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*Ministerial*

# **JOHN WESLEY ON PULPIT ORATORY**

By

*Ross E. Price*

*“Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without  
which no man shall see the Lord” Heb 12:14*

**Spreading Scriptural Holiness to the World**

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Revised and Abridged by

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**Introduction**

The Reverend John Wesley, M.A., published and edited many books and pamphlets during his busy career in the pulpit and on horseback. These became the reading material and guides to Christian living of the many Methodist Societies he was constantly organizing. In charge of a new society, as its preacher and leader, Wesley was able to leave often only a lay preacher. To help these men in their own pulpit decorum, and to promote their efficiency in the delivery of their sermons, Wesley wrote his pamphlet on Oratory. This has long been out of print. The latest American edition known to the present writer was published in 1891 at New York by Hunt & Eaton. In his introduction to that edition, J. M. Buckley, then editor of the Christian Advocate, says:

It has long been our judgment that this production is the best single article extant upon oratory and elocution. To it we owe more than to any other composition upon the same subject. By close attention to it we believe that any person of ordinary sense, and possessing the common speaking organs and mental faculties of human nature, can learn to become a good speaker, and that the best "natural orators" may be greatly improved by it. So highly do we value it as to have committed it to memory, and for a considerable period we were in the habit of criticizing every address which we heard, and every one which we delivered, by its principles.

So far as we are able to judge, it does not contain a single error or omit one important truth, and will be peculiarly valuable to the young men of the Church . .

Likewise the present writer has found it a valuable aid in the training of prospective ministers toward efficient delivery of sermons. It should be carefully studied by any who seek the highest degree of pulpit effectiveness in the proclamation of the message of salvation.

**Ross E. Price**  
Pasadena College, 1954

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**CHAPTER I**  
**How We May Speak So as to Be Heard**  
**Without Difficulty and with Pleasure**

1. Before we enter upon particular rules I would advise all who can, (1) To study the art of speaking early in life, and to practice it as often as possible before they have contracted any of the common imperfections or vices of speaking; for these may easily be avoided at first, but when they are once learned it is extremely difficult to unlearn them. I advise all young persons, (2) To be governed in speaking, as in all other things, by reason rather than example, and, therefore, to have an especial care whom they imitate therein; and to imitate only what is right in their manner of speaking, not their blemishes and imperfections.

2. The first business of a speaker is so to speak that he may be heard and understood with ease. In order to accomplish this it is a great advantage to have a clear, strong voice; such, at least, as will fill the place where you speak, so as to be heard by every person in it. To strengthen a weak voice, read or speak sometimes aloud for at least half an hour every morning; but take care not to strain your voice at first; begin low, and raise it by degrees to the height.

3. If you are apt to falter in your speech, read something in private daily, and pronounce every word and syllable so distinctly that they may all have their full sound and proportion. If you are apt to stammer at certain expressions, take particular care, first, to pronounce them plainly. When you are once able to do this you may learn to pronounce them more fluently at your leisure.

The chief faults of speaking are:

(1) Speaking too loud. This is disagreeable to the hearers, as well as inconvenient for the speaker. For they must consider it either due to ignorance or affectation, which is never so inexcusable as in preaching.

Every man's voice should, indeed, fill the place where he speaks; but if it exceeds its natural key, it will be neither sweet, nor soft, nor agreeable, if for no other reason than that he cannot then give every word its proper and distinguishing sound.

(2) Speaking too low. This is, of the two, more disagreeable than the former. Take care, therefore, to keep between the extremes; seek to preserve the natural key of your voice, and strive to adapt the loudness of it to the place where you are, or the number of persons to whom you speak.

In order to achieve this, consider whether your voice is naturally loud or low; and if it inclines toward either extreme seek to correct this first in your ordinary conversation. If it is too low, converse with those that are deaf; if too loud, with those who speak softly.

(3) The speaking in a thick, cluttering manner. Some persons mumble or swallow some words or syllables, and do not utter the rest articulately or distinctly. This is sometimes owing to a natural defect, sometimes to a sudden excitement, but oftener to carelessness.

To cure this, accustom yourself, both in conversation and reading, to pronounce every word distinctly. Observe how to give full sound to every word. If nothing else avails, do as Demosthenes did, who cured himself of this natural defect by repeating orations every day with pebbles in his mouth.

