "For this self-same cause, how ye ought to forsake and set aside (as much as you may) all worldly cares and studies." "Apply yourselves wholly to this one thing, and draw all your care and studies this way." The need of this is seen in the fact that no position exists which has more opportunities for laziness, or more opportunities for intellectual and social dissipation.

And a man who has been known as a "slacker" in the University is more than likely to be a "slacker" in the ministry. "This one thing I do" should be writ large over our study desk and imprinted deeply on our conscience.

III. The Outflow of Power.

1. Growth in ministerial experience. "Wax riper." Growth is the great law of ministry.

"In America they have what is called the 'dead line' - fifty years of age. It is held that a minister need not look to be invited to a new sphere if he is above fifty years of age. Mr. Moody once said to Dr. Torrey, 'Torrey, this dead line is all nonsense. The reason they cross the dead line at fifty is because they do not study, and keep on preaching old sermons.' He said, 'Torrey, if a man will keep studying he will be better at fifty than he was at forty, and he will be better at sixty than he was at fifty.'"

2. Progress in personal holiness. "Sanctify." There is constant danger of professionalism. Our dress, gait, manner, reading, tone, tend to unreality and professionalism. The minister must ever be a man if he is to be a true minister.

3. Reality of spiritual influence. "Examples." Dr. G. S. Barrett tells us that: - "One day, now many years ago, a friend of mine, a man of letters, of some distinction in his day, told me that he had just been to call on the late Samuel Martin, himself one of the saintliest ministers, and I have never forgotten what my friend added to his announcement, 'Do you know, I never leave that man's presence without feeling I could never sin again.'"

Then, as Dr. Barrett asks: - "Do we leave behind us wherever we go that aroma of saintliness which they who breathe find goodness sweeter and easier than before? There was a tradition in the early Church that wherever the foot of Jesus trod sweet flowers sprang up as He passed by. Are our footsteps marked by any such fair flowers of goodness, blooming because we have passed that way?"

Be it ours to realize Keble's words: -

"There are in this loud, stunning tide

Of human care and crime,

With whom the melodies abide

Of th' everlasting chime;

Who carry music in their heart

Through dusky lane and wrangling mart,
Plying their daily task with busier feet,
Because their secret souls a holy strain repeat."

As we review this long address, and ponder afresh these aspects of ministry; its Greatness, Responsibility, and Guarantees, we see as never before that the Church of England ministry is first of all, and always, one of personal power. "Thou must thyself be true." Lord Leighton was once addressing a company of artists at the Royal Academy. He said, "Gentlemen, you can only put into a picture what is in yourself." And for this there is only one way; we must live with God.

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