

LESSON VI.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

AUSTIN PHELPS, D.D.

LATE BARTLET PROFESSOR OF SACRED RHETORIC IN ANDOVER
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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LECTURE VI.

THE TEXT: FORMS, PERSPICUITY.

2d, THE second class of inquiries respecting the selection of texts relate to the form of texts.

(1) Of these the first is, Must a text be a grammatical sentence? That is, must its grammatical structure be complete, so that all its words could be parsed? Good taste responds "Yes," as the general rule. It has the look of affectation to choose for a text language which grammatically considered has no sense. "Beginning at Jerusalem" was the text of a pastor in Philadelphia. Beginning what? who begins? what for? what of it? Imagine the announcement of such a fragment as the theme of a secular speaker! "As in Adam all die; —" why retain the first word, which, torn from its connections, has no meaning? Omit the first word, and have you not the more tasteful text? It is an emphatic, grammatically finished proposition. "Pastor Harms" has published a sermon on the text, "A little while." Vinet does not object to it. But I venture to place it side by side with the theme of another sermon on the text in full, by a preacher in Philadelphia, and let each speak for itself. This is the plan of the German pastor: "1. These words are cheering to the afflicted — "a little while;" 2. They maintain joy in joyful hearts — "a little while;" 3. They arouse

sluggishness — “a little while;” 4. They disturb carelessness — “a little while;” 5. They sustain those who are combating — “a little while;” 6. They strengthen the dying — “a little while.” From the text in full, “A little while and ye shall not see me, and again a little while and ye shall see me,” the American preacher presents this subject: “Some of the lessons to be derived from the absence of our Lord from us, and its brief duration.” By the side of this what becomes of the “little while” of “Pastor Harms”? Imagine St. Paul on Mars Hill as sentimentalizing on “a little while”!

Any thing can be caricatured; the best things the most ludicrously. Yet only by caricature can we picture to the life this method of dawdling over fragments of inspired words. Imagine, then, a full-grown man, for a half-score of Sundays in succession, quiddling over the following texts, all of them inspired fragments: “The precious ointment that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron’s beard;” “Alexander the coppersmith;” “Bowels of mercies;” “The great and noble Asnapper;” “The shaking of a spear;” “A piece of the nether millstone;” “The eyelids of the morning;” “The little owl and the great owl;” “Peter’s wife’s mother”!

But exceptions exist, in which ungrammatical texts are admissible. They are cases in which the fragments chosen are very weighty in thought, and so well known, that they instantly suggest the complete idea. Why do we say, “The greater the truth, the greater the libel”? Why do we say, “Like people, like priest;” “Waste not, want not;” “No pains, no gains;” “Handsome is that handsome does”? These are not grammatical structures, yet good taste does not veto

their proverbial abbreviations. Why? Because of two elements in them, — their pith of sentiment and the instantaneousness with which they are understood. The thought is racy, and at the same time complete, though the form is not complete. Because of the raciness, it is pleasing to have it in a nutshell, provided that we have the whole of it.

On the same principle of taste we are pleased with certain exceptions to the general rule against fragmentary texts. Certain fragments of inspired speech are of striking significance, and at the same time so well known, that to utter them is to suggest to hearers instantly the complete idea. Such fractional texts are the following: "The glorious gospel of the blessed God;" "Without God in the world;" "Our Father, which art in heaven;" "The precious blood of Christ." These are good texts, because of their very striking significance and the instantaneousness with which they are completely understood. Their significance alone would not justify them; their completeness of idea alone would not: but the union of these two elements puts them into the same category with abbreviated proverbs. A delicate sense of propriety will enable a preacher to distinguish these exceptions, though they are somewhat numerous. The number of these exceptions suggests a caution, that, in doubtful cases, the entire passage should be cited with a repetition of the textual fragment. This is admissible in all cases, and required in some.

