

### **A Book Review: Lectures To My Students**

#### I. SUMMARY

Lectures To My Students, written by Charles H. Spurgeon, stands as an ever living monument, not only to the author, but also to the men the author loved so much – Pastors. In this book, we feel the pulse and heartbeat of this eloquent herald of Scripture. Spurgeon’s influence went way beyond London proper as he poured himself into other pastors. This high priority was seen as he said, “No work can possibly confer a greater benefit upon mankind than the training of ministers whom God has chosen, for around them spring up churches, schools, and all the agencies of religion and philanthropy” (p. iv).

The back cover contains a good summary of the book, saying, “With holy wit Spurgeon seeks to banish halfheartedness from the ministry. Like Gideon, he would send home all but those warriors of God’s own choosing. These he would inflame with knowledgeable, militant zeal for God’s glory, insisting that true ministerial success will come only through their ready disposal of their whole selves to the will and truth of God.” I would assume the publisher wrote these words, but they practically sound like the Prince of Preachers himself. What an apropos summary as it goes straight to the jugular point, resembling a sneak preview of the contents inside. This was great marketing!

#### II. CRITIQUE

**A. Purpose.** Spurgeon explicitly gives his purpose in the “Introduction and Apology” section, stating, “In reply to many requests from those ministers who in their student days listened to my

lectures, I submit a selection to the press” (p. v). This is Spurgeon’s homiletics and pastoral ministry classes combined into one. How to live a holy life, how to prepare and preach a sermon, proper earnestness, the role of the Holy Spirit, and correct posture are some of the subjects that Spurgeon articulates in striving towards the goal of complete pastoral training (as much as can be taught in the classroom alone).

**B. Credibility.** The best way to denote the book’s integrity is by the phrase, “top notch.” This man practiced what he preached, and then poured himself into scores of other men for the gospel ministry. The author’s approach to pastoral ministry exudes confidence and believability. Spurgeon’s agenda was always redemptive and this comes blazing through in this work. Obvious exclusions were the pastor’s role in politics and social reform.

Serious about the ministry, Spurgeon said, “The solemn work with which the Christian ministry concerns itself demands a man’s all, and that all at its best. To engage in half-heartedly is an insult to God and man” (p. vi). To put words into the author’s mouth, Spurgeon’s philosophy of writing is the same thing, that is, his words are the farthest from half-hearted as the sun is from the moon.

Being a pastor for so many years, Spurgeon understood the perils and the pitfalls of the pastorate. This is helpful because Spurgeon does not come across as an outsider, but a true insider who knows the dark secrets of the clergy saying, “the worst is the temptation to ministerialism – the tendency to read our Bibles as ministers, to pray as ministers, to get into doing the whole of our religion as not ourselves personally, but only relatively, concerned in it” (p. 11). The author may have been criticized for many things by his detractors, but seldom did an antagonist attack Spurgeon’s credibility. They knew he believed what he said. This book reveals a small portion of his sincerity to honor the Lord by training others to be pastors after

God's own heart. You get the feeling that Spurgeon wants you to catch his desire to give the Lord your best, and nothing less, and then pass it on.

**C. Scholarship.** In this book, the author comes across as being an expert in every area discussed. In his day, he was up to date with the current works regarding his subject matter, quoting everyone from Alleine to McCheyne. He is a man who understands what others have thought, and are thinking about the gospel ministry in biblical terms, not just his own opinion. The book is not chalked full of footnotes and it does not contain an extensive biography, but the original setting did not require it. Reflective of a pastor teaching pastors, this work suffers no loss for failing to be on the cutting edge of research.

**D. Writing Style.** At times, Spurgeon is refreshingly blunt and you can almost see him give a Cheshire cat grin when he quips, "Our standing in doctrinal matters is well known, and we make no profession of latitudinarian charity..." (p. iv). This work is extremely readable and you always know where Spurgeon stands. How refreshing it is, especially in today's day and age of relativism, to hear someone say with boldness, "Open immorality, in most cases, however deep the repentance, is a fatal sign that ministerial graces were never in the man's character" (p. 9).

The author intentionally inscribes this book with what he has described by saying, "I have purposely given an almost autobiographical tinge to the whole..." (p. v). This adds to the very personal nature that the book conveys. This might be the quintessential work that allows the readers to get to know the heart of this great man. He exceeds his goal here.

**E. Main Strengths.** This review would not allow the space for all the great bits of exhortation given to a preacher of the gospel. Mainly, this book is first-rate because as you read it, you get the feeling that you are actually attending one of the "Prince of Preachers" classes. What a privilege to be taught by Spurgeon himself, even though we are a century and an ocean apart!

