

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

SELF-POSSESSION AND EFFECTUAL SERVICE.

A SERENE and undistracted temper is necessary, not only for the man who is chosen to be a recipient of Divine revelations, but for the man also who is to be a messenger of those revelations to others. Courage before men is a salient characteristic of the genuine prophet, and a timid, blushing, embarrassed prophet is an impossible compound. The first apostles did much to prove their place in the holy succession by the boldness with which they spake under circumstances which might have abashed less convinced and resolute men. St. Paul recognised the obligation resting upon him to preach the gospel "with boldness."

In the chapters to which the vision of Ezekiel is introductory the prophetic office is illustrated by the duty laid upon the sentinel or watchman. For such work the power of calm, unerring discernment is indispensable. One set apart to this momentous task must be self-collected, able to see clearly, having all his wits under control as well as stout in heart to peal promptly out the unhesitating note of warning. The recruit who has the slightest tendency to hysteria or hallucination, who is inclined to be unduly sanguine or unduly depressed, who may be carried away by panic, struck dumb by strange spectacles, frightened out of his wits by phantom forms or phantom voices, is not the man for the post. He must be master of himself, able to see with his own eyes, to trust the correctness of his own judgments, to hold his own in the world.

Unless a man can have self-command, or at least acquire it by discipline, he is unfit to be God's watchman. The nervous prophet, the self-deprecating herald, the apostle who allows himself to be overborne by the clamour of the world, stultifies his own mission and does not a little to discredit his message.

Presence of mind or self-possession is often a secret of success in common things. In not a few vocations the cool head and uniform self-command are essential to life itself. The man who works at a perilous post on the wharf or in the shipyard, the signalman, the pointsman, the porter who has to cross the line when trains are coming in opposite directions, the commander of the ironclad, the pilot, the surgeon who undertakes critical operations, the advocate who has to win a verdict, must all be self-possessed, alert for every emergency, able to mobilise the wits at a moment's notice, apt to deal with the unexpected when it springs up. In fact, it would be a crime in such cases to lack the art of self-possession, and it is a duty to have it. Sooner or later occasions come to all of us when everything turns upon having ourselves well in hand, never allowing the lapse into momentary forgetfulness, never permitting the mind or the senses to be shocked into inaction. A man must have confidence in the art he has assumed, and in his own aptitude for applying the principles of his art, and above all in the truths to the promulgation of which his art is to contribute. He who has a modest faith in his own resources, be they natural or spiritual, will inspire some degree of that faith into others. If the actor in important events is discomposed, agitated, ill at ease, whilst entering upon his work, not only do the observers find themselves infected with the same temper as they watch him, but they tremble for the results. The man never inspires confidence who cannot command his own faculties at the moment, however vast the stores of knowledge and power with which popular rumour may credit him. It is the working capital in actual view which assures rather than the unrealisable reserves and assets.

We cannot persuade others till we ourselves are not only persuaded, but so absorbed by the subject-matter of our persuasion that all the powers of the mind rise up to em-

phasise it. The duty of self-command implies very much more than subjecting our bad passions to the control of the will ; and if we do not learn self-command in the widest possible sense of the term, we inevitably weaken our effectiveness for good. The wisest man is just as much disqualified by fluttered moods and weak wavering accents from swaying others as the ignorant or the imbecile. This lack of robust self-collectedness makes some men ciphers who might be factors of surpassing potency. At critical moments they cannot bring their faculties into action. When the occasion comes their thoughts seem to crack and sink away like thin ice. Coherence goes and the pre-arranged demonstration flies into the frailest splinters or disappears altogether. Nervous embarrassment, inability to bring our best gifts into action at the call of a providential opportunity, palpitations, flusterments, hesitancies seem to turn our message into farce and dumb show. Again and again we find ourselves unfit to interpret, and courageously ring out the message of God's will, and others intuitively know our unhappy secret. God wants us for vessels in which His treasure shall be carried, but we allow ourselves to break up into a handful of potsherds, and men are not accustomed to think that potsherds carry precious things. Who of us does not feel that this is a source of lifelong weakness and discouragement? For lack of self-control, however richly dowered for service we may be, we are in a position, like that of the commander in a campaign, one-half of whose forces are either mutinous or have been shut up by some flank movement of the enemy. One faculty we can quietly use at will is better for practical ends than a score faculties which are not under perfect control.