(2) A second inquiry concerning the form of texts is, Can any principle regulate the length of texts? Obviously no rule can be of any value on a point like this. Yet on few of the expedients of the pulpit do preachers differ more widely. And that criticism can

wisely say of it is contained in a few *memoranda*. One is, that long texts have advantages which are sometimes conclusive in their defense. They familiarize the people with the Bible. The Book of Common Prayer is justly commended on the ground that it introduces so much of inspired language into the routine of worship. Long texts, if well treated by elaborate exposition, effect the same object more instructively than the mere rehearsal of the Scriptures. Moreover, long texts promote a taste for exposition among the people, and invite a preacher to expository discourse. Prolonged texts, furthermore, are the more accordant with the original theory of the text: they are conservative of the ancient reverence for the inspired utterances.

But a second memorandum is, that short texts have advantages which should sometimes give to them the preference. They are more easily remembered than long texts. A brief message in the memory is of more worth than a long one in the ear. Short texts, again, promote unity of impression. A lengthy text is apt to have some redundant materials which must be eliminated as the sermon proceeds. The brief text more easily tallies with the range of the sermon. Further, it often promotes interest of introduction by the omission of needless exposition. Indolent composing in the introduction frequently takes the form of exposition irrelevant to the aim of the sermon. Once more: the laconic text admits of emphatic repetition in the body of the sermon. Facility of repetition in the use of a text is often a prime element in the force of a conclusion. For the reasons now noted, it is obvious that the only rule which can be wisely adopted as to the length of a text is, "Fit the text to the demands of the subject." The advantages in either direction are only

secondary ; but the demands of the subject are always imperative. They will necessitate variety.

But, while this is the only rule which criticism can wisely apply, another suggestion is, that a preacher's skill in the homiletic use of the Scriptures should affect the general length of his texts. The mere heading of a sermon with a dumb block of biblical words is inane ; not so the skillful handling of it with oratorical genius. Plod and drone over a text, copying lazily from your commentaries, and no style of sermonizing is more stale ; but use inspiration in the spirit of an orator, speaking as if you were yourself inspired, and your preaching becomes a model of fascinating speech. A clergyman, formerly of Brooklyn, used to preach upon entire chapters. He had trained his inventive power to act in devising methods of making the Bible interesting. He had at command an inexhaustible fund of biblical information. In his sermons, he would career over an entire biblical chapter with such exhilarating comment, that, in the result, he carried an audience with him to the end of an hour without a moment of weariness. He made exegetical learning kindle with oratorical fire. It is doubtful whether any thing else than his taste for scriptural truth, characters, events, idioms, and scenery could have saved his pulpit from being overwhelmed by the irrelevant materials stored in his polyglot memory. A man who can use biblical materials thus, with oratorical, as distinct from merely exegetical, skill, may safely indulge in the use of long texts. On the other hand, the most lifeless preaching possible, and therefore in spirit the most unscriptural preaching, is that which is made up of commonplaces, drawn from concordance and commentary, on a conglomeration of biblical words.

(8) A third inquiry concerning the form of texts is, May we choose for one sermon more than one text? The leading principle which decides this question is the same with that which regulates the length of the text, — fit the text to the subject and its discussion. This, however, will of necessity require that we generally adopt but one text. We should never choose more than one text, without an obvious demand for it in the nature of the theme, or of its discussion. What constitutes an obvious demand? It must be some departure from singleness in the subject. Two or more texts should not be chosen merely for the purpose of dignifying a subject by an accumulation of inspired statements of it. The text is not the proper place for this. If the subject be one, the text should be one. Neither should two or more texts be announced for the sake of discussing two or more independent subjects in one sermon. No such discussions of independent subjects are permissible in one sermon. The law of unity forbids them.

Two or more texts may properly be chosen for a subject which is twofold, or manifold, and for which no single text can be found which covers its whole range. The late Professor Hitchcock of Amherst discussed before the Legislature of Massachusetts, in 1850, the mutual dependence of liberty, education, and religion. The subject was single, yet threefold: no corresponding threefold text in the Bible exactly expresses or suggests that threefold theme. Therefore the preacher properly announced three texts, — one for each of the leading topics of the sermon. On the same principle, double texts are often appropriate to the discussion of related truths. Certain biblical doctrines lie over against each other. They are opposites without being contradictories. If no single text suggests such a brace

of truths, two may be chosen to introduce them. Thus Professor Shedd, in a discourse designed to reconcile the benevolence with the justice of God, announced the double text: "God is love," and "God is a consuming fire." A reconciliation of the theories of St. Paul and St. James on justification may require two texts. The Rev. Bishop Huntington, preaching upon "The cross as a burden and a glory," selected these two texts: "They found a man of Cyrene, Simon by name, him they compelled to bear his cross," and "God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

