

The Sermon Off-Stage

Dear David,

It is a privilege to have this opportunity to approach some thoughts I have been wanting to share with you for some time. Both through my own personal experience, and also from what I am learning from others, there's so much I'd like to pass on to you.

I remember reading a magazine recently in which Billy Graham was asked how he wanted to be remembered. His response was, *I want people to remember me as one who practiced what he preached*. It dawned on me that here was a man in his senior years who was still very conscious of the impression he was leaving on those he meets along life's way. It reminds me of another statement I have attempted to apply to my life: *The greatest sermon I will ever deliver is not the one I preach, but the one I live*. Does that make sense to you?

There were days—perhaps there still are—when I have had to look back upon a deed, a word, a thought or even a reaction, and blushed at the thought of someone thinking that was really me. Does the phrase, *Perception becomes reality* ring a familiar bell? It should—because it really does. People will establish their opinion of you very quickly and at times unfairly. For example, if you have a large ego that constantly needs feeding, people will notice, and you will have to live with their evaluation. I'm sure you get my point. Your ministry will be formed

for the most part by what people see and decide about you, even more so than what they know about you.

I remember a time when I made a negative impression. Perhaps if I share that experience it will help you see just how strongly I feel about *living that sermon*.

It was late one evening and I was hungry. I had spent nearly all day giving myself to people. It had been a steady stream of counseling appointments, hospital visit, and encounters with members of my congregation who had tested my *joy* level. I spotted a restaurant that I had visited before and walked in. It was about 8:45 p.m., and as I entered, I noticed on the door that closing time was 9 o'clock. Plenty of time.

I went up to the proprietor with every intention of placing my order, but rather than receiving a friendly greeting I was told they were closed. *What do you mean closed?* I countered. *The sign on the door says 9:00 p.m., and it's certainly not 9.* He explained that business was slow, the weather was bad, and they just thought it might be okay to close early. I recall saying something like, *This is the last time I will be coming into this place. If you post 9:00 p.m. as closing time, then that's when you should close—and not a minute before.* My body language showed disgust, and as I left the restaurant I made sure the door shut quickly and loudly. That was it. But it really wasn't. My sermon continued.

The next day I received a telephone call from a lady who asked, *Are you Pastor London, and were you in a certain restaurant last evening, and did you show great displeasure at not being served as you expected?* Sheepishly I

responded, Yes. She then proceeded to tell me a scenario that I would regret forever. You see, the lady was the wife of the man I had offended the night before. He had been watching my weekly television program and had even attended our worship service a few times. He had been a religious skeptic most of his life, but had seen in me—from a distance—someone he could trust. I will never forget her words, *Pastor, my husband said if that was you he had waited on in the restaurant last night—not only would he never enter your church again, he would never attend any church again.*

I had easily forgotten that we are to *let our gentleness be evident to all* (Phil. 4:5), that we are to *be patient with everyone* (1 Thess. 5:14), and, especially, that we are not *to let any unwholesome talk come out of our mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs . . .* (Eph. 4:29).

I have no way of knowing whether that proprietor held to his statement or not, but I do know that the man died a short time after our encounter. That restaurant experience will stay with me the rest of my life. My sermon fell to the floor with great emptiness. My heart still aches when I recall it.

David, you may be wondering, *What's the big deal; that could happen to anyone.* But I really believe that if you ponder my words you will get the point. There are a lot of great preachers, knowledgeable Bible scholars and noted clergy who have the respect and admonition of the masses, but who have invalidated their *sermon* by an innocent and careless action or overreaction, even as I did.

Please take some time and think on these things, dear friend. There seems to be great wisdom in the pithy thought, *you never get a second chance to make a first impression.*

Still learning and still trusting,

H. B. London Jr., Vice President

Ministry Outreach/Pastoral Ministries,

Focus on the Family, Colorado Springs, Colorado

Watch your life and doctrine closely.

Persevere in them, because if you do,

You will save both yourself and your hearers.

1 Timothy 4:16