(4) Speaking too fast. This is a common fault; but not a little one; particularly when one is speaking of the things of God. It may be cured by habituating yourself to attend to the weight, sense, and propriety of every word you speak.

(5) Speaking too slow is not a common fault, and when we are once warned of it, it may be easily avoided.

(6) Speaking with an irregular, desultory, and uneven voice, raised or depressed unnaturally or unseasonably. To cure this, you should be careful not to begin your sentences either too high or too low; for that would necessarily lead you to an unnatural and improper variation of the voice. Remember never to raise or lower the voice without a particular reason, arising either from the length of the sentence or the sense or spirit of what you speak.

(7) But the greatest and most common fault of all is speaking with an [unnatural] tone: some have a feminine, squeaking tone; some a singing or chanting one; some a high, swelling, theatrical tone, laying too much emphasis on every sentence; some have an awful, solemn tone; others an odd, whimsical, whining one, not to be expressed in words.

To avoid all kinds of unnatural tones the only rule is this: Endeavor to speak in public just as you do in common conversation. Attend to your subject, and deliver it in the same manner as if you were talking of it to a friend. This, if carefully observed, will correct both this and almost all the other faults of bad pronunciation.

A good pronunciation is nothing but a natural, easy, and graceful variation of the voice, suitable to the nature and importance of the sentiments one seeks to deliver.

4. If you would be heard with pleasure, in order to make the deeper impression on your hearers, First, study to render your voice as soft and sweet as possible; and the more, if it is naturally harsh, hoarse, or obstreperous; which may be cured by constant exercise. By carefully using this every morning, you may in a short time wear off these defects, and contract such a smooth and tuneful delivery as will recommend whatever you speak.

5. Secondly, labor to avoid the odious custom of coughing and spitting while you are speaking. If at times you cannot wholly avoid it, take care that you do not stop in the middle of a sentence, but only at such times as will least interrupt the sense of what you are delivering.

6. Above all take care, Thirdly, to vary your voice, according to the matter on which you speak. Nothing grates on the ear more than a voice still in the same key. And yet nothing is more common, although this monotony is not only unpleasant to the ear, but also destroys the effect of what is spoken.

7. The best way to learn how to vary the voice is to observe common discourse. Take notice how you speak yourself in ordinary conversation, and how others speak on various occasions. After the very same manner you are to vary your voice in public, allowing for the largeness of the place and the distance of the hearers.

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**CHAPTER II**  
**General Rules for the Variation of the Voice**

1. The voice may be varied in three ways: First, as to high and low pitch; Secondly, as to loudness or softness; Thirdly, as to swiftness or slowness of speed.

(1) As to pitch, a medium between the extremes is carefully to be observed. You must neither strain your voice by raising it always to the highest note it can reach, nor drop it always to the lowest note, which would be to murmur rather than to speak.

(2) As to volume, be careful not to force your voice to the last extremity. You cannot hold this long without danger of its cracking, and failing you suddenly. Neither ought you to speak in too faint and remiss a manner, which destroys all the force and energy of what is spoken.

(3) As to speed, you ought to moderate the voice so as to avoid all precipitation; otherwise you give the hearers no time to think, and so are not likely either to convince or to persuade them. Yet neither should you speak slower than men generally do in common conversation. It is a fault to draw out your words too slow, or to make needless breaks or pauses. To speak in a drawl is worse than speaking hurriedly. The speech ought not to drag, but to flow along. But, then, it ought to flow like a gliding stream, not as a rapid torrent.

2. The medium thus recommended is not something rigid and indivisible. It admits of considerable latitude. As to the pitch of the voice, there are five or six notes whereby it may be varied between the highest and the lowest; so here is abundant room for variation without falling into either extreme. There is also sufficient room between the extremes of volume to pronounce either loudly or softly, as different subjects may require. As to speed, though you avoid both extremes, you may nevertheless speak faster or slower, and that in several degrees, as best suits the subject and the feelings of your discourse.

3. It should likewise be observed that the voice ought not to be varied too hastily in any of these respects; the difference is to be made by degrees, and almost insensibly; too sudden a change being unnatural and affected, and consequently disagreeable to the hearers.



