

## On Guard.

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THE life-history of a minister of Christ is not unlike the progress of a traveller through a swampy country when the sun is striking vertically down, and calling out all the light and heavy infantry of the air. He walks with his head encompassed with a swarm of bloodthirsty flies, little and big, all eager to taste the quality of his blood. Some alight, some buzz and hover. All intend to use the very first opportunity of a halt to settle and bite. The only difference seems to be that the ministerial foes aim at the heart and attack vital parts, and that they come round at all seasons, hot or cold, and cease not day or night. It is the presence of so many spiritual vampires which makes it so necessary that we should ever be on guard.

Sometimes we are off our guard, and then the evil things fasten and incapacitate and envenom, so that for a time we find ourselves on the spiritual sick-list, and not the less on the sick-list because we are still able to move about and look healthy and well. A pallid heart can well coexist with the outer hue of brown and red.

Now, to play the sentinel over ourselves and our attacking foes is one of the supreme arts of life for those who would fain minister to others, and minister happily and successfully. In fact, to do this continually and thoroughly is to protect the soul's outworks, and to break down the very first line of assault. To fail here lays us open to terrible defeat when the enemy chooses to bring up his next line of attack.

It is wise also to remember that, unlike the ordinary military sentinel, we are never relieved. Our hearts are under the care of ourselves, and nobody else can share our watch. It is a solitary, personal business which knows no vacations. Other people have to watch over their own affairs, and have their hands full, so that, had they the inclination, they would not

have the time or the power, which is an additional reason for keeping watch and guard over ourselves.

Some might expect that the high office of a minister of Christ would protect him, and that he of all men might well be let alone. And this is the tragedy of it, that so high an office should be borne by so lowly and temptable a man. He is not let alone, as we all know too well by bitter experience. He is the butt of more foes than an ordinary man. As a wise enemy tries to pick off the officers, so is he singled out for special assault. He is the vulnerable attacking point of the Church of Christ, for the reason that, if he can be depreciated and deteriorated, the rank and file will surrender at discretion. It is therefore useless to shelter himself under his vocation or profession or his high dignity, for they are naught as a shield. In truth, his position insists on a clearer, sharper eye, a more alert mind, and a more continuous guard.

But one blessed help we have of vital efficacy. We have the help of the Master to keep us awake, and to give us penetration of instinct and vision. Little should we achieve but for His presence. He shares our watch with us, and when we watch and pray we do not even enter into temptation, because we see the foe afar off, and give the alarm in time to keep him at a distance. He keeps the mirror bright, so that the slightest world stain is immediately made visible. He keeps the eyes clear to enable us to detect the foe under his many disguises. He strips the angel of light, and reveals the malicious devil underneath the feathers of white. With His eyesalve so perfect and glorious, He prevents the eyes from sealing over, and it is this assurance which gives us the sufficiency, to say nothing of the patience and courage, which we who are to be on guard require. Without Him watching would be in vain.

I think the purpose of this homily will be better achieved if I descend to particulars, and set down in so many words what we ministers and workers ought especially to guard against in our daily lives. It is impossible to enumerate all the dangers which demand the watchful eye, but we may look at some samples of them, and to these we may add as many more as we please.

For instance, we require to watch carefully against *lowered ideals*. A servant of God may be known as a rule by his ideals and standards of work. What does he aim at? What does he realize as his highest ideal in the Master's service? What does he in his highest moments of elevation and vision desire to accomplish? Well, he must maintain this ideal, and, if possible, raise it higher. He must never allow it to sink lower. Here he will find his fiercest temptations will congregate. And if he yield, and his ideals descend, so much the less will he be an efficient minister of God. He will descend with his ideals, or, rather, his ideals will descend to his own lowered level of spirituality. For a low standard has been pulled down by a lower experience. We shall easily understand, then, the need of keeping an eye on our ideals, seeing how fraught the down-drag is with failure and disappointment. And the discovery will enable us to apply the remedy, which will be not so much by raising the ideal as by raising ourselves and our spirituality.

