

LESSONS LEARNED IN & OUT OF THE PULPIT

Life, especially ministerial life, with its many twists and turns, has a way, if we are observant, of teaching us many axioms. The following is a short list of some personal lessons that I have learned in my some fifty-plus years of ministry stated here in brief terms.

1. We, and those we pastor, have, or surely will face those times in life when death claims one of our loved ones and will wrestle with the heartrending aftermath of their absence. I have experienced that grief, and it is truly tempered with time - memories grow sweeter and begins to take the larger percentage of the grief time. It appears that sweet memories help to assuage the depth to which hurt goes, but as long as one continues to love, they will continue to have their times of grief also - for the only way that grief can cease is for love to cease. Yes, I too, have found that "getting over it" is many times just "getting through it." We tend to often think of grief as a negative emotion, and to a degree it can be, but there is a positive side of grief also - a side that, in reality, we really don't wish it to disappear because it, like joy, is an essential part of our love. Grief is often hard to explain, even to ourselves, but I have learned that...

Grief is love that seeks to embrace today the one who left yesterday.

2. Proper activity in the church, as it pertains to its spiritual function, is a vital activity.

Not just for the ministry but for the laity as well. Motivation, as most pastors know, is sometimes not as easily had as we would like it to be. Industrious saints are worth their weight in gold. I have learned...

One saint in motion is worth five that are standing still.

3. As a pastor, over many years, I came to learn: The people we pastor come with very different sets of wiring, different backgrounds, ages, different interests, different temperaments, different educations, different learning styles, different gifts, different temptations, and different loyalties.

These differences are both a challenge and a reward to your ministry - you may preach to a group, but you must pastor individuals.

4. Even though I have long understood that life is all about choices, yet in later years, that truth becomes ever more evident. On every journey we take, we face choices – some trivial and some of grave importance (salvation being the most important); some having short-range consequences, and some having long-range consequences. Life cannot be static; it continually involves us in choices. At every fork in the road (if we are blessed enough to have only two choices – life sometimes presents us with more than two), we make a choice.

And it is those decisions that ultimately shape our ministries and our lives because choices become the mold into which our lives are poured – our final “shape,” therefore, is designed by our own hands.

A choice, decision, plan, or goal contemplated that is yet ahead of us is more important than a choice viewed in retrospect – the first is yet fluid while the latter is concrete – the vitalness of “now” should be spent in the fear of God so our “tomorrow” can look back and smile on our “yesterday.”

5. Finally, when it comes to preaching, after 50-odd years (well, not all of them were odd) of ministry, I have learned (or learning still):

I. Reading the Bible and reading the Bible can be two very different things.

Since the Bible is unlike any other book in human existence, it, therefore, cannot be read like any other book. However, it does require a constant reading over that allows the Spirit to pinpoint particulars in the Scriptures which, if not in our memory, cannot be brought to the fore. So a constant reading and rereading of the complete Bible must be an ongoing operation, and then selective reading which pertains to a subject must be done. The better the “overall” reading, the better the “subject” is magnified. Trying to “get by” on less always is shown in the preacher’s lesser ability to relate the “mind of Christ.”

II. View your audience as people:

People who will either be helped or hindered by your efforts; people who are never “black and white” in their spiritual chemistry – none are all good, and none are all bad; people who are there not by chance – and therefore, your message was meant for them – one cannot aid the absent – so don’t make the attending people suffer for those who aren’t.

III. Forget your notes as much as possible.

Preach from what you have inhaled through study and prayer, and omit the points that don’t have points. A message engrained is a message extraordinary.

IV. Don't try to copy a "style..."

- allow God to fashion your own. God called individual men, not cookie-cutter stamp outs. God mixes Himself with a preacher's spirit, and we call this anointing. Seek not to "move the crowd" rather, seek to "move the cross."

V. Support the pastor you are preaching for.

God many times uses another pastor to help a congregation to understand the value of their man of God and how to better operate with him to fulfill the will of God in that local assembly. Illumination is worth much more than imagination.

VI. Proper language (not speaking of grammar) in the pulpit is always proper.

To lower the vocabulary to "street speak" and "vulgarisms" is despicable, regardless of the laughter that ensues. Preachers ought to sound like preachers and honor the office to which they are called.

VII. Preach like a dying man to dying men.

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