

*Preaching and Preachers*

with regard to examinations. We all know what it is to sit and listen to a lecture and to hear the lecturer saying certain things. As you listen you say, 'Yes, all right, I know that.' Then later you go to the examination hall and you have to answer a question on that very matter, and you suddenly find that you do not know much about it. You thought you did, but you do not. So the rule is, whenever anything strikes you put it down on paper. The result is that you will soon find that you have accumulated a little pile of skeletons—skeletons of sermons—in this way. Then you will be truly rich.

I have known ministers to be frantic on a Saturday with no texts or sermons for the Sunday, and trying desperately to get hold of something. That is simply because they have not practised what I am advocating. This is, I would say, if I had to single out one thing as being more important than anything else in the life of a preacher, this is beyond all question on the practical level the most important of all. I remember once that, looking through my pile of skeletons just before leaving for my summer vacation, I happened to notice that there were ten skeletons bearing on the same theme. I there and then arranged them in order and so knew that I had a series of ten consecutive sermons ready for my return. In a sense I no longer needed the holiday!

Next in order I would say is—and I cannot think of a better term though I do not like it in some ways because it has been so abused—'devotional reading'. I do not mean by that what are called devotional commentaries. I abominate 'devotional' commentaries. I do not want other people to do my devotions for me; yet I cannot think of a better term here. I am thinking of a type of reading which will help you in general to understand and enjoy the Scriptures, and to prepare you for the pulpit. This type of reading comes next to the Scriptures. What is it? I would not hesitate to put into this category the reading of the Puritans. That is precisely what they do for us. Those men were preachers, they were practical, experimental preachers, who had a great pastoral interest and care for the people. So as you read them you find that they not only give knowledge and information, they at

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the same time do something to you. Again I would emphasise that it is most important that the preacher should know not only himself in general but also his particular moods and states and conditions. The preacher should never be moody; but he will have varying moods. No man can tell what he will feel like tomorrow morning; you do not control that. Our business is to do something about these changing moods and not to allow ourselves to become victims of them. You are not exactly the same two days running, and you have to treat yourself according to your varying conditions. So you will have to discover what is the most appropriate reading for yourself in these varying states.

You will find, I think, in general, that the Puritans are almost invariably helpful. I must not go into this overmuch, but there are Puritans and Puritans! John Owen on the whole is difficult to read; he was a highly intellectual man. But there were Puritan writers who were warmer and more direct and more experimental. I shall never cease to be grateful to one of them called Richard Sibbes who was balm to my soul at a period in my life when I was overworked and badly overtired, and therefore subject in an unusual manner to the onslaughts of the devil. In that state and condition to read theology does not help, indeed it may be well-nigh impossible; what you need is some gentle tender treatment for your soul. I found at that time that Richard Sibbes, who was known in London in the early seventeenth century as 'The Heavenly Doctor Sibbes' was an unfailing remedy. His books *The Bruised Reed* and *The Soul's Conflict* quietened, soothed, comforted, encouraged and healed me. I pity the preacher who does not know the appropriate remedy to apply to himself in these various phases through which his spiritual life must inevitably pass.

This may sound strange to some, even wrong. You may have a theoretical outlook; you have not been in the ministry and you know nothing of its problems and cares and trials. The Apostle Paul knew what it was to experience 'without were fightings, within were fears'. He knew what it was to be 'cast down' and 'in great conflict' and to be