

The Reformed Pastor

By Richard Baxter



### III

## THE OVERSIGHT OF OURSELVES

**L**et us now consider what it is to take heed to ourselves. Let us see what we must do. Let our hearts also attend to this task as we understand it.

First, we are exhorted to take heed to ourselves, lest we should be void of that saving grace of God which we are offering to others. For it is possible to offer this grace to others and yet be a stranger to the effectual workings of that Gospel which we preach. We can proclaim to others the necessity of a Savior, and in our own hearts be neglecting Him. We miss an interest in Christ and His saving benefits!

The danger of not personally experiencing the grace of God

So let us take heed to ourselves lest we perish, while we call upon others to take heed of perishing! We can starve while we prepare food for others. In Daniel 12:3, the promise to "shine as the stars" is given to those who turn many to righteousness. It is on the supposition, however, that they first be turned to righteousness themselves. For their own sincerity in the faith is the condition of their glory.

It is possible that many a man has warned others not to come to that place of torment which they have hastened to themselves. Is it possible also that many a preacher is now in hell who has called upon his hearers a hundred times to use their utmost care and diligence to escape its dark destiny?

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Can any reasonable man imagine that God should save him for offering salvation to others, while he refuses it for himself? Can he be saved when he tells others truths which he has neglected and abused himself?

Many a tailor can go in rags while making costly clothes for others. Many a cook may scarcely lick his fingers when he has prepared the most sumptuous dishes for others to eat. Believe it, brethren, that God never saved any man for being a preacher. Nor did He reject a man because he was not an able preacher. He saved a preacher because he was a justified and sanctified man.

Take heed, therefore, to yourselves first. See to it that *you be* the worshiper which you persuade your hearers to be. Make sure first that you believe what you persuade others daily to believe. Make sure you have heartily entertained the Christ and the Holy Spirit in your own soul before you offer Him to others. He that bids you love your neighbor as yourself implied that you should love yourself instead of hating and destroying yourself—and others, too.

The danger of living with sins we preach against

Second, we are exhorted to take heed to ourselves, lest we live with those actual sins which we may preach against in others. Let us see that we are not guilty of that which we may daily condemn.

Will we make it our work to magnify God? And when we have done so, do we dishonor Him as much as others? Will we proclaim Christ's governing power? And yet when we have spoken of this power, do we deny it, and rebel ourselves? Will we preach God's laws and willfully break them? If sin be evil, why do we live in it?

If there be no sin, why do we dissuade men from it? If it be dangerous, how dare we venture on it! If it does not exist, how dare we tell men it is so? If God's threatenings be true, why do we not fear them? If they are false, why do we trouble men needlessly with them and make them frightened without a cause?

Do you not know the judgment of God? They who commit such things are said to be worthy of death, and yet would we persist in doing them? (Romans 1:32). You who



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teach others, will you not teach yourselves? You who say a man should not commit adultery, or be drunk or be covetous—are you such yourself? You who make your boasts in the law—do you not realize that in breaking the law you dishonor God? (Romans 2:21-23).

What! Shall the tongue speak evil that also speaks against evil? Shall it censure and slander and secretly backbite while it cries down these behaviors and the like in others? Take heed then to yourselves, lest you cry down sin and yet do not overcome it in yourself. For as 2 Peter 2:19 reminds us, of whom a man is overcome, of the same he is brought into bondage. To whom you yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants you are whom you obey—whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness (Romans 6:16). Yes, it is easier to judge sin than to overcome it.

Third, we need to take heed to ourselves that we may not be unfit for the great tasks which we have undertaken to complete. He must not be himself a babe in knowledge who will teach men all those mysterious things that are to be known in order to be assured of salvation.

Oh, what qualifications are necessary for that man who has such a charge upon him as we have! How many difficulties in theology need to be understood! What fundamentals of the faith must of necessity be known! How many obscure texts of Scripture must be expounded! How many duties must be done, wherein we may fail if we do not understand clearly their character, their purpose, and their context! How many sins we need to avoid, which cannot be done without understanding and foresight!

How many sly and subtle temptations we need to expose before our people's eyes—in order to escape them! How many weighty and intricate cases of conscience do we need almost daily to resolve! Can so much work, and such work as this, be done by raw, unqualified men?

What strongholds have we to batter down, and how many there are of them! What subtle, diligent, and obstinate resistance must we expect to deal with in every heart! How prejudice blocks our way in seeking to obtain a fair

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hearing! Often we are not disputing on equal terms, but with children who cannot understand us.

We have distracted people with whom we work. We have willful, unreasonable people to deal with, who are still never more convinced than when they are silenced in their own arguments. When they give you no reason, they will give you their resolution. We have to dispute against men's wills and their sensual passions, as much as against their understandings. We have not one but multitudes of raging passions and contradictory enemies at once to dispute against whenever we go about the conversion of a sinner.

O dear brothers, what men then should we be in skill, in resolution, and in unwearied diligence, that have all this to contend with and to do? Did not Paul cry out, "who is sufficient for these things?" (2 Corinthians 2:16). Can we then afford to be proud and lazy, as if we were sufficient? As Peter says to every Christian when considering the charge, there should be the reflection of our character: "What manner of person ought we to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" (2 Peter 3:11). So may I say to every minister, seeing how all these challenges lie upon us, what manner of persons ought we to be in all holy endeavors and resolutions for our work!

Such responsibilities require maturity.

