

The Minister's Self-Watch

"Take heed unto thyself, and unto the doctrine." — 1 Timothy 4:16

Summary:

The minister is the chief instrument of his calling and must therefore guard his spiritual condition with exceptional care. Genuine grace, a living communion with God, personal holiness, sound character, disciplined powers, and freedom from besetting sin are essential to effective ministry. Because a pastor's example magnifies both virtue and failure, he must continually watch his inner life, conduct, habits, and health, and depend on God to keep himself and his work faithful.

Outline:

1. **Ensure that we ourselves are saved**
 - Ministerial office cannot compensate for the absence of saving grace and a living knowledge of Christ.
2. **Possess strong piety**
 - A minister must remain close to God, spiritually vigorous, watchful, and prepared for the distinctive temptations of his calling.
3. **Maintain a blameless personal character**
 - Holiness, consistency, integrity, and careful conduct must confirm the message and adorn the ministry.

Text

Every workman knows that he needs to keep his tools in good repair, for “if the iron be blunt, and he do not whet the edge, then must he put to more strength” (Ecclesiastes 10:10). If the workman loses the edge from his axe, he knows he must work harder, or his work will be badly done. It is true that the Lord can use flawed tools—sometimes making seemingly foolish preaching effective for conversion. He can also work independently of agents, saving people directly through His Holy Spirit without a preacher. However, we should not see God’s absolute sovereignty as a guide for our own actions.

He may do as he pleases in his own absolute authority, but our duty is to follow his clearer instructions. One clear fact is that the Lord often matches means to ends, which teaches us that we are most likely to succeed when we are spiritually prepared. In other words, our ability to serve the Lord optimally depends on the state of our gifts and graces; we tend to perform best when these are in good order and worst when they are out of alignment. This serves as a practical truth for our guidance: when the Lord makes exceptions, they merely confirm the rule.

In a sense, we are our own instruments, so we need to keep ourselves in good shape. To preach the gospel, I must rely on my own voice, which means I need to develop my vocal abilities. Similarly, I can only think with my own mind and feel with my own heart, so I must nurture my intellectual and emotional capacities.

Storing books, forming societies, or planning projects is futile if I neglect cultivating myself; books, agencies, and systems are only distant tools for my divine calling. My spirit, soul, and body are my closest instruments for sacred service, and my spiritual abilities and inner life are my weapons in spiritual warfare.

Our main priority should be ensuring that we ourselves are saved.

A gospel teacher must first be a partaker of the gospel himself. We do not simply accept the apostolic succession of young men based solely on their claims. Paying fees to learned doctors, receiving classical education, or obtaining certificates does not prove a divine calling. True piety is essential; without a call to holiness, one is not truly called to the ministry. The rabbis say, “First, improve yourself; then help others.” Gregory also states, “The hand that seeks to cleanse others should itself be pure.”

Conversion is vital for a minister, and this shouldn't be taken for granted. Many fakes and self-deceivers surround ministers like vultures circling a carcass. Truth doesn't appear on the surface; it must be retrieved from the deepest depths. We need to examine ourselves with great care and thoroughness, to avoid the risk of failing ourselves after teaching others.

Unconverted ministry involves the most unnatural relationships. A pastor without saving grace is like a blind man employed to teach optics, philosophising about light and vision, talking to others about the subtle shades and delicate blendings of the prismatic

colours, while he himself is absolutely in the dark! Whatever his natural gifts or mental powers, he is utterly out of place in spiritual work if he has no spiritual life; and it is his duty to leave the ministerial office until he has received this first and simplest of qualifications for it. However, the word of an unconverted man may be blessed to the conversion of souls, since the Lord, while he disowns the man, will still honour his own truth.

Richard Baxter, in his “Reformed Pastor,” writes as follows:

Be cautious that you do not lose the grace of God that you offer to others, and that you remain unaware of the powerful impact of the gospel you preach. While you declare the need for a Savior to the world, ensure your hearts do not overlook Him, or you may miss out on His saving grace and benefits. Be vigilant to avoid perishing yourself while warning others of danger, and prevent starving spiritually while you prepare their sustenance.

