

Letters to Young Ministers — The Cultivation of Personal Piety

by James Alexander (1804—1859)

It is scarcely possible to treat of some subjects without running into common places: their very importance has made them trite, just as we observe great highways to be most beaten. The question has been much discussed, whether a minister should ever preach beyond his own experience. In one sense, unquestionably, he should. He is commissioned to preach, not himself, or his experience—but Christ Jesus, the Lord, and his salvation. He is a messenger, and his message is laid before him in the scriptures; it is at his peril, that he suppresses anything, whether he has experienced it or not. He is, for example, not to withhold consolation to God's deeply afflicted ones, until he has experienced deep affliction himself. Yet every preacher of the gospel **should earnestly strive to attain the experience of the truths which he communicates, and to have every doctrine which he utters turned into vital exercises of his heart**; so that when he stands up to speak in the name of God, there may be that indescribable freshness and penetrativeness, which arise from individual and present interest in what is declared.

In every Church there are some aged and experienced Christians. These are specially regarded by the Master, and require to be fed with the finest of the wheat. The ministry is appointed with much reference to such; and they know when their portion is withheld. They may be poor and unlettered, and incompetent to judge of gesture, diction, or even grammar; but they know the difference between the 'language of Canaan,' and the 'speech of Ashdod.' I hold them to be the best judges of the ministry. How little does the starched and elegant—but shallow young divine suspect, that in yonder dark, back pew, or in the outskirts of the gallery, there sits an ancient widow, who was in Christ before he was born, and who reads him through and through. Mr. Summerfield once related to me, that Dr. Doddridge, when other more learned helps failed, used to consult a poor old woman, living near him, upon hard passages in his Commentary, and that he generally acquiesced in her conclusions. There is no teacher like the Paraclete; and the promise is, 'All your children shall be taught of the Lord.' To be able to feed such sheep of Christ, if for no other reason, the young minister should seek to attain high degrees of piety.

The truth is, such are the discouragements of genuine cross-bearing ministry, and so repugnant to the flesh are many of its duties, that nothing but true piety will hold a man up under the burden; he will sooner or later throw it off; and begin to seek his ease, or preach for 'itching ears.' It is an easy thing to go through a routine, to 'do duty,' as the phrase of the Anglican establishment is; but it is hard to the flesh, to denounce error in high places, to preach unpopular doctrine, to labor week after week in assemblies of a dozen or twenty, to spend weary hours among the diseased and dying, and to watch over the discipline of Christ's house. Nothing but an inward enjoyment of divine truth, and a reference to the final award, will stimulate a man to constancy in such labors.

You will be called, as a minister, to spend much time in laborious study, the tendency of which is to draw the mind off from spiritual concerns; and sometimes in the perusal of erroneous, heretical, and even infidel works, that you may know what it is you have to combat. Your condition in this is like that of the physician, who ventures into infection, and makes trial of poisons. You will need much grace to preserve your spiritual health in such perils. The freedom with which you must mingle in society will expose you to many of the common temptations of a wicked world; and it will require the extreme of reserve, caution, and mortification, on your part, to prevent your falling into the snare. In the present day, out of opposition to the ascetic life, we all probably act too much as if we were 'children of the bride-chamber,' and too much neglect the subjugation of the body. **That a man is a minister is no guarantee that he shall not be cast into hell-fire!** The instances of apostasy within our own ranks stare at us, like the skeletons of lost travelers, among the sands of our desert-way. No temptation has befallen them but that which is common to man. The apparitions of clerical drunkards, and the like, should forewarn us. 'Let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall!'

The apostle Paul expresses his view of this, in terms of which the force cannot be fully brought out by any translation: 'But I keep under my body'—I strike under the eye, so as to make it black and blue, a boxing phrase, indicative of strenuous efforts at mortification; as who should say, 'I subdue the flesh by violent and reiterated blows, and bring it into subjection,' 'I lead it along as a slave;' having subjugated it by assault and beating, I treat it as a slave, as boxers in the Palaestra used to drag off their conquered opponents. And the reason for this mortification of the flesh is, 'lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway.'