Much akin to this danger is the necessity of watching against a *lowered tone* of soul. Physicians tell us sometimes that there is nothing positively wrong with us, but that we are suffering from a loss of tone in the system. And they order rest and change of air and tonic medicines to raise the tone again, and to screw us up to concert pitch. The soul frequently suffers from the same thing, and this manifests itself in similar ways. There is a disinclination to take exercise, a lack of the old robust enjoyment in work, a lack of interest in things, a jaded feeling, a tendency to worry and fume, a sensitiveness to take offence and to imagine slights, and a general inability to throw off the minor ailments and ills of the ministerial life. It is of no use denying the tonelessness when it comes, or of trying to ignore it. It is a real thing, and nothing but disaster can come from letting it steal in upon us unnoticed. We must be on our guard against it, and apply the proper remedies. We must ascend to the breezy high levels of God, and be braced by fresh and special contact with Him. We must call in the Great Physician, and put ourselves under His immediate care. We must take the cordials of the

Spirit, and we must get away from those swampy spots which engendered the loss of tone. Certainly, we must not acquiesce in its continuance, for loss of tone can easily proceed to the loss of a hundred other precious things which cannot be done without.

The *loss of temperature and temper* has to be guarded against most assiduously, for their loss spells disaster sooner or later. Heat soon evaporates unless the inner fires be well stoked, and may die down and disappear unless we keep a watchful eye on the heart. To lose our first love, to grow cold within, to change into a spiritual iceberg, is to throw up the main elements of a successful ministerial life. And because it is easier to stop the loss at the beginning, we do well to ascertain when the first degree of lost heat is registered. This is the reason for being constantly on guard, for when the temperature goes down the temperament alters for the worse, and the temper deteriorates. Thus, what more workable quality is there than hopefulness, the optimism which looks brightly around and faithfully up? What is more essential in our dealings with other workers than the genial spirit which keeps smiling even when the rest of the world frowns? A cheery temper which has a touch of the South in it, and a buoyant temperament which steadily looks at the bright side of things, are simply invaluable. To lose them, therefore, is a calamity. And we need not lose them if only we are willing to be at the pains to keep a sharp eye on the heart and stop the leak.

Now, it is not of much avail to make discoveries unless we know how to deal with them when they are made. We must go farther back, and see if we can find the sources from whence the lowered ideals, the lowered tone, the lowered temper, come. They do not come by chance. Only thus, I think, can we get at the roots of the mischief to cut them out.

I fancy that most of us know what leads to inward troubles, for have we not been under our own inspection for many a long year, winter and summer? We have experimented on ourselves until we know almost unerringly the reaction from the test.

There are dangers from the *social side* which we need to be on our guard against. We are not hermits; we walk in the open world unconfined by walls. And the consequence of this free and unconstrained life is that we rub shoulders with others constantly. At many social functions our presence is welcomed if we will come out of our dens and accept their hospitality. And, not being solitaries, with more or less alacrity we go. For, undoubtedly, we do well to see our people under such free conditions. And, could we always go with a right spirit, the good that we might do is great, to say nothing of the good that we might get for ourselves. Then, where is the danger which bids us be on our guard? Well, we may overdo them. We may spend time in their enjoyment which might have been better expended in visiting and ministerial work. We may find social affairs so absorbing as to soil the soul and weaken the will. We may unbend too much, and play the layman to such perfection that we forget the minister. We may descend too low. Here are the directions in which we may expect danger and guard ourselves carefully. Due vigilance will tell us where to stop. And lest we let the social spirit trespass too far, we had better put an arrest on ourselves on the nearer instead of on the farther side.

