

Lectures To My Students. By C. H. Spurgeon. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1954. 443 pp. \$15.95. Reviewed by T. Scott Christmas.

In this timeless work, Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-1892), pastor of the famed Metropolitan Tabernacle and overseer of the Pastor's College, sets in print a treasure of lectures to his students. These lectures were originally presented to a specific group, in a specific style, for a specific purpose. Of them, Spurgeon wrote in the introduction to his work:

My College lectures are colloquial, familiar, full of anecdote, and often humorous: they are purposely made so, to suit the occasion. At the end of the week I meet the students, and find them weary with sterner studies, and I judge it best to be as lively and interesting in my prelections as I well can be. They have had their fill of classics, mathematics, and divinity, and are only in a condition to receive something which will attract and secure their attention, and fire their hearts . . . To succeed in this the lecturer must not be dull himself, nor demand any great effort from his audience. . . I have purposely given an almost autobiographical tinge to the whole, because my own experience, such as it is, is the most original contribution which I can offer, and, *with my own students*, quite as weighty as any other within my reach (p. v).

Following their delivery, Spurgeon had the lectures published with the specific target audience of young preachers in mind. That target audience was young preachers. Although the lectures are still read by seasoned men of the Word, they were originally given and subsequently recorded to provide assistance for students and beginners in preaching. The lectures were consistent with the purpose of the Pastor's College. Spurgeon spelled out that purpose when he wrote:

Many men of earnest spirit and established Christian character are hindered in their efforts to do good by the slenderness of their knowledge. Conscious of their own defects, they endeavor to improve themselves, but the absence of a guide, their need of books, and their scanty time, all prevent their making progress. These are the men whom the Pastor's College welcomes. . . The College aims at training preachers rather than scholars. To develop the faculty of ready speech, to help them understand the word of God, and to

foster the spirit of consecration, courage, and confidence in God, are objects so important that we put all other matters into a secondary position. If a student should learn a thousand things, and yet fail to preach the gospel acceptably, his College course will have missed its true design (pp. iii-iv).

In light of this mission, Spurgeon sought to impart to his young apprentices, the sage advice for which every young preacher yearns. In these lectures, the “Prince of Preachers” imparts what most textbooks do not: practical and godly wisdom for the ministry.

Although the original lectures were recorded in two separate series, the particular text reviewed here combined the two into one. In 28 chapters, stretching an extended span of 443 pages of small type print, Mr. Spurgeon imparts priceless spiritual wisdom. His subjects include “The Ministers Self-Watch,” “The Call to the Ministry,” “The Preacher’s Private Prayer,” “Our Public Prayer,” “Sermons—Their Matter,” “On the Choice of a Text,” “On Spiritualizing,” “On the Voice,” “Attention!,” “The Faculty of Impromptu Speech,” “The Minister’s Fainting Fits,” “The Minister’s Ordinary Conversation,” “To Workers with Slender Apparatus,” “The Holy Spirit in Connection with our Ministry,” “The Necessity of Ministerial Progress,” “The Need of Decision for the Truth,” “Open-Air Preaching—A Sketch of Its History,” “Open-Air Preaching—Remarks Thereon,” “Posture, Action, Gesture, Etc.,” “Earnestness: Its Marring and Maintenance,” “The Blind Eye and the Deaf Ear,” “On Conversion as our Aim,” “Illustrations in Preaching,” “Anecdotes from the Pulpit,” “The Uses of Anecdotes and Illustrations,” “Where Can We Find Anecdotes and Illustrations?,” and “The Sciences as Sources of Illustration.” Since the length of this review does not permit comment on every chapter, only highlights will be mentioned.

Going straight for the heart of his reader, Spurgeon opens his work with “The Ministers Self-Watch” (pp. 7-21). Within the chapter, the author deals with essential subjects such as personal holiness, disqualification from ministry, the need for self-examination in salvation, and preaching without being commissioned. The imagery is vivid and sobering. At one point, Spurgeon admonishes stoutly that it is “better to abolish pulpits than fill them with men who have no experimental knowledge of what they teach” (p. 11). While emphasizing the need for vigorous personal piety, Spurgeon imparts wisdom on restoring the fallen pastor. In his discourse, the author quotes John Angell James as remarking, “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” (p. 14). He follows with warnings about temptation, the cunning of the enemy, and the need for consistency in one’s personal life. Spurgeon reminds his readers that, as spiritual leaders, people are always watching them! The chapter as a whole was deeply penetrating. It functioned as a floodlight for the soul, exposing the dark recesses of the heart, revealing those oft neglected areas which must be checked constantly. It is a truly humbling chapter. Sitting at the feet of such a godly man exposes how far short men naturally fall in meeting the high standards for ministry. The heart of this reviewer was moved by the communication of the great need for personal holiness in order to be useful to the Master.

Chapter after chapter, section after section, Lectures demonstrates tremendous strength by its ability to address so many vital areas with such great insight! This reviewer began to marvel at the never-ending flow from this artesian well of wisdom. Further, the issues Spurgeon dealt with over a hundred years ago are still relevant today. Some of the subjects that were

especially striking to this reviewer were his words about restoring the fallen pastor; the need for personal, vigorous piety; the graphic comments about the enemy; abstaining from unnecessary doctrinal quarrels; the use and abuse of the tongue; asking about the quality and impact of your message; and that mysterious enabling known as “unction.” And no one says it like Spurgeon! His points are fresh, insightful, captivating, and illustrated majestically. His humor alone demonstrates that he would have been a joy to be around! And yet, his words are practical poetry and powerful prose!