Lecture I, “The Minister’s Self-watch”, begins the book like a starting gun in a footrace, initiating the reader to Spurgeon’s vivid delivery. For starters, he says, “True and genuine piety is necessary as the first indispensable requisite; whatever ‘call’ a man may pretend to have, if he has not been called to holiness, he certainly has not been called to the ministry” (p. 3).

The most distinguishing chapter is, “The Call to the Ministry”. I have read, re-read, and told others to read this great piece of exhortation involving those who would dare to tread on the gospel ministry’s holy ground. As prerequisites for the call, he discusses the “intense, all-absorbing desire for the word,” the “aptness to teach,” the “measure of conversion-work going on under his efforts,” and lastly, the “preaching should be acceptable to the people of God” (p. 29). This should be required reading for all seminary students wishing to be used by the Lord for pulpit ministries.

The size of this review prevents me from discussing other excellent truths like “Attention,” ministerial progress, the pity of listening to bad sermons, self indulgence, convictions, dullness, aiming for conversions, and many more. I have underlined so much of this book because it is chalked full of juicy morsels.

**F. Main Weaknesses.** Overall, I really loved this book. These few exceptions should in no wise detract the reader from pouring over this book on a regular basis. The Scriptures say that when there are many words, the possibility to stumble increases. The same might be said for this book of just fewer than 600 pages.

Lecture VI, “On the Choice of a Text”, describes the lengths pastors will go when they are not systematically expositing the Word. This chapter contains discussions of well rounded pastors stating that selecting a text to preach was the “greatest trouble” in the ministry (p. 88). Spurgeon himself said, “I confess that I frequently sit hour after hour praying and waiting for a

subject, and that this is the main part of my study; much hard labour have I spent in manipulating topics ... When a verse gives your mind a hearty grip, from which you cannot release yourself, you will need no further direction as to your proper theme” (pg. 88, 89). This is nothing but pure mysticism, but fortunately, Spurgeon was so gifted in other areas, that this flaw never became a stick trap to him or his congregation. I would never suggest doing this, even infrequently.

Lecture VII, “On Spiritualizing”, goes beyond proper grammatical, historical interpretation. Spurgeon says, “Within limit, my brethren, be not afraid to spiritualize, or take singular texts.... I counsel you to employ spiritualizing within certain limits and boundaries” (p. 103). This chapter reflects the kind of interpretation that is informally known as being a “hyper-typer.” The author does not take it as far as A.W. Pink for instance, but it would be best to only designate types in the Bible when they are explicitly called types. Otherwise, when and where do you draw the line?

This reviewer found some chapters to be practically irrelevant, such as, Lecture X, “The Faculty of Impromptu Speech”, and Lecture XI, “The Minister’s Fainting Fits”. Yes, there are times that one must be ready to speak unexpectedly, but this style of preaching is inadequate at best, and disobedient at worse (not studying at all). Likewise, some comments on depression are fine, but it seems like Spurgeon’s own depression was the motivation for this chapter. I am no physician, but I would imagine that because gout was so painful, it had to contribute to the down trodden spirit often found in Spurgeon. I would be cautious to equate this brand of depression with what is commonly called depression today.

Finally, the illustration chapters probably take this important part of the sermon too far. Most pastors need less encouragement to illustrate, not more. I would agree with Spurgeon

about all the illustrations if his readers, and original hearers, could illustrate as effectually and properly as he did.

**G. Value for Preaching.** This tome represents Spurgeon at his finest. Every Pastor should frequently peruse this book. If this book is not relevant to pastoral ministry, then no book is.

The Lecture on the priority of private prayer is indispensable for any pastoral ministry book. Spurgeon lays it on the line saying, “If there be any man under heaven, who is compelled to carry out the precept – ‘pray without ceasing,’ surely it is the Christian minister ... If you as ministers are not very prayerful, you are much to be pitied” (p. 41). It is a good reminder to hear from the author that prayer is essential, even in the delivery of a sermon and in the opening of our hearers’ souls. It is nice to know that even Spurgeon’s giftedness as a speaker was always submissive to the Holy Spirit.

In today’s evangelical churches, that are moving towards fluff and good feelings, it is a good reminder from the author to fill your sermons with doctrine that is “solid, substantial, and abundant” (p. 72). He goes on to say, “... the true value of a sermon must lie, not in its fashion and manner, but in the truth which it contains. Nothing can compensate for the absence of teaching; all the rhetoric in the world is but as chaff to the wheat in contrast to the gospel of our salvation” (p. 72). Who needs to take surveys, soothe felt needs, and cater to “seekers” when you can obey the Lord, prodded along by His servant Spurgeon, in preaching nothing but the truth.

When Spurgeon discusses public prayer, he might as well be discussing every duty of the pastor. “Cast your whole soul into the exercise.” This summarizes Spurgeon’s lectures to pastors in training.