

LESSON VII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE VII.

THE TEXT: EMOTION, DIGNITY, NOVELTY, PERSONALITY.

(2) THE second inquiry which concerns the impression of texts upon an audience is, Ought we to select texts of elevated emotional character? These have been termed by homiletic writers "promising texts." It was an ancient homiletic rule that such texts should not be chosen. The aim of the rule was to insure simplicity in all the labors of the pulpit. Care to make preaching elementary has been the burden of a vast amount of homiletic advice.

In sympathy with this view it must be conceded that serious difficulties attend the management of emotional texts. One of these is the obvious danger of exciting expectations which the sermon will disappoint. Take, for example, such passages as the following: "Jesus cried with a loud voice, saying, Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani:" "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" "They rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come." These passages a preacher can not read appropriately without the suggestion of sublime emotions. An audience may naturally anticipate from them splendid discourses. The grand text needs to be buoyed up by a grand sermon

Will any sermon equal such texts? This difficulty is aggravated by the incongruity between an impassioned text and the quiescent state of an audience when the text is announced. Hearers are generally unexcited when a preacher rises to utter his text. Such passages as we are considering come upon them suddenly. The transition is abrupt. Can even inspired passion command instantaneous sympathy?

Another difficulty of such texts is, that they invite a preacher into an impassioned introduction. The tendency is to produce a strain to lift the introduction to the level of the text. Therefore eloquent description, or impassioned appeal, or richly-wrought imagery may be thrust into the preliminary portions of a sermon, where such composition is very rarely natural. So much the more prodigious, then, is the labor devolving upon the preacher of sustaining such an impression by a corresponding splendor in the sermon. If a man begins with the sunrise, he must rise to the meridian.

And this suggests the danger of bombast in a futile attempt to equal promising texts. Some passages of the Scriptures no uninspired mind can imitate. No preacher can describe the New Jerusalem as St. John has described it. Preachers become turgid when they imitate the old prophets in denunciatory discourse. They appear effeminate when they struggle to copy the beauty or the pathos of certain biblical appeals. They still more frequently make the pulpit ridiculous by prolonging and improving upon scriptural imagery.

These are real difficulties in the treatment of such texts. Yet it must be said, on the other hand, that promising texts can not always be dispensed with. One reason is that they form the most significant portions of God's word. Are we never to preach upon the

biblical descriptions of the judgment, of heaven, of hell? Moreover, some subjects are not congenial with an unpretending text. Some of the themes of the pulpit are intrinsically grand, awful, overpowering: others are plaintive, beautiful, exquisite. These qualities are ingrained in the subjects. The one class, if presented becomingly, must be discussed in bold, impassioned style: the other class, if discussed tastefully, must appear in elegant words, with elaborate imagery, leaving a gorgeous impression. With or without texts, subjects have these varieties of nature. They need congruous texts. Good texts on immortality are not numerous in the Scriptures. Shall a preacher content himself with the language of Christ to his disciples, "Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul," in order to evade the grand text, "This corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. . . . Then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory"?

Furthermore, some occasions demand eloquent texts. Occasions occur on which a preacher must make a great effort. The theme must be great, the sermon great, and the text on a level with both. Dr. South, when he preached before Charles the Second on the anniversary of the "martyrdom of King Charles the First of blessed memory," struck the key-note of the sympathies of his audience by a text taken from the narrative of the early barbarism of the Hebrews, recorded in the Book of Judges: "And it was so that all that saw it said, There was no such deed done nor seen from the day that the children of Israel came up out of the land of Egypt unto this day: consider of it, take advice, and speak your minds." There are occasions on which

text, subject, sermon, prayer, hymns, the tunes, and, it may be, the very drapery of the pulpit should be suggestive of an extraordinary event. Every thing must be becoming to such an occasion: whatever is not so will jar upon the wrought-up sensibilities of the hearers.

