

A faded, green-tinted portrait of C.H. Spurgeon, showing his face and beard, serves as the background for the top two-thirds of the cover.

C.H. SPURGEON

on Spiritual
Leadership

STEVE MILLER

A Commitment *to* Holiness

“AS HE WHO CALLED YOU IS
HOLY, YOU ALSO BE HOLY IN
ALL YOUR CONDUCT,
BECAUSE IT IS WRITTEN, ‘BE
HOLY, FOR I AM HOLY.’”

—1 PETER 1:15–16

questions about his motives and elicit suspicions that surely he wasn't as good a man as he appeared to be. One reason skepticism arose so easily is that hypocrisy was a common problem in the pulpits of that day; moral weakness in a minister's life was more the norm than the exception.

In the same way that the tallest trees and other projectiles on a landscape tend to attract lightning, so did Spurgeon's prominence draw more than his share of detractors and critics. His success in ministry and his exemplary life led some to raise

Yet Spurgeon had nothing to hide. In fact, near the end of his life, someone wrote a letter threatening to expose him in some way. Spurgeon responded, “You may write my life across the sky; I have nothing to conceal.”¹

Spurgeon’s exhortations for Christians to live holy lives were not mere lip service. Rather, they emanated from a deeply heartfelt conviction of the absolute necessity for holiness in his own life as a messenger of no less than God Himself. So passionately did he feel about this that he said, “Every saint must be holy, but he should be holiest of all who ministers before the Lord.”² He recognized that the works of a holy God are impaired when transmitted through an unholy vessel:



*You all know the injurious effects frequently produced upon water through flowing along leaden pipes, even so the gospel itself, in flowing through men who are spiritually unhealthy, may be debased until it grows injurious to their hearers.*³

*Let the channel through which the living water is to flow be both clear and clean.*⁴



Our effectiveness, then, is proportionate to our holiness. As Spurgeon said,



We must cultivate the highest degree of godliness because our work imperatively requires it. The labor of the Christian ministry is well performed in exact proportion to the vigor of our renewed nature. Our work is only well done when it is well with ourselves. As is the workman, such will the work be.⁵



—THE REQUIREMENT FOR HOLINESS—

Scripture clearly sets the standard when it says an overseer “must be above reproach” and “must have a good reputation with those outside the church” (1 Timothy 3:2, 7 NASB). Elsewhere we read that leaders are to “shepherd the flock of God . . . being examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2–3). The apostle Paul, while training Timothy for ministry leadership, told Timothy to “be an example to the believers in word, in conduct, in love, in spirit, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). After all, how can we expect people to know and understand the holiness God desires in a Christian’s life unless they see it on display in us? We ought to live in such a way that we can say, with the apostle Paul, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

—AN AWARENESS THAT
OTHERS ARE WATCHING—

As we carry on our work of ministry, it's essential we live with a constant awareness that people are watching us. We have the potential to be either a positive or negative influence upon others. We are accountable for the spiritual well-being of our followers, and need to exercise care that our thoughts, words, and actions represent God and the Christian life accurately.

“Our lives should be such as men may safely copy,” Spurgeon once summarized.⁶ This was a recurring theme in the messages Spurgeon gave at the Pastors' College and the annual college conferences:



A very considerable and essential part of Christian ministry lies in example. Our people take much note of what we say out of the pulpit, and what we do in the social circle and elsewhere. Do you find it easy, my brethren, to be saints?—such saints that others may regard you as examples? We ought to be such husbands that every husband in the parish may safely be such as we are. Is it so? We ought to be the best of fathers.⁷

It is a shocking state of things when good people say, “Our minister undoes in the parlor what he has done

in the pulpit; he preaches very well, but his life does not agree with his sermons.” Our Lord Jesus would have us perfect even as our Father who is in heaven is perfect. Every Christian should be holy; but we are laid under a sevenfold obligation to it: how can we expect the Divine blessing if it be not so?⁸