Self-possession is a sign of the quietness of faith. When attained by spiritual processes it becomes a test of that trust in God which is learned in His immediate presence and extends into the daily fulfilment of the tasks he has

fixed. Without this tranquility which grows from faith we can have no power. We need to be assured not only that we are accepted for the Divine service, but of God's good pleasure likewise to uphold us in our work. There can be no confusion or embarrassment where that fixed persuasion exists. The man who is bold at God's word is bold because authority is behind him, and authority means the mighty grace which will not suffer its obedient instruments to be confounded or brought to shame. The consciousness that God is working through every part of the mind will help to keep the faculties of the mind in orderly and undistracted co-operation. Trepidation implies a suspicion that some power of either earth or hell is moved against us, and that the power which thus menaces our efficiency is greater than the power that is on our side. Sacred work is more or less discredited by distraction and soul-relaxing fear, for these things are symptoms of guilty mistrust and unfit our sacrifice for the Divine acceptance. A true faith should enable us to sway our finest powers for God and His service.

It is well to honour man as man, but that honour must not be exaggerated into an idolatry of rank, power, prestige, which debases our independence and incapacitates us for service. Respect for the opinions of others should never lead us to cancel ourselves and the contents of our own consciences. Sidney Smith once said in a vein of characteristic banter that "when he was dining with a Dean he crumbled his bread with one hand and with a bishop he performed the same feat with two, so extreme was his nervousness." The probability is, that if symptoms of that kind did appear on either side, the prelates of those days would not feel quite at their ease with the witty cleric. Some of us cherish a silly and gratuitous veneration for the mere clothes which deck out those who are made of the same clay with ourselves. We need a self-collectedness which is never nonplussed by pomp and parade. We are

sometimes dazed into an ignoble surrender of ourselves and of all that God would teach through us. The chased hare, it is said, may be brought to a dead stand by the sudden shouts of its pursuers, and some of us seem to be so constituted that the hue and cry of inane worldlings, a chorus of anonymous press-writers, the prance of lordly assumption in our track, will stupefy us and root our very feet to the earth. Amazed, overborne, surprised into paralysis, browbeaten out of our self-command, we are quite disqualified for victorious religious life and service. Without the quiet mastery of his own faculties a man can neither learn all he is meant to learn in God's presence nor impressively teach others. It is no shame to us that we are stricken, dumb-founded, unable to keep a tight reign over our own thoughts and emotions when vivid visions of God burst upon our souls, but it is a reproach to us that we should be terrorised into uncertainty, hesitation, dimness of perception and feebleness of testimony by undue deference to the world. The homage we pay to wealth, learning, social status is so abject that our personality, with all its powers, convictions, responsible discernments, is brought to the vanishing point. Heretical forms of worship other than those of Buddhism may land us in the half-way house to a new form of Nirvana, and deprive the world of good that should have been achieved by the force of our unimpaired personality.

Some forms of self-possession are not achieved by a dutiful response to the Divine voice which solicits our trust and bids us be ourselves and they repel us. We meet now and again with blatant, loud-talking persons who have never had to struggle against tempers of oppressive diffidence, and who are rarely at a loss in the presence of their fellows; and their imperturbability arises not from the fact that they trust God with any peculiar fervour, but from the unbounded confidence in themselves that seems to have