This reviewer found the chapter on “The Minister’s Fainting Fits” to be informative, insightful, and especially encouraging. In it, Spurgeon addresses the fits of depression that come over most preachers. It has been said that the temptation of preachers is not pride, but discouragement. This seems true in the life of Paul, Spurgeon, and others. In fact, the preacher’s tendency toward depression appears so common that the author devoted an entire chapter to it. The section is a great help because, just as the author notes, “children of light sometimes walk in thick darkness” (p. 154). With perceptive insight, Spurgeon gives ten illuminating reasons for this propensity. He ends the chapter with these encouraging words:

The lesson of wisdom is, *be not dismayed by soul-trouble*. Count it no strange thing, but a part of ordinary ministerial experience. Should the power of depression be more than ordinary, think not that all is over with your usefulness. Cast not away your confidence, for it hath great recompense of reward. Even if the enemy’s foot be on your neck, expect to rise and overthrow him. Cast the burden of the present, along with the sin of the past and the fear of the future, upon the Lord, who forsaketh not His saints. Live by the day—ay, by the hour. Put no trust in frames and feelings. Care more for a grain of faith than a ton of excitement. Trust in God alone, and lean not on the needs of human help. Be not surprised when friends fail you: it is a failing world. Never count upon immutability in man: inconstancy you may reckon upon without fear of disappointment. The disciples of Jesus forsook Him; be not amazed if your adherents wander away to other teachers: as they were not your all when with you, all is not gone from you with their departure. Serve God with all your might while the candle is burning, and then when it goes out for a season, you will have the less to regret. Be content to be nothing,

for that is what you are. When your own emptiness is painfully forced upon your consciousness, chide yourself that you ever dreamed of being full, except in the Lord. Set small store by present rewards; be grateful for earnestness by the way, but look for the recompensing joy hereafter. Continue with double earnestness to serve your Lord when no visible result is before you. Any simpleton can follow the narrow path in the light: faith's rare wisdom enables us to march on in the dark with infallible accuracy, since she places her hand in that of her Great Guide. Between this and heaven there may be rougher weather yet, but it is all provided for by our covenant Head. In nothing let us be turned aside from the path which the divine call has urged us to pursue. Come fair or come foul, the pulpit is our watch-tower, and the ministry our warfare; be it ours, when we cannot see the face of our God, to trust under THE SHADOW OF HIS WINGS (pp. 164-165).

This encouragement was worth the price of the book. They are helpful words from one who has completed the journey.

Concerning weaknesses, the book has few. There is some questionable content in the chapter entitled "On Spiritualizing" (pp. 97-109). Spurgeon opens and closes the chapter by counseling his readers to not be afraid to spiritualize their text of Scripture within certain limits and boundaries (pp. 97, 109). Throughout the section, he attempts to draw those boundaries so as to guard his readers from going too far. At one point he advises, "Mr. Bunyan is the chief, and head, and lord of all allegorists, and is not to be followed by us into the deep places of typical and symbolical utterance. He was a swimmer, we are but mere waders, and must not go beyond our depth" (p. 107). One wonders if it would have been better for Spurgeon to post a "No Swimming" sign in this dangerous hermeneutical pool. Regarding this particular subject, Spurgeon's counsel was more confusing and troubling than helpful. Although his advice was probably quite conservative for his time and style, it was still much too open to spiritualizing. Far be it from any preacher to allegorize or spiritualize a passage of God's Word which the Author has not intended to be so.

Another weakness of the book was its length. This was not a quick read! However, although it was ever so long, it was well worth the effort! And while a larger type set might make the meal more palatable, that would yet extend the 443 page length!

Although his style of preaching was not expository, it seems obvious from reading Spurgeon that he was one of the most gifted preachers and spiritual leaders of all time. How could one man have known so much and communicated it so poetically? Part of that ability came from his brilliant mind; but much of it came from his voracious reading. It is said that he had one of the largest and finest theological libraries of his day (more than 12,000 volumes). But more than that, Spurgeon was familiar with the location and contents of his books! Not only did he read, but he remembered what he read! And his broad reading and intimate knowledge of books showed through in his encouraging and stirring words to young preachers.

Most exemplary of all, Spurgeon was a man of one book! In his chapter on “Workers with Slender Apparatus,” the great patriarch encourages the use of that one book:

In case the famine of books should be sore in the land, *there is one book which you all have, and that is your Bible*; and a minister with his Bible is like David with his sling and stone, fully equipped for the fray. No man may say that he has no well to draw from while the Scriptures are within reach. In the Bible we have a perfect library, and he who studies it thoroughly will be a better scholar than if he had devoured the Alexandrian Library entire. To understand the Bible should be our ambition; we should be familiar with it, as familiar as the housewife with her needle, the merchant with his ledger, the mariner with his ship. We ought to know its general run, the contents of each book, the details of its histories, its doctrines, its precepts, and everything about it. . . . Concerning the Book of God, ‘Tolle, lege’—take, read. . . . Make the Bible the man of your right hand, the companion of every hour, and you will have little reason to lament your slender equipment in inferior things (pp. 179-181).

Advice such as this reflects the heart of a man who lived to honor the Word of the Lord and the Lord of the Word. Spurgeon wanted to see that same heart mirrored in his students. And that pastoral heart bleeds through the pages of Lectures To My Students.

At times Spurgeon's keen mind, mammoth ability, and sage wisdom can be discouraging to those who follow in his steps. The mind, gifts, and life of one such as he are seldom seen. His example and impact is unattainable for most, and is therefore, discouraging. And yet, his life should not discourage, but should instead continually encourage young preachers. For in him is seen the heart of a man passionate for God and compassionate toward his fellow servants in ministry. And that example is one which can, and should, be imitated. Lectures To My Students is pastoral advice at its finest. "Tolle, lege"—take, read!