We are watched by a thousand eagle eyes; let us so act that we shall never need to care if all heaven, and earth, and hell, swelled the list of spectators. Our public position is a great gain if we are enabled to exhibit the fruits of the Spirit in our lives; take heed, brethren, that you throw not away the advantage.⁹



—THE SERIOUSNESS OF SIN—

One of the more common reasons Christians in general succumb to temptation is that they rationalize, “One little sin won’t hurt.” Ministry leaders are no less susceptible to such reasoning. We say, “Just this one time; I won’t do it again.” Or, “This won’t hurt anyone.” Yet Spurgeon had the right perspective when he said:



You cannot, though you may think you can, preserve a moderation in sin. If you commit one sin, it

*is like the melting of the lower glacier upon the Alps; the others must follow in time.*¹⁰

*Little sins are like little thieves, they open the door to big ones.*¹¹

*A loose stone here, and a fallen tie there, and a rotting timber in a third place, will soon bring on a total ruin to a tenement, but the hand of diligence maintains the fabric. Thus we must watch our spiritual house, lest we fall by little and little.*¹²

*One pampered sin will slay the soul as surely as one dose of poison will kill the body.*¹³



Satan takes a special delight in the failure of a spiritual leader. He knows that to seduce just one leader into sin can have a ripple effect that disrupts the lives of everyone under that leader's influence. Thus he is especially persistent in his assaults against those in key positions of ministry, and we need to stand ever vigilant because his schemes are so crafty and subtle. As Spurgeon noted in his *Lectures to My Students*:



*The great enemy of souls takes care to leave no stone unturned for the preacher's ruin.*¹⁴

Take heed, therefore, brethren, for the enemy hath a special eye upon you. You shall have his most subtle insinuations, and incessant solicitations, and violent assaults. As wise and learned as you are, take heed to yourselves lest he overwit you. The devil is a greater scholar than you, and a nimbler disputant; he can “transform himself into an angel of light” to deceive, he will get within you and trip up your heels before you are aware; he will play the juggler with you undiscerned, and cheat you of your faith or innocency, and you shall not know that you have lost it: nay, he will make you believe it is multiplied or increased when it is lost. You shall see neither hook nor line, much less the subtle angler himself, while he is offering you his bait. And his baits shall be so fitted to your temper and disposition, that he will be sure to find advantages within you, and make your own principles and inclinations to betray you; and whenever he ruineth you, he will make you the instrument of your own ruin. Oh, what a conquest will he think he hath got, if he can make a minister lazy and unfaithful; if he can tempt a minister into covetousness or scandal! He will glory against the church, and say, “These are your holy preachers: you see what their preciseness is, and whither it will bring them.” He will glory against Jesus Christ Himself,

and say, "These are thy champions! I can make thy chiefest servants to abuse thee; I can make the stewards of thy house unfaithful."¹⁵



—SIN'S IMPACT ON OUR MINISTRY—

No matter how much we might try to convince ourselves that a secret sin won't hurt others or that we can quarantine its effects upon our spiritual service, the reality is that every sin—no matter how small or private—is a gangrene that deadens our effectiveness in ministry. No amount of mental, emotional, or physical effort on our part can change the fact that sin is a *spiritual* problem that has definite repercussions on *all* areas of our spiritual life, leading to a loss of spiritual power and usefulness.



Your whole life, your whole pastoral life especially, will be affected by the vigor of your piety. If your zeal grows dull, you will not pray well in the pulpit; you will pray worse in the family, and worst in the study alone. When your soul becomes lean, your hearers, without knowing how or why, will find that your prayers in public have little savor for them; they will feel your barrenness, perhaps, before you perceive it yourself. Your discourses will next betray your declension. You may utter as well-chosen words, and

*as fitly-ordered sentences, as aforetime; but there will be a perceptible loss of spiritual force.*¹⁶



Spurgeon also pointed out that spiritual leaders are like public clocks by which onlookers set their watches and, when a leader is in error, he is responsible for leading others into that same error:



*[If the] Greenwich Observatory should go amiss, half London would lose its reckoning. So is it with the minister; he is the parish-clock, many take their time from him, and if he be incorrect, then they all go wrongly, more or less, and he is in a great measure accountable for all the sin which he occasions.*¹⁷