These reasons are conclusive for the admission of promising texts into the pulpit. Yet, as they are liable to abuse, we have occasion to remember certain cautions in the use of them. One is, that they should not be the exclusive favorites of a preacher. Eloquent texts, often chosen, degenerate in the popular esteem. A preacher gains a name for grandiloquence, which is transferred unjustly to his favorite Scriptures. Another caution is, that we should guard against the dangers incident to the treatment of promising texts. Those dangers, though real, are not inevitable. If a preacher is self-possessed under the inspiration of his text, he will use *it*: he will not suffer it to use *him*. Practically a preacher's good sense will regulate his use of this class of texts.

(3) Certain suggestions concerning the impression of a text upon an audience arrange themselves under the general inquiry, What is essential to the dignity of a text? Is not all inspired language of sufficient dignity for the pulpit? No; not when isolated as a text. In the third chapter of Lamentations, verse sixteenth, occurs the text, "Gravel-stones." Is this a dignified text? It suggests the rule that the dignity of a text requires that it shall not be restricted to a single word. One of the ancient preachers delivered a sermon on the word "But." We can conceive of an ingenious discourse on this very significant particle, yet it is a very insignificant text. What shall we say, then, of the selection of such words as "Remember,"

“Rejoice,” “Repent,” “Jehovah,” “Sabbath,” “Faith,” “Anathema,” “Christ,” “Verily,” “Charity”? They all fall under the same condemnation. Fruitful as they are of suggestion, it is an affectation of smartness to choose them as texts. What shall we do, then, if the significance of the word “Christ” or “Jehovah” is the theme of the sermon? Take a passage in which the word occurs, announce a grammatical section of it, and then limit attention to the word by the proposition. Any other method is unnatural. No matter how solemn the selected word may be, it is not impressive if so announced as to appear artificial.

In the same line of remark lies the more general principle, that texts should not be mutilated for the sake of giving them a forced pertinence. Homiletic authorities present abundant examples of this error. Generally they are miserable attempts at facetiousness. We need not debate them. It was unworthy of Dr. South to preach to a corporation of tailors on the text, “A remnant shall be saved.” The good sense of every man condemns this, and the reverent feeling of every Christian pronounces it beneath the dignity of the pulpit. Yet, in the principle which underlies it, it is not more objectionable than the indulgences of some more sober preachers. For example, one preacher discourses on the text, “There is no God.” This is inspired language, but it is not inspired thought. Another has a discourse on the text, “Be ye angry;” the design of the discourse being to show the duty of a virtuous indignation. But this is not the inspired design. Chrysostom’s sermon on excessive grief at the death of friends is from the text, “I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not.” But this is not the

apostolic injunction. In condemning this abuse of texts, good sense echoes the verdict of good taste.

Such abuses of texts as these very naturally excited the disgust of Voltaire at the whole custom of using texts. The papal pulpit had been full of such impertinences. They were so characteristic of preaching at the height of the papal corruption, that it became a proverb, adopted from one of the early cardinals, to exclaim, if one happened to hit upon a happy travesty of the Scriptures, "Good for the pulpit! keep that for a sermon!"

There is one apparent exception to this principle, which is not a real one. It is where a passage is re-trenched by elision, and yet is a pertinent text, because the fragment chosen does not depart from the spirit of the whole. "By grace are ye saved" is a good text, because the fragment, and the passage from which it is taken lie on the same plane and in the same line of thought. There is, then, no mutilation of the passage, and no want of dignity in the text. The exception is only apparent; and it represents a large class of fragmentary passages, which are perfectly good texts.

Yet again: it is essential to the dignity of texts that they should not be such as to suggest low or ludicrous associations. The following are examples from the extant literature of the pulpit,—"I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on?" "The bellows are burned:" "There was no harm in the pot:" "Ye are straitened in your own bowels:" "Moab is my wash-pot:" "A jewel of gold in a swine's snout:" "The dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed, to her wallowing in the mire." These are biblical. Sermons have been preached upon them; but they are beneath the dignity of the pulpit

That inspiration has recorded them is no evidence that inspiration authorizes the use of them as texts. The proprieties of location are every thing here. A passage in its place in the inspired record may fit into the picture of inspired meaning, with its oriental surroundings; but it does not follow that the passage is a becoming text for an occidental pulpit.