There are also dangers from *absorbing occupations and hobbies*. Hobbies are amongst the most beneficent gifts which have been granted to busy man. Blessed is the minister who has one or more. Hobbies are the opiate of a worker's life, calming and soothing his tired brain. They turn him off the main road for a season, and send him rushing along quite another, small, insignificant, and undignified, if you like, but refreshingly different. And there, with his coat off and his muscles stiff and taut, he plays the small boy again or the youngster on his holidays. Perhaps he spends an honest hour or two in catching butterflies; perhaps he pursues a ball, racket or bat or golf-club in hand; perhaps he dabbles in colours, and wonderfully or unrecognizably represents on paper some bit of God's world; perhaps he messes his fingers and spoils his

clothing—handkerchiefs, mostly—in photographic work, and if he carries a heavy camera over stiff country, all the better ; perhaps he botanizes, and is for ever peering through his glasses at something curious ; perhaps he dabbles in still pools, and enchants the home circle with something grotesque under the microscopic lens. But why endeavour to enumerate what cannot be counted ? Blessed is that man, I say again, and he needs to be humoured instead of ridiculed in his pursuit. The wife who does not see this ought never to have married. But if a hobby be so beneficent, where can the danger come in ? It may encroach on higher work. It may throw the main coach off the rails. It may absorb too much thought and anxiety and interest. It may, in fact, cease to be a hobby, and become a business, displacing the greater concern for which he became a minister. To ride a hobby is excellent so long as you amble along, and keep a tight rein, and stop at the cross-roads ; but if the hobby run away with you, and your control be lost, then you will be thrown and hurt considerably. So long as we master our hobbies, so long are we safe ; but the moment they ride us we are in the wrong box.

The *itch of publicity* is a danger against which we do well to be on guard. We are not all constituted alike, and the tendency with some is to retire farther and farther into the background, and perhaps not to assert themselves enough. But the forward spirit acts in a public direction, and impels men to rush to the front, to pose before the footlights, to appear in newspapers, to be continually in evidence. And it may easily be overdone. For it is quite possible that the public does not take as much interest in us and our doings as we do, and it is more than possible that the fine bloom of our modesty will become somewhat rubbed by the perpetual obtrusion of ourselves. We may be wonderful men, and may do wonderful exploits in our parishes and eclipse everybody else ; but if we are, why not let others find it out and advertise our excellences ? Besides, wire-pulling is not a good attitude for a minister to assume, and he had far better work in silence. The only One who matters in life is the

Master, and if He is pleased we may be content. The less we splash, the farther we shall swim, and the more easily. The less we think of man, the more we shall be disposed to think of the Lord. The more we do for God's glory, the less we shall do for our own. This desire for public notice is especially repugnant in the deeper spiritual departments of our work, as, for instance, in the parading of the number of our communicants, as if in our longing for numbers we may not open the meshes so wide as to let just anybody through, worthy or unworthy. Our parishes are not, like racehorses, set into competition with others, the prize coming to him who outdistances his neighbour. The fear is that, with a ministerial lead in this competitive direction, the congregation may follow suit, and start on a nauseous course of brag, pointing with proud finger to their larger congregation, their larger subscription lists, their larger Confirmation numbers, their bigger missionary fund success. A people are on the downgrade who catch this evil spirit.

We shall do well to be on our guard, too, on *matters which may compromise us*. There are many innocent occupations and pleasures which have somehow acquired a bad name, and which, if we indulge in them, will set us in a wrong light and damage our influence. We may insist on our liberty, and do as we please in these misunderstood amusements, but we shall not be in quite the same position as before. We are refusing a small concession to a weakness, if you will; but the public opinion to which we are most exposed is against us decidedly, and we have secured our liberty at the costly expense of our chances of doing a hundred or more souls good. For, after all, the opinion which is most important to us is that of the weakest among those to whom we are called to minister. If they feel that we are not denying ourselves of a doubtful pleasure, that we are self-indulgent, then they cannot trust us as they did. And if we become so compromised we shall feel the difference, and it will spring back upon us in a disastrous fashion. Illustrations of the amusements or indulgences I am referring to will occur to my readers, and I think that we shall do wisely to be

on our guard against doing anything which will in the remotest degree outrage a weak conscience.