*The members of our congregation gather lessons from what we do as well as from what we say, and this should make us very careful lest we lead them astray. Be holy, that others may be holy.*¹⁸



Given the great degree to which sin can impair God's ability to use us, Spurgeon makes this plea:



If there is anything we are doing, or leaving undone, any evil we are harbouring, or any grace we are

*neglecting, which may make us unfit to be used of God, let us pray the Lord to cleanse, and mend, and scour us till we are vessels fit for the Master's use. . . . Let us not be content till we are useful, but make this the main design and ambition of our lives.*¹⁹



—PREVENTING UNHOLINESS—

There's more to maintaining holiness than simply avoiding sin. Rather than wait for temptation to strike and react accordingly, we can take proactive measures to nurture holiness in our lives. "They tell me there is as much of a tree under as above ground," Spurgeon said, "and certainly it is so with a believer; his visible life would soon wither if not for his secret life."²⁰

What can we do in secret to nurture our holiness so that our public lives won't wither? First and foremost is a complete dependence upon the Holy Spirit:



Evermore, in beginning, in continuing, and in ending any and every good work, [we must] consciously and in very truth depend upon the Holy Ghost. Even a sense of your need of Him He must give you; and the prayers with which you entreat Him to come must come from Him. You are engaged in a work

*so spiritual, so far above all human power, that to forget the Spirit is to ensure defeat. . . . Render Him homage by yielding yourself to His impulses, and by hating everything that grieves Him.*²¹



The Bible says that when you “walk in the Spirit . . . you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh” (Galatians 5:16), thus affirming that a deliberate choice to walk in the Spirit’s ways is an antidote to sin.

Another essential to cultivating our secret inner person is closeness with God:



*We must, dear friends, never become weak in another sense, namely, in our communion with God. David slackened his fellowship with God, and Satan vanquished him through Bathsheba; Peter followed afar off, and soon denied his Lord. Communion with God is the right arm of our strength; and if this be broken, we are weak as water. Without God, we can do nothing; and in proportion as we attempt to live without Him, we ruin ourselves. . . . If it be true that only as we hang upon the Lord are we strong, then broken fellowship will soon bring broken strength.*²²



As we walk in the Spirit and stay in close communion with God, our minds are more likely to stay focused upon the things of the Lord, which can also help us in our desire to live holy lives. Thus Spurgeon advised, “Preoccupation of mind is a great safeguard from temptation. Fill a bushel with corn and you will keep out the chaff.”²³

We who are in ministry leadership can also find strength in numbers. How often have we been encouraged by the strength and resolve of a fellow worker who practices personal purity? For the times when we’re discouraged or sorely tempted, having such a friend or two to lean upon can make a big difference:



An old Puritan has well observed that “Nothing in all the world contributes so much to the kindling, the firing, and the inflaming of men’s hearts after holiness, as the society of those that are holy.”²⁴

The mountain of life must be scaled; crevasses, chasms, precipices, must be encountered. Almost without exception we must be roped together in this mountaineering; let the wise man accept only as his partners those who will pursue the ways of faith and virtue, for with these only will he reach the summit.²⁵



—THE BENEFITS OF HOLINESS—

At times we will find it a struggle to live holy—sometimes so much so that we may even wonder if the only “way out” is to succumb to the temptation—then ask God for forgiveness. But we know all too well that the supposed relief that comes from such indulgence is short-lived . . . only to be quickly followed by the Spirit’s piercing sword of conviction. Moreover, to surrender in such a fashion is to intentionally abuse God’s grace. No, we don’t have to give in. “God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it” (1 Corinthians 10:13). What’s more, the relief we gain from persevering on the path of holiness is real and lasting. Consider these benefits that Spurgeon noted:



*Sanctity in ministers is a loud call to sinners to repent, and when allied with holy cheerfulness it becomes wondrously attractive.*²⁶