This, then, is not a burden to put on the shoulders of a child. What skill every part of a work requires, and how much time it requires! I do not think preaching a sermon is the hardest part of our work. Yet what skill is necessary to make the truth plain, in order to convince our hearers! How hard it is to let the irresistible light penetrate into their conscience, and then to keep it there and drive the truth home! How difficult it is to work the truth into their minds and to work Christ into their affections! How clever it is for the pastor to meet every objection raised, and clearly to answer those raising them! How challenging it is to drive sinners to convictions so that they see there is no hope unless they be converted or unavoidably be condemned.



To do all this in a language and a manner appropriate to our ministry, and yet which is most suitable to the capacities of our hearers—this requires much art. All this and a great deal more is required for every sermon we preach with holy skill. So great a God whose message we speak should be honored by our delivery of it.

How lamentable it is then to have a message from the God of heaven—that has everlasting consequences to the souls of men—and yet to give this word so weakly! How unfortunate it is to behave so impudently, or communicate so superficially, so that the whole business of our God miscarries in our hands! When God is dishonored, His work disgraced, and sinners hardened rather than converted through our weakness and neglect, what a responsibility we have!

How many times have worldly hearers gone home jarring at the obvious and dishonorable failings of the preacher! How many sleep before us, because our hearts and tongues are all so sleepy! And we do not even have enough skill and zeal to wake them up!

Moreover, think what skill is necessary to defend the truth against those who oppose it and deal with those who argue against it. What skill then is needed to deal privately with one ignorant, poor soul about his conversion!

Will a common measure of holy skill and ability of prudence and other qualifications serve for such a task? I know necessity may cause this Church to tolerate the weak. But woe to us if we tolerate and indulge in our own weakness. Do not your reason and conscience tell you that if you dare to venture on so high a work as this, you should spare no pains to be fitted to perform it? It is not now and then a random and idle exercise or taste of studies that will serve to make a sound man of God.

We can excuse ourselves from the necessary intellectual diligence by saying that the Holy Spirit must alone qualify and assist us in our work. Does God encourage us in such idleness? Does He miraculously give us knowledge by dreams when we are asleep? Or does He take us up into heaven and show us His counsels? Oh that men should

The need for diligence

dare so sinfully to quench the Spirit by such laziness, and then pretend it is the Spirit who is doing it!

God has required of us that we be “not slothful in business, but fervent in spirit, serving the Lord” (Romans 12:11). We must provoke our hearers to be such people, as well as be such people ourselves. Therefore, brethren, lose no time: Study and pray, converse and practice. By these four ways your abilities will be increased.

Take heed therefore to yourselves, lest you are weak through your own negligence, and lest you mar the work of God by your weakness. For “as a man is, so is his strength” (Judges 8:21).

Beware of moral inconsistency.

Fourth, take heed to yourselves, lest you exemplify contradictory doctrine. Beware, lest you lay such stumbling blocks before the blind that you occasion their ruin. Beware, lest you undo with your lives, what you say with your tongues. Beware, lest you become the greatest hindrance to the success of your own labors.

It hinders our work greatly when other men contradict in private what we have declared to them publicly about the Word of God. This is so because we cannot be there to contradict them and to show up their folly. But it will much more hinder our work if we contradict ourselves. If our actions become a lie to our tongues, then what we may build up in an hour or two of discourse can be demolished with our hands in a week. This is the way to make men think that the Word of God is merely an idle tale and to make preaching appear no better than prating. For he that means as he speaks will surely do as he speaks.

Thus one proud, surly, lordly word, or one needless contention, or one covetous action may cut the throat of many a sermon.

Tell me brethren, in the fear of the Lord, do you have regard for the success of your labors, or do you not? Do you long to see it have effect upon the souls of your hearers? If you do not, why do you preach? What do you study for? Why do you call yourselves ministers of Christ? But if you do, then surely you cannot find within your heart the desire to mar your work for a worthless thing.



It is an obvious error for all to see in those ministers of the Church who make such a wide gulf between their preaching and their living. They will study hard to *preach* exactly, and yet study little or not at all to *live* exactly. All the week long is little enough to study how to speak for two hours; and yet one hour seems too much time to study how to live all the week. They are loath to misplace a word in their sermons; yet they think nothing of misplacing affections, words, and actions in the course of their lives. Oh how curiously I have heard some men preach, and how carelessly have I seen them live!

So brethren, we have certainly great reason to take heed to what we do, as well as to what we say. If we be the servants of Christ, we must not be speakers only, but must serve Him also with our deeds. "Be doers of the Word, that in our deeds we may be blessed" (James 1:25). As we expect our audience to be "doers of the Word, and not hearers only," so, too, we must be doers and not speakers only, lest we be "deceivers of ourselves" (James 1:22).

A practical doctrine must be practically preached. We must study as hard how to live well as how to preach well. We must think, and think again, how to compose our lives (as well as our sermons) as may best lead to men's salvation.

If saving souls be your end, brethren, then you will certainly attend to this goal out of the pulpit as well as in it. If it be your end, you will live for it, and make all your endeavors reach for it.

### MOTIVES FOR THIS OVERSIGHT OF ONESELF

Having shown you what it is to take heed to ourselves, let me next lay before you some motives to awaken you to this duty.

First of all, you have heaven to win or lose yourselves. This is your goal as well as leading souls to everlasting happiness or misery. Therefore, you should begin at home

Need to be doers  
of the Word

The eternal consequences of our  
actions