The *student habit* requires a word of caution, too, lest by our intense application to our books we steal away the time which other duties demand. The general reproach is that ministers read too little, and are left in the lurch by abler laymen. It is no doubt true with many that, from want of time or from want of inclination, they are not keen on books that count in the world of thought. It is a calamity which can hardly be repaired by any other application of our energies. It is the fruitful root of staleness and rashness of utterance and beating the air. We cannot even know our own side well unless we have studied the other side too. But if the unreading man suffers, so does the overreading student. He needs to be on his guard lest in the cultivation of his mind he neglects the minds and spirits of his flock. Our studies, too, may be off the line of our life's work, having no relation to the ministry or to the needs of the people. The tendency of over-absorption in books is to dry up the soul and stale the interests which ought to be vigorous in a minister of the Gospel. Many students have declared the difficulty of the struggle between the love of books and the love of souls. Not that there is any real antagonism between books and souls, but where the interests are too wholly absorbed in one thing, another is apt to feel the detrimental effects. Over-study may lead to unpracticalness, to dreaminess, to unreality, and to evaporation of interests in a religious direction. Anyway, it is well to be on our guard concerning the danger.

*Over-organization* is another danger. I suppose there has never been such elaborate organization of parish work as now. Machinery has reached stupendous proportions, and the parish workers are at it hard to stoke the fires and keep the wheels revolving. The present-day ambition is to make meetings, classes, and services, fly like the pictures in a panorama. Guilds, clubs, bands, and societies, are the order of the day, and the rushing minister, looking over his party walls at his slowly-moving brother who has fewer irons in the fire, feels that there



is nothing going on in that parish. But the difficulty for our fussy brother, who scarcely allows himself time to breathe or eat or sleep, is how to keep pace spiritually with all this organization, and to maintain a high tone in himself and his flock. And the danger is lest, underneath all the dust of movement, there may be just nothing at all in the way of life or spirituality. I do not say that it will be, but that it may be, so. It takes a large fire to keep so many irons even passably hot. And if so be that there are too many, and these too cold, he had better pause a while, and remember that a faithful minister is not content with a big machine and a small output; that, unless the kettle boils, nothing is palatable either to God or man. Surface perfection may be bought in too dear a market, therefore, and we do well to inspect our machinery now and then to see whether it really moves forward or not, and whether it achieves what it promises to our self-satisfied complacency. And alongside of the machinery we had better also inspect ourselves, to ascertain whether the inner steam is vigorous enough to match the big flywheels. Machinery at a standstill for want of power to push it is of no more good than scrap-iron, unless for the possibility of coming potency.

It is important that we do not allow one portion of our creed to overshadow the rest by *doctrinal one-sidedness*. Intense natures find this a common tendency. We may easily push a truth into undue prominence, and defraud our people of other truths which are in their way quite as essential. Thus, some men can preach of scarcely anything but the Second Coming of the Lord, and prophecy, than which nothing is more important, is the predominating theme in every sermon. Others find their interests absorbed in Sacramental truth, which they feel drawn by their deep concern to introduce on all occasions, as if no other truth could hold the candle to it. With some it has even attained to the place of a magical formula which may be depended on to achieve spiritual wonders apart from the attitude of the recipients, and it is pressed on all hands, as if the condition of mind were entirely subordinate. Social subjects

hold the field with many to-day, and the social is driving the spiritual out of view. Change the conditions of life, they say, and the downtrodden masses will stream into our churches, and be found, with the most submissive of minds, to accept all that we may tell them. The gospel of economics is not to be ignored, but at the same time it is not to take the place of the Gospel of our Master, and must not even obscure it. Eschatology with not a few is treated as the main subject of their messages; and while in some the sulphur is strong, in others all heat, sulphur, and pain, are entirely eliminated. Some earnest spirits stop at the Cross, and scarcely ever deal with a Risen and Glorified Saviour and the risen life in Him. It is impossible to exhaust the list of such ministerial absorptions, but we can each fill in what may be our own tendencies for ourselves. I am only concerned to point out the danger, and to suggest that we all be on our guard against it.

