

Humor in the Pulpit

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IF THEY [Christ's ambassadors] have a true sense of the commission which Christ gave to His disciples, they will with reverence open the Word of God and listen for instruction from the Lord, asking for wisdom from Heaven, that as they stand between the living and the dead, they may realize that they must render an account to God for the work coming forth from their hands."—*Evangelism*, p. 643.

As ministers we need sometimes to feel more of the weight of responsibility resting upon us in our pulpits, as did the Puritan, Richard Baxter, when he wrote:

"I preached as never sure to preach again,
And as a dying man to dying men."

In the light of this solemn responsibility one of the areas in which we ought to carefully guard ourselves in the desk is that of the use of humor. One does not speak facetiously to a man or woman obviously about to enter the valley of the shadow. But, as Baxter indicated, every Sabbath we look from our pulpits into the faces of men and women who are being hastened to the grave. Surely this is a sobering thought.

Writing concerning the tendency to bring humor into the pulpit, God's messenger said:

"No light, trifling words will fall from his [the minister's] lips; for is he not an ambassador for Christ, bearing a divine message to perishing souls? All jesting and joking, all lightness and trifling, is painful to the cross-bearing disciple of Christ."—*Ibid.*, pp. 206, 207.

And again:

"The relation of anecdotes or incidents which create a laugh or a light thought in the minds of the hearers is severely censurable. The truths should be clothed in chaste and dignified language; and the illustrations should be of a like character."—*Ibid.*, p. 640.

We can thank the Lord that He has given to all of us a sense of humor. It is a wonderful endowment, which helps us to keep from taking ourselves, and occasionally others, too seriously under trying circumstances. Life might be well-nigh intolerable at times but for this God-given gift of humor. But the guilt of sin, the burdens of the week, the nagging cares and temptations of life are not relieved by a joke from the sacred desk. Rather do they settle down with added weight after the smile has faded, often to be joined by the suspicion that the one

who jokes in the pulpit can offer little to ease inward wounds.

During my first year at one of our colleges a visiting minister preached for the Sabbath service. His deeply spiritual message that morning was used of God's Spirit to probe into the deep recesses of my heart, and I was responding to those searching appeals. As the preacher was coming to the end of his sermon, I was ready to stand to my feet in reconsecration should he make the call. Then, just at the climax of his message, he inserted a joke. It was only one brief sentence, as I remember it, but it completely nullified the whole of the sermon as far as I was concerned. My desire to stand to my feet was gone. The words he spoke from that moment on had no effect on me. As one small worm can kill the ripening wheat, so that one little joke had effectively destroyed the fruitage of that sermon in my heart, and, I am confident, in the hearts of others who sat in the chapel with me that Sabbath morning. These words of reproof written to a minister of another generation could easily have been applied to the speaker of that hour:

"You often bring in something comical to create a smile, and this frequently destroys the force of your whole discourse."—*Testimonies*, vol. 1, p. 435.

May the Lord send His angel to touch our lips with coals from off the altar, lest, speaking lightly, we take the edge from the sword of the Spirit and cause it to fall ineffectively upon the hearts of others.