This suggests that the dignity of a text requires that it be not such as to violate modern and occidental ideas of delicacy. Dr. Watts endeavored to versify for public worship some passages from the Song of Solomon. But the good taste of the Church has silently dropped nearly every one of those lyrics. They are stored in our older hymn-books; but no pastor offers them, and no choir nor audience uses them for purposes of song. The elder Puritan taste luxuriated in that portion of the Scriptures as a source of texts; but an advanced culture is much more discriminating in the selection, and wisely so. Many of the most intense passages of that *epithalamium* are exquisitely beautiful in their places as parts of an Eastern bridal-song; but those same passages, isolated from their surroundings, and exalted as texts, to be scrutinized by modern and occidental criticism, are simply repulsive. That is not a fastidious taste which is offended by them. That is no affectation which avoids them.

(4) The relation of a text to an audience suggests the further inquiry, What principles should govern a preacher respecting the choice of novel texts? In reply, it should be observed that the pulpit has some standard texts. "Joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth:" "What shall I do to be saved?" "I pray thee have me excused:" "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian:" "Go thy way for this

time:” “Now is the accepted time,”—these and a large number of the same class contain themes which are nowhere else so pithily expressed. They seem as if they had been fore-ordained primarily for use in the discussion of those themes in the pulpit. It would be affectation to avoid these standard texts, for no other reason than that they are familiar to all. Every faithful preacher must employ them, though every faithful preacher of much experience before him has done the same. They are among the jewels of the pulpit. Diamonds are never obsolete.

Yet, on the other hand, a large proportion of sermons should be upon unhackneyed texts, and this for several reasons. Some of the advantages of obscure texts are, also, advantages of novel texts. Especially are novel texts desirable, often, for the sake of the interest they excite. True, the interest of novelty is not the most profound, but it may be the forerunner of a more valuable interest. George Herbert said, “Nothing is small in God’s service.” One of the most masterly successes of the pulpit is that of freshening an old story. Other things being equal, a novel text is an element in this power. A novel text is a new voice. The novel text, like an obscure text, may also promote exposition of the Scriptures. Often it will be an obscure text, and will demand exposition. If it is not obscure, the announcement of it is an addition to the scriptural knowledge of many; and, if it be a striking passage, it may add to their materials of scriptural meditation for a life-time.

Furthermore, novel texts promote variety in preaching. We need a broad range of biblical authorities, as we need a broad range of themes. Monotony of thought in the pulpit often results, as we have seen, from

monotony of textual selection. Moreover, a strange text will often facilitate permanence of impression. It is a law of mind that a truth is apt to be deepened in its impression upon us, if it comes to us from an unexpected source. A profane man who happens to utter an acknowledgment of the value of prayer moves us by his commonplace thought as no preacher could. It is not so much the greatness as it is the worldliness of statesmen which often renders their trite and jejune tributes of respect to Christianity as solemn to us as proverbs of religious wisdom.

The principle here involved is very strikingly illustrated in the deduction of themes from unexpected texts. A listener often expresses the impression which a sermon has made upon him by saying, "I did not know there was any such text in the Bible." Such a remark means more than it says. It means, "That sermon has affected me: its truth I feel. That text has disclosed it to me,— a gem of truth which I never saw before. I shall remember the sermon for the sake of the text." Dr. Bushnell's sermon on the theme, "Every man's life a plan of God," is a striking sermon in itself. It will be remembered by many for the sake of the subject, but by some for its deduction of such a subject from an unwonted source, the text being the address of Jehovah to Cyrus, in Isaiah's vision: "I girded thee, though thou hast not known me." Compare this with the more common texts, "Without me, ye can do nothing," or, "He doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth."

Dr. Bushnell's sermon on unconscious influence is another instance of the same kind. No one would forget the sermon, who had observed its ingenious yet apt



derivation from a text which perhaps was never preached upon before: "Then went in also that other disciple." Compare this with the standard text on the influence of Christians, "Ye are the light of the world; a city that is set on a hill can not be hid;" or the common text for a sermon on the evil influence of the wicked, "One sinner destroyeth much good." Dr. South's sermon against extemporaneous prayer must have gained some force from the novel aptness of his text, "Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God." Compare this with the text so often employed in defense of a liturgy, "After this manner, therefore, pray ye."