The two dispensations of the Old and New Testaments furnish a class of themes which may require double texts. Revelation as a whole derives a dual structure from this feature in its history. The views of Job and of St. Paul on the immortality of the soul; the Mosaic and the Christian laws of the Sabbath; the Mosaic and the Christian theories of marriage; the Mosaic and the Christian theories of human servitude; the Ten Commandments, and their summary in the Christian law of love; the imprecatory Psalms, and the Sermon on the Mount, — these are examples of subjects properly treated by mutual comparison, each couple in one sermon, with two texts. In all the cases in which double texts are allowed, you will perceive that the principle of selection is simply that of necessity. It is very different from that by which a preacher chooses double texts to intensify the biblical authority for a theme, or to discuss independent themes, or to affect a homiletic singularity.

3d, The third class of inquiries concern the impression of texts upon the audience. In the very conception of it a text is a rhetorical expedient: it is no essential part of discourse considered as such. Aristotle

knew nothing of it. We employ it as an oratorical device for certain advantages, most of which consist in the direct impression of the text upon the audience. Therefore this impression gives rise to a significant class of inquiries.

(1) Of these the first is, Should a preacher restrict his choice to ^{*}perspicuous texts? "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" "Turn ye, turn ye, from your evil ways, for why will ye die?" "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found:" "By their fruits ye shall know them:" "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand:" "Grow in grace:" "By grace are ye saved through faith," — such passages, together with the narrative parts of the Bible, the parables, the Lord's Prayer, the Ten Commandments, and the devotional Psalms, represent the staple of texts in the ministrations of many preachers. Is it wise to confine the pulpit to so narrow a range of choice? Is it desirable to give to such passages, even an ascendancy in one's range of selection?

In answer we should defend the affirmative, if we were prescribing for an itinerant ministry; for perspicuous texts have some very positive advantages. Such texts are immediately suggestive of the subjects derived from them. Often it is desirable that a theme should disclose itself to hearers instantaneously: therefore it is judicious to choose a text which needs no comment. Often suspense is the very thing which we wish to retrench: therefore we take a clear text, that the hearer may not be held aloof from the theme by the interpolation of expository preliminaries. An occasion is sometimes such as to indispose an audience to such preliminaries. A wise preacher in Connecticut, after the death of a young person by a shocking calam-

* perspicuous, def. transparently clear; easily understandable

ity, at one stroke took command of the wrought-up feelings of his hearers by announcing as his text the words, "It is I: be not afraid." Make a subject thus chime in, if possible, with the mood of an audience instead of plodding through an explanation of an obscure text, before you can reach a subject.

Again: a perspicuous text may facilitate a long and intricate discussion. It may save time for such a discussion. We must watch for all fair expedients for shortening preliminaries. Ten minutes saved by the absence of an expository introduction to a sermon may save the whole force of it in its final impression upon the hearers. On those economized minutes may depend the question whether the conclusion shall fall upon interested or upon jaded sensibilities. A clear text saves, also, not only time, but the intellectual strength of an audience for a difficult discussion. If a subject must task the hearer's power of attention or abstraction, an adroit preacher will not exhaust that power by a needless expenditure of it upon the text. The tactics of military skill are the true strategy of the pulpit. Concentrate the mental resources of an audience where they are most imperatively demanded. Reserve fresh force for the critical juncture of the discussion.