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**CHAPTER III**  
**Particular Rules for Varying the Voice**

1. If you speak of natural things, merely to make the hearers understand them, you need use only a clear and distinct voice. But if you would display the wisdom and power of God, do it with a stronger and more solemn accent.

2. The good and honorable actions of men should be described with a full and lofty accent; wicked and infamous actions with a strong and earnest voice, and such a tone as expresses horror and detestation.

3. In congratulating the happy events of life, we speak with a lively and cheerful accent; in relating misfortunes (as in funeral orations), with a slow and more solemn tone.

4. The voice should also be varied according to the greatness or importance of the subject; it is absurd to speak either in a lofty manner where the subject is of little importance, or to speak of great and important affairs with a low, unconcerned, and familiar voice.

5. On all occasions let the thing you are to speak be deeply imprinted on your own heart; and when you are sensibly touched yourself, you will easily touch others, by adjusting your voice to every emotion which you feel.

6. Love is shown by a soft, smooth, and melting voice; hate, by a sharp and sullen one; grief, by a dull, languishing tone, sometimes interrupted by a sigh or groan; fear is expressed by a trembling and hesitating voice; boldness, by speaking loud and strong; anger is shown by a sharp and impetuous tone, taking the breath often and speaking short; compassion requires a soft and submissive voice.

7. After the expression of any violent passion you should gradually lower your voice again. Readiness in varying it on all kinds of subjects, as well as emotions, is best acquired by frequently reading or repeating aloud either dialogues, select plays, or such discourses as come nearest to the dramatic style.

8. You should begin a discourse low, both as it expresses modesty and as it is best for your voice and strength; and yet you should speak so as to be heard by all that are present. You may afterward raise the voice as the subject matter shall require. The audience likewise, being calm and unmoved at first, is best suited by a cool and dispassionate address at the beginning.

9. The above rule admits of some exceptions; for on some extraordinary occasions you may begin a discourse abruptly and passionately, and consequently with a warm and passionate accent.

10. You may speak more loudly in laying down what you intend to prove, and in explaining it to your hearers. But you need not speak with any warmth or emotion yet; it is enough if you speak articulately and distinctly.

11. When you prove your point, and refute your adversary's objection, there is need of more earnestness and exertion of voice. And here chiefly it is that you are to vary your voice, according to the rules above cited.

12. A little pause may then precede the conclusion, in which you may gradually rise to the utmost strength of pronunciation; and finish all with a lively, cheerful voice, expressing joy and satisfaction.

13. An exclamation requires a loud and strong voice; and so does an oath or strong assertion; such as, "O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God!" "I call God for a record upon my soul."

14. In a personification, the voice should be varied according to the character of the persons introduced; in an apostrophe, according to the circumstances of the person or thing to which you address your speech; which, if directed either to God or to inanimate things, ought to be louder than usual.

15. In reciting and answering objections, the voice should be varied as if two persons were speaking. And so in dialogues, or whenever several persons are introduced, as disputing or talking together.

16. In a climax, the voice must be gradually raised to answer every step of the figure. In that figure of speech in which the speaker breaks off suddenly, as if unwilling or unable to state what was in his mind; the voice, which was raised to introduce it, must be lowered considerably. In an antithesis, the points are to be distinguished, and the former to be pronounced with a stronger tone than the latter; but in the repetition of the last word or any prominent word in a sentence or clause, at the beginning of the next, the word repeated is pronounced the second time louder and stronger than the first.

17. One should be careful never to make a pause in the middle of a word or sentence; but only where there is such a pause in the sense which requires or at least allows it. You may make a short pause after every sentence, and begin the next generally a little lower than you conclude the last; but on some occasions a little higher, which the nature of the subject will easily determine.

18. I would likewise advise every speaker to observe those who speak well, that he may not pronounce any word in an improper manner: and in case of doubt, let him not be ashamed to ask how such a word is to be pronounced; as neither does he desire others to inform him whenever they hear him pronounce any word improperly.

19. Finally, be careful not to lower your voice too much at the conclusion of a sentence; but pronounce the very last words loud and distinct, especially if they have but a weak and dull sound of themselves.

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**CHAPTER IV**  
**Concerning Gestures**

1. That this silent language of the face and hands may move the emotions of those that see and hear you, it must be well adjusted to the subject, as well as to the feeling, which you desire either to express or to excite. It must likewise be free from all affectation, and such as appears to be the natural result of the things you speak and the feeling that moves you to speak them. The whole is to be managed so that there will be nothing in all the positions and motions of your body to offend the eyes of the spectators.