Once more, an unhackneyed text invites effort on the part of a preacher. It stimulates his mind in the composition of a sermon as it does the hearer in listening to the sermon. He is aroused by an object in the early part of his work in constructing the discourse. This you will find to be often of great moment in the labor of habitual composition. Do we never listen to discourses which are pointless, and are preached with no enthusiasm, till the conclusion approaches, when they change signals, and become luminous with oratorical fire? The preacher has seemed to construct and develop his sermon with no object which aroused him early in his work. His thoughts have not been intense; his transitions have not been ingenious; his style has not been vivid, till the peroration has begun to loom up; and then "he mounts up on wings, as an eagle." Such discourses often flow from an indolent use of a hackneyed text. The preacher, acting under the chill of professional routine, has allowed himself to be beguiled into a hackneyed strain of remark. He does not wake up, and put his invention to the task, and his pen to its speed,

till the application of his theme makes him conscious of an object. He has not started enthusiastically: therefore he plods lifelessly. For the foregoing reasons, without subjecting ourselves to any rule respecting novelty of texts, we may wisely adopt the principle, that while we recognize some standard texts, yet, other things being equal, an unhackneyed text is preferable.

(5) One inquiry remains to be considered of that class which concerns the impression of texts upon the audience. It is, May a preacher choose texts which to an audience will seem to be personal? By personality in a text is meant a significance which applies it palpably to any individual, be he preacher or hearer. This is another of the topics on which only principles, not rules, can be laid down. It is obvious that a preacher should not avoid pungency in his choice of texts. That would be a timid caution which would prompt a preacher to do this through fear of seeming to mean somebody. But, on the other hand, it is equally obvious that a preacher must not, in the choice of texts, disregard the claims of courtesy. That is a selfish boldness which abuses the liberty of the pulpit by making it the medium either of egotism or of insult. Our Saviour and the Apostles were gentlemen in their preaching.

The most objectionable forms of personality in texts will be avoided by attention to a very few simple principles. One is that of avoiding a violent accommodation of texts. A very large proportion of those instances of textual personality which make up in part the fund of clerical anecdote consist of an extreme license of accommodation. Scriptural language is wrested, not only from its own proper sense, but from all good sense. The significant passages of the Bible, which are usually

chosen as texts, are not so framed as to strike individuals alone. They have a range of shot: they cover classes of men. A preacher may aim them at an individual; but they reach an individual as the representative of a class. Hence violence must be done to them to give them a significance which shall apply them to an individual alone.

Let us test this by one or two examples. The subject is of some importance as affecting the whole range of clerical impertinence. Many years ago, a man residing in West Springfield, Mass., was buried by the caving-in of a well. He remained for some hours in a perilous condition, and was rescued in the last stages of exhaustion. On the following Sabbath the Rev. Dr. Lathrop, pastor of the Congregational Church in the town, announced as his text, "Look . . . to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged." This was one of the mildest forms of a personal text. The man referred to probably did not faint under it. But how does it strike a thoughtful hearer as an application of the word of God? Was it a manly use of inspired language?

A certain pastor lost his popularity with his people, and they refused to pay his salary. He sued them for it, and gained the suit. They, in revenge, paid him in coppers. He, in rejoinder, preached a farewell sermon on the text, "Alexander the coppersmith did me much evil." This was a Roland for an Oliver; but was it a dignified treatment of the Scriptures? The vast majority of cases of personality in the choice of texts are just such violent applications of biblical words by an abuse of accommodation. Let a preacher preserve a manly habit in the accommodation of texts, and he will not be betrayed into such distortions.