Moreover, a transparent text assists the illiterate part of an audience in the comprehension and recollection of the sermon. A text plainly expressive of the theme helps an untrained mind to the understanding of much which is not transparent. If an invalid hearer loses some part of the discourse, a perspicuous text may assist him to rejoin the train of thought. It is like a beacon to one who has lost his way. Such a text, also, very obviously assists the memory of such a hearer

The remembrance of the entire sermon will often depend on the simplicity of the text. This suggests, further, that a plain text may predispose many to listen to the sermon founded upon it. You will often detect a hearer deliberately composing himself to sleep when he sees the prospect of an elaborate discussion. A wise tactician in the strategy of the pulpit will catch such imbecile listeners, if need be, with guile. Do not indulge them with a dark text suggestive of another indulgence of darkness. I have known one preacher, who, in preaching to an audience which was unusually demonstrative in its religious emotions, would always choose a sermon which had an impassioned text. His text for one such audience was, "Howl ye; for the day of the Lord is at hand." You will find yourselves driven by pastoral fidelity to invent expedients for breaking up habits of somnolence in a certain class of hearers. By a law of our nature we grow fond of anodynes to which we become habituated. May not this account for the attachment of certain attendants upon the worship of the sanctuary to pastors whose sermons they certainly do not hear? A faithful preacher will deem nothing beneath his care which may predispose infirm minds to listen to his discourses.

Still another advantage of a clear text is that it brings biblical authority to the front at the outset of a discussion. This supreme object of a text is achieved most readily by one which is easily understood. Texts which unequivocally affirm unwelcome doctrines may sometimes be made to capture a hearer's convictions or sensibilities before prejudice has time to rally. A plain declaration of God's word forbids cavil. An adroit preacher will thus forestall cavil, at times, by blocking its way with such a text. "My text is found in Mark

xiv. 21: 'Good were it for that man if he had never been born.' Who, then, can believe that Judas has been in heaven these eighteen hundred years?"—such were the text and introduction of a certain discourse on the future punishment of the wicked.

Such advantages as these have been the inducement to some homiletic writers to advise the selection of transparent texts only. Probably the same reason led to the adoption, by the Fathers, of the *περικοπή* of texts, and to the restriction of the range of choice in some of the Reformed churches to the scriptural lesson for the day. But such limitations presuppose a low state of culture in the popular mind. For the necessities created by the advanced culture of our own times, obscure texts have advantages which often offset those of perspicuous texts. The discussion of an obscure text, if well constructed, promotes popular knowledge of the Scriptures. An obscure text understood is so much added to the common stock of biblical information. If we always avoid such passages, out of regard to the wants of infirm hearers, one of the objects of having a text is lost. Some persons in every congregation are not students. They do not read commentaries. Their reading of the Scriptures is not very intelligent. Their daily devotional reading of the Bible is largely routine: they estimate its value, often, by the quantity read, rather than by the thoughts appropriated. For solid growth in scriptural knowledge they depend upon the ministrations of the pulpit. A considerate pastor will care for this class of souls by often choosing texts, which, when explained, will be some addition to their scriptural ideas. After many days, you may find the bread you have thus cast upon the waters in the good service which such a text performs in the meditation

of a Christian on his death-bed. Other things being equal, therefore, an obscure text is preferable to a perspicuous one in a stationary ministry, for the opportunity it gives for enlarging the range of biblical thought in the experience of many hearers. - On this ground Bishop Horsley advocated and sustained by his own practice the frequent selection of difficult texts. In his pulpit he thus put himself at the head of a Bible class.

Again: an obscure text often facilitates a gradual approach to the subject of a discourse. Is it an argument for a plain text that it discloses the subject at once? True; but sometimes it is not desirable to disclose the subject at once. A prudent speaker will sometimes count it a misfortune to have the subject foreseen at a glance by its reflection from the text. If sometimes it is wise to overawe cavil by a biblical command to accept an obnoxious doctrine, at other times it may be wiser to conceal the obnoxious doctrine till certain prefatory remarks have quickened the interest of a hearer in it. In such a case a text which by its transparency tells the whole story defeats itself. The text, "He hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth," leaves a preacher no leeway for suspense in announcing the theme of "The Decrees of God." But Dr. Emmons approaches a branch of that subject more ingeniously from the text, "Except these abide in the ship, ye can not be saved." The text, "The wicked shall be turned into hell," gives inevitable foresight of what the subject is to be. But the same subject might be derived legitimately, yet gradually, from the parable of the house built on the sand. In the choice of a text, we must often strike the balance between opposing advantages. The same weights are not always in the same scale.