Many men warn others against the very place of torment they are eager to enter themselves; numerous preachers now in hell have, countless times, urged their audiences to be diligent and cautious to avoid it. Can any rational person believe that God would save people for offering salvation to others, yet refuse it themselves, or for sharing truths they neglect and misuse? Many tailors wear rags despite making costly clothing for others; similarly, many cooks barely lick their fingers after preparing expensive dishes for others.

Understand this, brethren: God has never saved anyone simply for being a preacher or for being a skilled preacher. Instead, salvation comes to those who are justified and sanctified, and thus faithful to their Master’s work. Therefore, focus on yourself first—be the person you encourage others to become, believe what you persuade them to believe, and truly embrace the Christ and Spirit you offer. He who commanded you to love your neighbours as yourself meant that you should love yourself without hatred or destruction—both of yourself and others.

The minister should possess strong piety.

The minister is not to be content with being equal to the rank and file of Christians; he must be a mature and advanced believer; for the ministry of Christ has been called “*the choicest of his choice, the elect of his election, a church picked out of the church.*” If he were assigned to a regular position and routine tasks, he might be content with ordinary grace. However, since he is chosen for extraordinary efforts and called to a perilous role, he would strive to attain the superior strength necessary to meet the demands of his station.

His vital sense of divine goodness must beat powerfully and consistently; his faith must shine brightly; his determination must be firm; his actions must be swift; and his entire being must be in the best possible mental health.

Weakest-minded, timid, carnal, and imbalanced men are not suitable for the pulpit. If they were given a little success, they would be intoxicated with vanity. If we as a nation were called to defend our homes, we would not send out our boys and girls to meet the enemy; neither should the church send out every fluent novice or inexperienced zealot to plead for the faith.

The highest moral character must be maintained. Many are disqualified from office in the church who are well enough to serve as simple members. I hold very stern opinions with regard to Christian men who have fallen into gross sin; I rejoice that they may meet in the congregation and may be received into the church with mixed hope and caution; but I seriously question whether a man who has grossly sinned should be very readily restored to the pulpit.

As John Angell James remarks,

“When a preacher of righteousness has stood in the way of sinners, he should never again open his lips in the great congregation until his repentance is as notorious as his sin.”

Open immorality, in most cases, however deep the repentance, is a fatal sign that ministerial graces were never in the man’s character.

We need to live very near to God if we are to approve ourselves for the ministry. As ministers, your whole life will be shaped by the strength of your piety. If your zeal grows dull, you will not pray well in the pulpit; you will pray worse in the family, and worst when alone in the study.

You may speak with as well-chosen words as before; but there will be a loss of spiritual force. You will shake yourselves as at other times, even as Samson did, but you will find that your great strength has departed (Judges 16:20). It is like watches and the public clock; if your watch is wrong, only you will be misled. But if the town clock makes a mistake, the whole town is misled. Similarly, the minister is the town clock; many depend on him for their timing. If he is incorrect, they all drift into error, and he bears much responsibility for the consequences.

Overall, the ministry faces numerous temptations. Though many believe it offers a safe retreat from temptation, the dangers are actually more frequent and subtle than those faced by most Christians. While the ministry may offer a vantage point from its elevated position, this height is perilous, and for many, the ministry has become a treacherous downfall.

If you inquire about what these temptations are, we might not have enough time to specify each one. There are open and hidden snares, with the most dangerous being the lure of ministerialism (or “professionalism”)—when we approach the Bible, prayer, and our faith as professionals rather than as personal disciplines. John Owen said, “No man

preaches his sermon well to others if he doth not first preach it to his own heart.” Brethren, maintaining this personal integrity is exceptionally challenging.

Our office, instead of helping our piety as some claim, has become a significant obstacle due to our own flawed nature; at least, I see it that way. While we fight against bureaucracy and formalism, it so easily entangles us, much like a long garment that twists around the runner’s feet and hinders his race!

“Take heed to yourselves,” says Baxter,

Since the tempter will strike first and most sharply against you, if you lead the fight against him, he will hold back only as long as God allows. He bears the greatest hatred for those who do the most to oppose him. Because he despises Christ more than anyone—who is the General of the army, the ‘Captain of our salvation,’ and works tirelessly against darkness—he also targets the leaders more than the ordinary soldiers, because he knows he can cause chaos among the others if the leaders fall first.

Even though you are wise and learned, be careful not to be outwitted. The devil is a smarter scholar; he can disguise himself as an angel of light to deceive. He might deceive you from within, trip you up before you realize it, and manipulate you into losing your faith or innocence without you noticing. He will even make you believe that these are increased or multiplied when they are actually gone.