A due regard for a second principle will protect a

preacher against improper personalities in the choice of texts: it is that such freedom with the Scriptures is founded on a false theory of clerical influence. Real power in a clergyman is essentially solemn and affectionate. Those elements in a man's ministry which appeal to conscience and to the sense of kindness are the chief sources of the strength of his pulpit. Without these, he may gain notoriety, but not influence. Such influence as he may seem to gain is not clerical in its nature. Therefore to him it is worse than none. A man who establishes a reputation for personality, oddity, or buffoonery in the pulpit, does just so much against his reputation, and therefore against his usefulness as a Christian preacher. He establishes a kind of influence of which he can not but feel ashamed when he is clothed, and in his right mind, and begins to aim at the conversion of souls. By his buffoonery he has done a work which he must undo, before he can successfully approach men who are inquiring what they must do to be saved, or men who are in affliction, or men who are on a death-bed. Yet these are among the classes of our congregations whose instincts about a preacher are the most unerring test of his clerical influence. It is a curse to a minister to have an influence founded on qualities which are repellant to the sympathies of such minds. No preacher can afford to support the reputation of having more grit than grace. A clergyman was once settled in one of our cities, of whom an intelligent lawyer, not a Christian man, used substantially this language, "I admire my pastor. He is a tingling preacher, witty, eloquent, severe. He is not afraid of a laugh in his audience. I am willing to pay largely to retain him, and so are we all. But if I were in affliction, or were about to die, he is the last man I should

want to see then." Such a criticism, if well founded, should annihilate a pastor. What must the Saviour think of him! We can not too earnestly remind ourselves that clerical influence may be easily sacrificed to clerical notoriety. And no two things are more unlike.

A third principle, which, if properly regarded, will protect a preacher from certain forms of impertinent personality in his choice of texts, is that modesty is a power in a public man. A genuine modesty will prevent a preacher from thrusting himself immoderately, or in an untimely way, upon the attention of his hearers. Tact is needed to strike always the right line of procedure in this respect. It was not a clerical impropriety in an aged clergyman in Worcester County, Massachusetts, whose son was ordained as his colleague, to preach at the ordination upon the text, "He must increase; but I must decrease." A favorite and becoming text for sermons of pastoral reminiscence, in which after a quarter or half century of service, pastors may properly speak of their own labors, is, "Having obtained help of God, I continue unto this day."

The modesty of these personal texts is obvious. Is it as obvious in the text of the young preacher, who in a farewell sermon, after a ministry of three years, preached upon the words, "Remember that by the space of three years I ceased not to warn every one, night and day, with tears"? Was there not an intolerable impudence in the personality of the following instance? An evangelist of considerable reputation was invited to preach in a certain place; and the reason urged for his acceptance was that the pastor had outlived his influence, and the people were in a distracted state. The evangelist came, and commenced his work

with the text, "Without me ye can do nothing." Against all such impertinences a preacher is protected by simply remembering that modesty is itself a power in a public man.

One other principle, which will also tend to shield the pulpit from a perverted personality in texts, is that a preacher has no right to invade the privacy of domestic life. The clergy need sometimes to be reminded of the old maxim of English law, that every man's house is his castle. As a preacher, a man may not say every thing which as a pastor he may say. As a pastor, a man is the personal friend of his people. He goes into their homes, and there may speak in all fidelity truths which it would be impudence to utter in his pulpit. Again: as a preacher, a man may utter in the body of a sermon things which he may not say in a text. It may be a stretch of his authority to accommodate a text to a hearer, so that, because it is a text, it shall stick to him like a label to a man in a pillory. But the most offensive errors of this kind are those in which a preacher chooses texts by which he invades the sanctity of his own home by foisting his private affairs upon the notice of his people. A pastor in Massachusetts made the Scriptures the medium of his rudeness of culture by preaching, on the Sabbath morning after his marriage, from the text, "Two are better than one;" and, on the Sabbath after the birth of his child, from the text, "Unto us a son is given." No man who is fitted for the pulpit in other respects will be guilty of such blunders as these; but perversions in which the principle is the same, any preacher is liable to, whose self-respect does not unite with his reverence for the Scriptures to prevent his indulgence of a frivolous or a rude taste in his selection of texts.