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Not Corrupting the Word

by J.C. Ryle

“For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God speak we in Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:17).

The Positive Lessons

I now turn to the positive lessons which the text contains. “As of sincerity, as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ.” A few words on each head must suffice.

* We should aim to speak “as of sincerity” — sincerity of aim, heart, and motive; to speak as those who are thoroughly convinced of the truth of what they say; as those who have a deep feeling and tender love for those whom we address.

* We should aim to speak “as of God.” We ought to strive to feel like men commissioned to speak for God, and on His behalf. In our dread of running into Romanism, we too often forget the language of the Apostle — “I magnify mine office.” We forget how great is the responsibility of the New Testament minister, and how awful the sin of those who when a real messenger of Christ addresses them refuse to receive his message, and harden their hearts against it.

* We should aim to speak as “in the sight of God.” We are to ask ourselves, not, What did the people think of me? but, What was I in the sight of God? Latimer was once called upon to preach before Henry VIII, and began his sermon in the following manner. (I quote from memory, and do not pretend to verbal accuracy.) He began: “Latimer! Latimer! Dost thou remember thou art speaking before the high and mighty King Henry VIII; before him who has power to command thee to be sent to prison; before him who can have thy head struck off, if it please him? Wilt thou not take care to say nothing that will offend royal ears?” Then after a pause, he went on: “Latimer! Latimer! Dost not thou remember that thou art speaking before the King of kings and Lord of lords; before Him, at whose bar Henry VIII will stand; before Him, to whom one day thou wilt have to give account thyself? Latimer! Latimer! Be faithful to thy Master, and declare all God’s Word.”

O, that this may be the spirit in which we may ever retire from our pulpits, — not caring whether men are pleased or displeased, not caring whether men say we were eloquent or feeble; but going away with the witness of our conscience — I have spoken as in God’s sight.

* Finally, we should aim to speak “as in Christ.” The meaning of this phrase is doubtful. Grotius says, “We are to speak as in His name, as ambassadors.” But Grotius is poor authority. — Beza says, “We are to speak about Christ, concerning Christ.” This is good doctrine, but hardly the meaning of the words. — Others say, We are to speak as ourselves joined to Christ, as those who have received mercy from Christ, and whose only title to address others is from Christ alone. — Others say, We should speak as through Christ, in the strength of Christ. No meaning, perhaps, is better than this. The expression in the Greek exactly answers to Philippians 4: 13. “I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me.” Whatever sense we ascribe to these words, one thing is clear: we should speak in Christ as those who have themselves received mercy; as those who desire to exalt not themselves, but the Saviour; and as those who care nothing what men think of them, so long as Christ is magnified in their ministry.

In conclusion, we should all inquire: Do we ever handle the Word of God deceitfully? Do we realise what it is to speak as of God, as in the sight of God, and in Christ? Let me put to all one searching question. Is there any text in God’s Word which we shrink from expounding? Is there any statement in the Bible which we avoid speaking about to our people, not because we do not understand it, but because it contradicts some pet notion of ours as to what is truth? If it be so, let us ask our consciences whether this be not very like handling the Word of God deceitfully.

Is there anything in the Bible we keep back for fear of seeming harsh, and of giving offence to some of our hearers? Is there any statement, either doctrinal or practical, which we mangle, mutilate or dismember? If so, are we dealing honestly with God's Word?

Let us pray to be kept from corrupting God's Word. Let neither the fear nor favour of man induce us to keep back, or avoid, or change, or mutilate, or qualify any text in the Bible. Surely we ought to have holy boldness when we speak as ambassadors of God. We have no reason to be ashamed of any statement we make in our pulpits so long as it is Scriptural. I have often thought that one great secret of the marvellous honour which God has put on a man who is not in our communion (I allude to Mr Spurgeon) is, the extraordinary boldness and confidence with which he stands up in the pulpit to speak to people about their sins and their souls. It cannot be said he does it from fear of any, or to please any. He seems to give every class of hearers its portion, – to the rich and the poor, the high and the low, the peer and the peasant, the learned and the illiterate. He gives to every one plain dealing, according to God's Word. I believe that very boldness has much to do with the success which God is pleased to give to his ministry. Let us not be ashamed to learn a lesson from him in this respect. Let us go and do likewise.