Further: an obscure text tends to interest the more cultivated hearers. If invalid minds may be benefited by facile texts, robust minds are on the alert for an object of intellectual interest. Such minds will grapple with a difficult discussion, will be attracted by a difficult text. One of the practical perplexities of preaching on the text, "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" is the intellectual disappointment which thoughtful hearers feel at the announcement of that which promises them no intellectual refreshment. Have you not been sensible of this in listening to sermons upon that passage? It is one of the most difficult texts in the Bible on which to construct an interesting discourse.

This suggests that an obscure text furnishes a favorable mode of training to reflective habits the less cultivated hearers. A certain class of hearers are unreflecting, not from mental weakness, but from want of culture. One of the multifarious aims of a preacher should be to elevate this class of minds. The pulpit is the chief educating power to them. Yet they need a considerate pulpit. Specially do they require a training which shall associate genially their intellectual aspirations with their religious emotions. In practical life pastors are embarrassed by the antagonism which exists, in the popular convictions, between intellect and piety. You will soon encounter this antagonism in some form. You will find the presumption lurking in the minds of some of your most excellent hearers that a very intellectual thing can not be a very religious thing. It is a pernicious error: few to which the popular mind is exposed are more so. Yet you will never succeed in removing it, except by elevating such minds to a higher level of culture.

One method of inducing this state of improved culture is to take advantage of the reverence of your hearers for the word of God, their awe in view of its mysteries, their faith in the value of its unexplained obscurities, and their consequent desire to know more of its meaning. Take advantage of the assemblage of moral feelings which gather around the Bible, and make them tributary to the intellectual training necessary to the understanding of the Bible. Preach, therefore, often on obscure texts. One thing which has sustained theological thinking among the common people of Scotland is the taste for elaborate and argumentative exposition, which has been cultivated by the Scottish pulpit. A profound principle of tactics in the education of a people by the pulpit is contained in this advance of intellectual culture in alliance with the moral affections.

Such are some of the advantages of obscure texts. A pulpit which recognizes progress in the education of the masses, and therefore aims to keep itself at such a height that it can be an educating power to the masses, must admit discussions of the obscurities of revelation. Yet such discussion may be abused. Therefore it is desirable to observe certain cautions respecting the choice of obscure texts.

One caution is that we should not choose an obscure text unless we are confident that we can make it plain. Not only should we ourselves understand it, but we should be able to make our audience understand it. A positive evil is done, if we drag into view a scriptural obscurity, and, after a bungling exposition, leave it as we found it. Another caution is that we should not select a dark text, when to make it intelligible would require a disproportionate amount of the time allotted to the sermon. A discussion of a theme should not be

cramped in order to unfold an unmanageable text. A third caution is, that we should not choose a very obscure text for a very simple subject. Some passages when explained are reduced to an exceedingly simple meaning, yet the process of explanation is difficult and prolonged. Many of the most valuable religious sentiments of the Old Testament are but hints of the same sentiments recorded more luminously in the New Testament. To evolve them from the texts of the Old Testament may be a laborious process, yet some simple texts of the New Testament may have rendered them familiar to hearers of to-day. A text is never designed for a display of ingenuity in extorting a sentiment from it. The text is made for the subject, not the subject for the text.

A fourth caution is, that we should not choose obscure texts in such proportion as to misrepresent the simplicity of the Scriptures. Some preachers have a mania for exposition. A difficult text is a treasure to them, of value proportioned to its obscurity. Archbishop Whately, if one may judge from his published sermons, was inclined to a disproportioned treatment of the difficulties of the Bible. It is not wise to be eager to array these before the people from the pulpit.

I consider thus at length the question of perspicuous and obscure texts, because it is fundamental to the whole subject of the degree of intellectuality which should be cultivated in the pulpit. We need to correct those traditions of the pulpit respecting it which do not recognize progress in popular intelligence; and yet no sweeping principles can be safely adopted against them. A certain average of regard for conflicting interests must be aimed at, and this may not be the same in the experience of any two pastors.