Dreadful words! but needed, to deter us from more dreadful destruction. **The hell of apostate ministers must be doubly severe!** It is the 'deceitfulness of sin' which hardens so many of us into carelessness about so great a danger. Pride goes before destruction, until suddenly, like Saul, the careless minister finds himself inveigled into some great sin. This may never be known to the world, yet it may lead to his ruin. 'I am persuaded,' says Owen, 'there are very few that apostatize from a profession of any continuance, such as our days abound with—but their door of entrance into the folly of backsliding was either some great and notorious sin, that bloodied their consciences, tainted their affections, and intercepted all delight of having anything more to do with God; or else it was a course of neglect in private duties, arising from a weariness of contending against that powerful aversion which they found in themselves unto them. And this also, through the craft of Satan, has been improved into many foolish and sensual opinions of living unto God without and above any duties of communion. And we find that after men have, for a while, choked and blinded their consciences with this pretense, cursed wickedness or sensuality has been the end of their folly.'

Of all people on earth, ministers most need the constant impressions derived from closet piety. If once they listen to the flattering voice of their admirers, and think they are actually holy because others treat them as such; if they dream of going to heaven ex officio; if, weary of public exercises, they neglect those which are private; or if they acquire the destructive habit of preaching and praying about Christ without any faith or

emotion; then their course is likely to be downward. Far short, however, a minister of Christ may be of so dreadful doom, and yet be almost useless. To prevent such declension, the best advice I know of, is to be much in secret devotion; including in this term the reflective reading of Scripture, meditation, self-examination, prayer and praise. And here you must not expect from me any recipe for the conduct of such exercises, or rules for the times, length, posture, place, and so forth; for I rejoice in it as the glory of the Church to which we both belong, that it is so little rubrical. How often you shall fast or sing or pray, must be left to be settled between God and your conscience; only fix in mind and heart the necessity of much devotion.

It is good sometimes to recall the examples of eminent preachers. John Welsh, the famous son-in-law of Knox, was, during his exile, minister of a village in France. A friar once lodged under his roof, and on being asked how he had been entertained by the Huguenot preacher, replied, 'Badly—for I always held there were devils haunting these minister's houses, and I am persuaded there was one with me this night; for I heard a continual whisper all the night over, which I believe was no other than the minister and the devil conversing together.' The truth was, it was the Huguenot preacher at prayer. Welsh used to say, 'he wondered how a Christian could lie in bed all night, and not rise to pray; and many times he prayed, and many times he watched.' Such cases are not altogether lacking in our own days. Mr. Simeon, of Cambridge, in more than one instance is known to have spent the whole night in prayer. Let me seriously commend to your notice a paper contained in his life by Mr. Carus, entitled, 'Circumstances of my Inward Experience.' Almost every word of it is golden, and among other passages you will note the following:

'I have never thought that the circumstance of God's having forgiven me, was any reason why I should forgive myself; on the contrary, I have always judged it better to loathe myself the more, in proportion as I was assured that God was pacified towards me. Nor have I been satisfied with viewing my sins, as men view the stars in a cloudy night, one here and another there, with great intervals between; but have endeavored to get and to preserve continually before my eyes, such a view of them as we have of the stars in the brightest night; the greater and the smaller all intermingled, and forming as it were one continual mass; nor yet, as committed a long time ago, and in many successive years; but as all forming an aggregate of guilt, and needing the same measure of humiliation daily, as they needed at the very moment they were committed. Nor would I willingly rest with such a view as presents itself to the naked eye; I have desired and do desire daily, that God would put (so to speak) a telescope to my eye, and enable me to see, not a thousand only—but millions of my sins, which are more numerous than all the stars which God himself beholds, and more than the sands upon the sea-shore. There are but two objects that I have ever desired for these forty years to behold; the one is my own vileness, and the other is the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ; and I have always thought that they should be viewed together; just as Aaron confessed all the sins of all Israel while he put them upon the head of the scapegoat.'

Such exercises as these, you will admit, may well give occasion for more than usual persistency in prayer.