been ingrained from the beginning. Such men obviously rate themselves as Titans of the purest caste, and eye the planet and all it contains as though it were a mere wren's nest whose callow fledgelings they may venture to despise. Their self-possession is based on overweening conceit, and they have a comfortable blindness to the learning, virtue and experience which abound on every side, and indeed an ill-disguised contempt for such things. With brows of brass, clattering tongues and speech of unflinching volubility, they reprove, instruct and exhort without the faintest sense of misgiving; but behind their loudness and indeed the secret spring of it, there is an inexhaustible stock of ambition, denseness and audacity, and a frivolous estimate of everybody's talent but their own. The set determination to make themselves heard, to shine to the top of their capacity, to succeed at any price, enables them when occasion offers to do more than justice to themselves. No struggle or agony or self-discipline has contributed to the result. We feel at once it is the impudence of the charlatan and not the God-fed firmness and courage of the prophet. We recoil from egotism, self-advertisement, the dogmatic cocksureness which is scarcely distinguishable from the crow of conceit; and our haunting fear of being blatant may sometimes make us forget the duty of self-control and so far diminish our power of bearing effectual testimony to truths the world needs. We must have self-command but self-command acquired by altogether different methods from that. The strength and boldness we need in speaking for God must be built up in many cases from its very foundations upon religious principles and experiences. The man whom nature does not help, and who by the power of superhuman influence alone grows bold and manly, will far surpass the other in effectual service for God.

It may sometimes happen that in the physical life there

is a barrier to that self-possession which is a prime condition of usefulness and in one case out of a hundred the barrier may be insurmountable. Excellent and high-principled men and women assume too readily that they are the victims of nervous disorder, weak circulation, faintness. When they have something to say which really ought to be said, the brain gets confused, the heart comes into the mouth, the pulse rises to fever height and the power of utterance fails. Here and there such physical incapacity may actually exist, but do not let us lightly put ourselves into this valetudinarian category or discount our possibilities of useful service. God's family is not quite so rickety as the complaints of its various members about their ailments might lead us to suppose. We may learn a manly mastery of ourselves which will make us worthy channels of God's message. The mightiest of the apostles had sometimes to do his work "in weakness and fear and much trembling," yet recognised an ideal and an obligation to preach the word "with boldness."

Let God's imperative help us. It is a Divine voice which calls us to mental collectedness, to the quiet use and control of all our hidden gifts. He would fain rescue us from our official frailties, from proneness to mental confusion, from a culpable awe of the face of our fellows, from that nervous paralysis which so often has its roots in a morbid or defective spiritual life. It is not His will to have servants who lack the note of courage, competence, effectuality. He does not desire that we should be unduly depressed by the vision of His own majesty, much less by the specious shows of the world and the glamour of a fashionable sciolism. His word is "stand upon thy feet." "Answer Me with girt loins like a man," "Fear not," "Be quiet," "Take breath." Never let us grovel before the face of our fellows and discredit our work by palpitating dumbness. The Most High wants to put us at our ease

in His own presence first and then in the midst of a proud, uproarious world. Our task may be grave and vast, criticism may be rapacious, opposition spiteful, noisy, widespread, but let us be calm. God comes to bring virility, fitness, large endowment and not atrophy, dumbness, intellectual paralysis.

By contact with God we shall gain steadiness, confidence of touch, firm, impressive self-mastery for our work. "Now when they beheld the boldness of Peter and John . . . they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." If we learn presence of mind before God, we shall find little difficulty in maintaining it before men. To achieve self-command when the majesty of the Most High has overwhelmed us is a stupendous task, but a task to which we are helped by the gentle expostulation and remonstrance of the glorious Lord Himself. He gives commensurate help. He is no tyrant who wishes to cow or demagnetise us, no imperial brow-beater who wishes to despoil us of our mental forces. He seeks quietly to lead us into courses of holy reason. He looks with sympathy upon all our efforts to grasp His being and to interpret His will. The pattern of a man speaking to his friend, He makes the code of His intercourse with us, tempering his most stupendous revelations to our infirmities. His influence over us is that of reason which begets reason, and love which begets love. And when we have learned this great task of commanding ourselves in His sacred presence, making our best powers obedient to His intimations, we ought to maintain the habit in the presence of those to whom He has sent us, and speak His message with quiet and unfaltering confidence. God Himself calls us to manly self-possession before His face, that we may illustrate the lesson thus learned in daily service amongst our fellow-men.

"Wait on the Lord, be of good courage, and He shall strengthen thine heart; wait, I say, on the Lord."

T. G. SELBY.