

**Courage and Humility
by John Stott**

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**by
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Churches today are filled with patrons with itching ears who seek to place over them teachers to speak to their liking, but these congregations have a critical need for courageous men who, by the Spirit of the Living God, will speak the Word of God unabashed. These men must not give in to the desire to make the Word of God more palatable for fear of driving people from their Church. These people are, instead, more apt to leave due to empty sermons which foster their contempt.

The preacher who seeks inspiration for courageously speaking God's truth may find comfort in the stories of Moses, Elijah, Nathan, Jeremiah, and even John, who all boldly confronted the likes of Kings with God's rebuke. These examples of fearless and uncompromising declarations of God's Word continue throughout the New Testament, with James and John, Paul, Peter and the other disciples, often evoking persecution, and are epitomized with our Lord, Himself. The Church age has been filled with men who have fearlessly challenged their flock and other clergy with correction from the Word of God, including John Chrysostom, John Wycliffe, John Knox, and into the twentieth century against such opposition as that from Nazi, Marxist, Moslem, Hindu, and the so-called Christian West.

The prolific nature of this character of uncatering prophet bids us investigate its seed, which we find points us to the conviction of these men that they bear a very Word from God, Himself, from which deviation is not an option. As the prophets of old were commissioned by God to 'not hold back a word' (Jer. 1:9, 17; 26:2), so also are these men convicted with like mandate. And as Israel of old wanted not the right Word of God, but rather smooth illusions (Is. 30:9-11), so people of all ages. Those who cater to their request whitewash cracked walls and incur liability for the failing structure.

Preaching the Word of God is not a popular thing. Today, preachers who seek to speak the Word of God courageously are not only alienated from those in their flock who wish not to hear, but also from fellow preachers who routinely compromise on issues to which the Bible speaks unequivocally. This also is nothing new, as we consider Micaiah's decision to speak the Word of God to King Jehoshaphat and King Ahab contrary to the report of the 400 court prophets. Indeed, our Lord warns us to beware "when all men speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets." (Luke 6:36). The ungodly resent the humiliation that was, and must be ours also, at the Cross of Christ, but this makes it nonetheless the way to God.

The preacher of the Words of Christ must not only preach Christ's words of comfort, but also His uncomfortable words of God's wrath and judgment, which lend enlightening contrast those of grace, love, and salvation. This attention to the uneasy must not be left to merely the explanation of concepts, but further applied to the hard life of faithfully following our Lord. Our congregations must be exhorted to follow the countercultural mandates to a holy life.

As we zealously seek to share the hard truths with our flock, we must also guard against an unbalanced sadistic satisfaction in seeing our people wince to the back of God's Hand. For such a one to then speak of the mercies of our Savior would be in vain. As Christ exemplified, with loving sensitivity, Christian pastors must both disturb the comfortable and comfort the disturbed.

Steady expository preaching through the Bible will embolden the pastor aspiring for courage, as it forces the address of passages which one might otherwise neglect, removes speculation as to why a particular subject is covered, and exposes one's congregation to the broader themes in Scripture. Again we find great exemplaries from John Chrysostom in the early church, to the reformers Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Bullinger-- all whose exposition of entire books of the Bible were the foundation of their regular preaching-- to the more recent Matthew Henry, Joseph Parker, Alexander Maclaren, and William Temple. Contemporary congregations may not have the attention of those from old, but if we spend months, instead of years working through our Text, they will have fed their need for truth as we grow in courage as pastors.

As we succeed in being outspoken, we must not become proud, headstrong, and arrogant in our outspokenness. The pulpit gives unique occasion for vanity, as all eyes are upon the speaker while the audience remains silent and subdued. There is a danger of developing weekly rhetorical discourse to glorify the speaker; alternatively, another snare is an outward appearance of humility with an insatiable appetite for applause.

To combat arrogance we need to submit to the Word of God, rather than preaching our own opinions. Humbleness of mind means esteeming others more highly than ourselves, and to walk humbly with our God (Phil 2:3-4, Mic. 6:5). We must understand, except for the revealing of God by God, His infinite ways are beyond our finite minds. Recognition of this should result in submission to preach the Word of God, as is, without aspiring to originality, portraying our own opinions, or else retracting to

make God's Word more palatable. This is not our prerogative; rather, we are stewards to deliver to God's people the full truth in His Scripture. To accomplish this we must sit at the feet of Christ in meditation of His Word, receptive and expectant for Him to lead us from His Truth.

Another malady against true humility is selfish purpose. Why do we preach? The purpose of many preachers has digressed to the goal of praises from men. We must always remember that the reason we preach is not to reveal our intelligence to our flock, but rather to expound the Scriptures so faithfully and relevantly that Christ is perceived in all His adequacy for meeting the needs of His children. When the Holy Spirit meets with His people and the preacher becomes a spectator who has merely prepared the way of the Lord, things are as they ought to be. Our job is to betroth our congregation to Christ (2Cor. 11:2), and while we cannot help being seen, we must never seek to draw attention to ourselves.

Finally, we must recognize that we are dependent on the Holy Spirit's power for effectiveness. While we should recognize the ability with which God has equipped us, we must not depend on our use of them, alone, to transform a lost human. We must seek to be "clothed with the power from on high" for such a task (Luke 24:49). This can only happen when we relinquish our pride and let our acknowledged weakness and dependence upon Him glorify His strength, for in our weakness we are strong in His power (2 Cor. 12:10).