2. It is more difficult to discover the faults of your own gestures than of your pronunciation. For a man can hear his own voice, but he cannot see his own face; neither can he observe the several motions of his own body; at least but imperfectly. To remedy this you may use a large mirror, as Demosthenes did, and thereby observe and learn to avoid every disagreeable or unhandsome gesture.

3. There is but one way better than this, which is to have some excellent example often before your eyes; or to desire some skillful and faithful friend to observe all your motions, and inform you which are proper and which are not.

4. As to the motion of the body, one ought not to change his place or posture every moment; neither, on the other hand, should he stand like a stick, in one fixed and immovable posture; but to move in a natural and graceful manner, as various circumstances may require.

5. The head ought not to be held up too high, nor thrust forward in a clownish manner; neither ought it to be cast down, or hang, as it were, on the chest; nor should it be cocked on one side or the other, but kept moderately and decently upright in its natural state and position. Moreover, it ought neither to be kept immovable, as a statue, nor to be continually moving or throwing itself about. To avoid both extremes it should be turned gently, as the occasion arises, sometimes one way, sometimes the other; and at other times it should remain looking straight forward to the middle of the audience. It ought always to be turned in the same direction as the hands and body; only in refusing a thing, for this we do with the right hand, turning the head at the same time to the left.

6. It is the face which gives the greatest life to action; of this, therefore, you must take the greatest care, that nothing may appear disagreeable in it, since it is continually in the view of all but yourself. There is nothing that can prevent this but a mirror, or a friend who will deal faithfully with you. You should adapt all its movements to the subject with which you are dealing, the emotions you would arouse, and the persons to whom you speak. Let love and joy spread cheerfulness over your face; hatred, sorrow, or fear, a gloominess. Look with gravity and authority on your inferiors; on your superiors with boldness mixed with respect.

7. You should always be casting your eyes upon some one or another of your listeners, and moving them from one side to the other with a look of affection and regard. Look your audience decently in the face, one after another, as we do in familiar conversation. Your aspect should always be pleasant, and your looks direct, neither severe or askew; unless you desire to express contempt or scorn, which may require that particular aspect.

8. If you speak of heaven or things above, lift up your eyes; if of things beneath, cast them down; and so if you speak of things of disgrace; but raise them in calling God to witness, or speaking of things wherein you glory.

9. The mouth must never be turned awry; neither must you bite or lick your lips, or shrug your shoulders, or lean upon your elbow; all such actions give just occasion for offense on the part of your listeners.

10. We make use of the hand a thousand different ways; only very little at the beginning of a discourse. Concerning this you may observe the following rules:

(1) Never clap your hands or thump the pulpit.

(2) Use the right hand most, and when you use the left let it be only to accompany the other.

(3) The right hand may be gently laid upon the chest when you speak of your own faculties, heart, or conscience.

(4) You must begin your action with your speech, and end it when you make an end of speaking.

(5) The hands should seldom be lifted higher than the eyes, nor let down lower than chest.

(6) Your eyes should always have your hands in view, so that those to whom you speak may see your eyes, your mouth, and your hands all moving in concert with each other and expressing the same thing.

(7) Seldom stretch out your arms sideways more than half a foot from the trunk of your body.

(8) Your hands are not to be in perpetual motion; this the ancients called the babbling of the hands.

11. There are many other things relating to action, as well as utterance, which cannot easily be expressed in writing. These you must learn by practice, by hearing a good speaker, and by speaking often before him.

12. But remember while you are actually speaking you must not be studying any other motions, but use those that naturally arise from the subject of your discourse, from the place where you speak, and the characters of the persons whom you address.

13. I would advise you, lastly, to observe these rules, as far as things permit, even in your common conversation, till you have a perfect habit of observing them, so that they are, as it were, natural to you. And whenever you hear an eminent speaker, observe with the utmost attention what conformity there is between his action and utterance and these rules. You may afterward imitate them at home until you have made his graces your own. And when once, by such assistances as these, you have acquired a good habit of speaking, you will no more need any tedious reflections upon this art, but will speak as easily and as gracefully.