It is easy, too, to be *drawn aside into topics* which are not rightly ours as ministers of truth. We may become partisans and preach politics, and forget that in matters of opinion the truth may lie on both sides, and that as a matter of fact all sensible people are in the main agreed. It is the fault of our party system that this agreement is obscured. Rightly are we bound to have our views on vital political questions, and rightly must we vote for them; but it is well to confine our energies, so far as the pulpit is concerned, to the Divine truths which are revealed, and to wait until the dust of party conflict has settled, before we venture publicly to enter into the arena and expose ourselves to indignant protest from some of our own good people who are on the other side. The form that our politics must take is to go down to the root of all questions, and to deal with principles, which our flocks must apply for themselves. Here is safe ground, and better ground by far. To wave red rags in the neighbourhood of bulls may be a display of courage, but it is also a display of folly and rashness. Here, too, we must be on our guard.

One very common danger which every minister and worker

is more or less conscious of is the tendency, amidst the stress of life, to *devotional neglect*—the failure to apportion sufficient time for devotion. The active life may too easily encroach on the contemplative one. We know that it is folly to allow it to do so, and we know that it spells ministerial suicide to cheat the soul for the presumed benefit of the parish. Yet, in spite of our knowledge, how often are we tempted to do it! Put it into other words, and we see the absurdity of the contention that we have no time to be quiet and to pray. What if the cook were to say: "I was so busy preparing the dinner that I had no time to keep my fire alight?" Or the reaper might say: "I had so much to do, and so large a field to cut, that I really could not afford the time to sharpen my scythe." Or the engine-driver, having to make up for lost time, might say: "I was so busy observing my speed, oiling my engine, manipulating the levers, and looking ahead, that I really could not bother myself about the fire." The fact is that we spoil the whole work of a parish by neglect behind the scenes, and we cannot expect any spiritual returns unless we keep our communications with heaven perfectly open and always open. We may do quite as much work as we did before, but, having lost our first love, heaven's register records, "No results."

It is of the very first importance that we play the watchman over our *attitude to our fellow-ministers*, for, probably, there are none concerning whom we have more abundant cause to be on guard than our ministerial neighbours. We are but poor frail mortals at the best, and have the fragile tempers appertaining to such mortals. So it is possible that we may not rejoice in another's success. We may not feel quite friendly to those who steal our sheep. We may not feel charity to men of divergent views, albeit they be close neighbours. We may pick holes and search carefully for defects, and criticize them. We may be jealous, envious, bitter, and unbending. This is certainly not edifying, and the world, detecting it in our words and manner, will make dismal capital out of it. Of course, we cannot speak a good word for this temper ourselves, and very possibly we

fight against it tooth and nail. But do we deal with it in the thought? There it has to be met and conquered. And do we seek that spirit of love which when it comes swamps and drowns all the spiteful products of the natural heart?

The beauty of the Church of England is that her ministers are more independent than any others, and have no need to cringe. They enjoy a veritable English freedom, and require to kow-tow to nobody. All the same, there is a distinct danger of *undue submission to others*. The Bishop, the squire, the man with money, the old ladies with their keen scent for heresies and advancing or receding churchmanship, the newspapers, and such-like powers, may have a damping effect upon our courage, and may have a real effect in bending the knee. We shall be tempted to preach to please, to drop an unpalatable truth, to hide up a perilous conviction, to emphasize a popular cry, to join in heresy-hunting, and to halloo with the rest, in order to ingratiate ourselves with the powers that be, or at least to keep in with them by small sacrifices or big ones; all these things and more we shall be tempted to concede for fear of man. We require to be on our guard religiously against any duplicity or wrong compromise. But, on the other hand, let us not, to protect ourselves, be too independent, too rough, and too uncompromising. The reaction may be equally perilous. Needlessly to rub people the wrong way because we may be tempted to rub them too vigorously the other way is the sheerest idiocy. "The Lord God of Israel before whom I stand" must be our cry and our attitude, and this conviction must be the secret of boldness.

Now, with the soul as with the body, most ailments are curable if taken in time. The first evil symptoms are the signal to act. And like weeds which are easily extracted when small, so minor spiritual evils are easily checked at the start. There are warning signals of most ministerial ills, and if we strike in when we see them, and deal with them, we may keep ourselves in excellent spiritual health. But in order to act promptly we must occupy our watch-tower and be perpetually on guard.