The minister must have a blameless personal character.

We must cultivate the highest level of godliness because our work demands it. The effectiveness of the Christian ministry depends directly on the strength of our renewed nature and our character. May we never be priests of God at the altar, and sons of Belial outside the tabernacle door; but on the contrary, may we, as was said of Basil the Great (330–379 AD), bishop of Caesarea, *“thunder in our doctrine, and lighten in our conversation.”*

We distrust individuals with two faces and doubt those whose words and actions conflict. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words, so a corrupt life will overshadow even the most eloquent speech. Ultimately, our most genuine achievements are built through our actions; our character proves more convincing than our words. I also want to warn you not only about sins of commission but equally about those of omission.

It is a horrible thing to be an inconsistent minister. Our Lord is said to have been like Moses, for this reason, that he was “a prophet mighty in word and in deed.” The man of God should imitate his Master in this; he should be mighty both in the word of his doctrine and in the deed of his example, and mightiest, if possible, in the second. It is remarkable that the only church history we have is, “The Acts of the Apostles.”

The Holy Spirit has not preserved their sermons, though they were excellent—better than anything we will ever preach. Nonetheless, the Holy Spirit has only documented

their “acts.” When we hold church meetings, we record minutes and resolutions, but the Holy Spirit only notes the “acts.” Our deeds should be worthy of recording, because they will be documented eventually. We must live as if under God’s direct gaze, as if in the light of the all-revealing day.

Holiness in a minister is both his most essential quality and his greatest adornment. Being morally upright alone is insufficient; a higher virtue is required. A consistent character is necessary, but it must be anointed with sacred consecration, for without that, the quality that makes us most pleasing to God and others will be absent.

A preacher’s life should attract people to Christ, but it’s unfortunate if it repels them. The holiness of ministers loudly calls sinners to repent, and when combined with joyful humility, it becomes incredibly compelling.

One old episcopal minister has well said, “The star which led the wise men unto Christ, the pillar of fire which led the children unto Canaan, not only shone, but went before them” (Matthew 2:9; Exodus 13:21). The voice of Jacob will do little good if the hands be the hands of Esau. In the law, also, no person who had any blemish was to offer the oblations of the Lord (Leviticus 21:17-20). The Lord is teaching us the graces that are necessary to be his ministers.

A man I knew, who was once poor, was excited about a minister visiting his home. Weeks before, his wife diligently cleaned the house, and he often hurried home early, hoping to see the minister. This continued for some time, but eventually the minister either forgot his promise or grew tired, and the visit never happened. As a result, that man lost trust in all preachers, believing they cared only for the rich and not for the poor. For many years, he didn’t settle in any church until he eventually visited Exeter Hall, where I was preaching, where he stayed as a listener until circumstances led him away.

Convincing him that any minister could be honest and love both rich and poor impartially was no easy task. Let us be careful with our words to prevent causing such misunderstanding.

We should remember that we are constantly being observed. Men rarely have the audacity to break the law openly in front of others, yet our lives are lived under such scrutiny. We are watched by numerous keen eyes; therefore, we should behave in a way that we wouldn’t worry even if all of heaven, earth, and hell were watching. Our public standing is a significant benefit when we can demonstrate the fruits of the Spirit in our actions.

When we advise you, my dear brethren, to take care of your life, we mean paying attention even to the smallest aspects of your character. Steer clear of minor debts, being late, gossip, nicknaming, petty quarrels, and other small vices that spoil the mind like flies on ointment. The self-indulgences that have damaged the reputations of many must be avoided by us. We should also abstain from familiarities that cause suspicion, and from roughness and foppery that make others look down on us. We cannot risk losing respect over trivial matters.

Even in your recreations, remember you are ministers. When not on duty, you remain officers in Christ's army and should conduct yourselves accordingly. If you need to handle minor concerns, how much more careful must you be with vital issues like morality, honesty, and integrity! A minister cannot afford to fail here. His private life must always align with his calling, or his reputation will swiftly decline. The sooner he withdraws, the better—his continued service will only bring shame to God's work and harm to himself.

This lecture is taken from C. H. Spurgeon's *Lectures to My Students*, First Series, first published in 1875.