*In holiness God is more clearly seen than in anything else.*²⁷

*The serene, silent beauty of a holy life is the most powerful influence in the world, next to the might of the Spirit of God.*²⁸

*Only sanctified souls are satisfied souls.*²⁹



An additional benefit observed by Spurgeon is that holiness, because it is so supremely important, can make up for certain deficiencies we might have:



*You must have holiness; and, dear brethren, if you should fail in mental qualifications (though I hope you will not), and if you should have a slender measure of the oratorical faculty (though I trust you will not), yet, depend upon it, a holy life is, in itself, a wonderful power, and will make up for many deficiencies; it is, in fact, the best sermon the best man can ever deliver.*³⁰



—AN ONGOING PURSUIT—

As pointed out earlier, it's easy to rationalize that small or infrequent lapses into sin surely cannot be all that harmful. Yet the command of Scripture is blunt: "As He who called you is holy, you also be holy in *all* your conduct" (1 Peter 1:15, italics added). Spurgeon put it eloquently in the following quotations:



Much of the beauty of holiness lies in little things. Microscopic holiness is the perfection of excellence: if a life will bear examination in each hour of it, it is pure indeed. Those who are not careful about their words, and even their thoughts, will soon grow careless concerning their more notable actions. Those who tolerate sin in what they think to be little things, will soon indulge it in greater matters. To live by the day and to watch each step, is the true pilgrimage method. More lies in the careful noting of every single act than careless minds can well imagine.³¹

Holiness is no blazing comet, amazing nations with a transient glory; it is a fixed star that, with still, calm radiance, shines on through the darkness of a corrupt age. Holiness is persevering obedience; it is not holiness at all if it be occasional zeal and sensational piety.³²

Godliness is a life-long business.³³



—OUR REASON FOR HOLY LIVING—

Above all, it helps to remember why holiness is so important. As spiritual leaders, we are not our own. We were bought with a price, and we are ambassadors of God to a watching world—

ambassadors of not just any earthly king, but the King of all kings and Lord of all lords:



*Behave yourselves, Christian brethren, for you bear a great Name. . . . If you are indeed in Christ's stead, what manner of persons ought you to be! May God help you to be worthy of the embassy on which you are sent!*³⁴

*Be ye holy, for ye serve a holy God. If you were making a present to a prince, you would not find Him a lame horse to ride upon; you would not offer Him a book out of which leaves had been torn, nor carry Him a timepiece whose wheels were broken. No, the best of the best you would give to one whom you honored and loved. Give your very best to your Lord. Seek to be at your best whenever you serve Him.*³⁵



Indeed, Spurgeon pursued purity with a passion. When it came to holiness, he lived what he preached. He constantly admonished other leaders toward a similar commitment in their own lives for the simple reason that the Bible calls for such. And he was ever mindful of the impact a holy life can have on a multitude of others. One evening during a lecture to his pastoral students Spurgeon quoted Robert

Murray McCheyne, a devout Scottish preacher whose words capture well the truth that the call to a holy life is a truly noble calling indeed:

Remember you are God's sword, His instrument—I trust, a chosen vessel unto Him to bear His name. In great measure, according to the purity and perfection of the instrument, will be the success. It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an awful weapon in the hand of God.³⁶

SPURGEON on His Knees

OUR FATHER . . . we adore Thee because Thou art holy, and we love Thee for Thine infinite perfection. For now we sigh and cry after holiness ourselves. Sanctify us wholly, spirit, soul and body. Lord, we mourn over the sins of our past life and our present shortcomings. We bless Thee [that] Thou hast forgiven us; we are reconciled to Thee by the death of Thy Son. . . .

Lord, purify us in head, heart and hand; and if it be needful that we should be put into the fire to be refined as silver is refined, we would even welcome the fire if we may be rid of the dross. Lord, save us from constitutional sin, from sins of temperament, from sins of our surroundings. Save us from ourselves in every shape, and grant us especially to have the light of love strong within us. . . .

Lord, help Thy poor children to be holy. Oh! keep us so if we are so; keep us even from stumbling, and present us faultless before Thy presence at last.³⁷

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