But lest you think only of sorrowing exercises, let me recall a passage, which Flavel gives concerning one whom he modestly calls 'a minister,' but who is well understood to have been himself; offering it not so much for imitation, as to show how deep were the experiences of one who was busied in various learning, and in all the scholastic argumentation of his day. He was alone on a journey, and determined to spend the day in self-examination. After some less material circumstances, he proceeds thus: 'In all that day's journey, he neither met, overtook, or was overtaken by any. Thus going on his way, his thoughts began to swell and rise higher and higher, like the waters in Ezekiel's vision, until at last they became an overflowing flood. Such was the intention of his mind, such the ravishing tastes of heavenly joys, and such the full assurance of his interest therein, that he utterly lost the sight and sense of this world and all the concerns thereof; and for some hours knew no more where he was, than if he had been in a deep sleep upon his bed. Arriving, in great exhaustion, at a certain spring, sat down and washed, earnestly desiring, if it were the pleasure of God, that it might be his parting-place from this world. Death had the most amiable face, in his eye, that ever he beheld, except the face of Jesus Christ, which made it so; and he does not remember (though he believed himself dying) that he had once thought of his dear wife or children, or any other earthly concern. On reaching his inn, the same frame of spirit continued all night, so that sleep departed from him. Still, still, the joy of the Lord overflowed him, and he seemed to be an inhabitant of the other world. But within a few hours, he was sensible of the ebbing of the tide, and before night, though there was a heavenly serenity and sweet peace upon his spirit, which continued long with him, yet the transports of joy were over, and the fine edge of his delight blunted. He many years after called that day one of the days of heaven, and professed he understood more of the life of heaven by it, than by all the books he ever read, or discourses he ever entertained about it.'

Even if you should be disposed to treat this as one of the anomalies of religious experience, you will nevertheless do well to remark that the subject of these exercises is John Flavel, a man remote from enthusiasm, and whose extensive writings are characterized by regular argument and sound theology; and also that this very narrative was thought worthy of republication by the cool-headed Jonathan Edwards. The mention of which name reminds me of an instance given by him, of high religious joy of his own wife. The narrative is long; but is worthy of your perusal. Among other traits were these: the greatest, fullest, longest continued, and most constant assurance of the favor of God, and of a title to future glory; to use her own expression, 'the riches of full assurance;' the sweetness of the liberty of having wholly left the world and renounced all for God, and having nothing but God, in whom is infinite fullness. This was attended with a constant sweet peace, and calm and serenity of soul, without any cloud to interrupt it; a continual rejoicing in all the works of God's hands, the works of nature, and God's daily works of providence, all appearing with a sweet smile upon them; a wonderful access to God by prayer, as it were seeing him, and sensibly, immediately conversing with him, as much oftentimes (she said) as if Christ were here on earth sitting on a visible throne, to be approached to and conversed with. All former troubles were forgotten, and all sorrow and sighing fled away, excepting grief for past sins and for remaining corruption, and that Christ is loved no more, and that God is no more honored in the world; and a compassionate grief towards fellow creatures; a daily sensible doing and suffering

everything for God, and bearing trouble for God, and doing all as the service of love, and so doing it with a continual uninterrupted cheerfulness, peace, and joy.

Now, though these are the experiences of a woman, will anyone say there is anything in them which would be unreasonable or undesirable in a minister of Christ? True, we are by no means to make piety consist in transports, as is irrefragably proved by the great man who recorded these things: yet there are hours or days in every life of long continued piety, which are remembered for years, and shed their light over all the remaining pilgrimage. And who should covet these Pisgah views, if not ministers of the word?

There is among the posthumous papers of the incomparable Pascal, one, which he long carried about his person, and which contains the record of a particular visitation of divine love. It is one of the most seraphic productions of human language: in some places the joy and rapture and dissolving love seem to defy all ordinary expressions, and he can only write down such broken phrases as, 'joy-joy-tears-tears!' The greatest scoffers will hardly reckon Pascal and Edwards among unreasoning devotees.

Our age is disposed to sneer at high religious passions—it is perhaps the reason why the pathos of the pulpit has to such a degree departed. It is not, however, as a homiletic instrumentality that I would urge you to grow in grace—but far more momentous reasons, which, as a preacher, you have long since learned.