

How to Prepare Sermons
LESSON III.

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I. DEFINITION.

The word *text* is from the Latin *textus* or *textum*, and signifies something woven or spun. It is, therefore, that out of which the sermon is woven, the basis of the sermon or discourse. The text is not to be a mere motto for a sermon, nor is it to be chosen after the theme or subject is chosen, and the sermon finished. If the sermon is not to be woven from the text, then do not take a text, or pretend to do so. If you choose a text, let it be a text and not a *pre-text*. Sometimes texts are too apt to be "points of departure" for a sermon.

Shall Texts Be Long or Short?

The answer to this question depends upon circumstances and usage. We are told that the early Christians chose long texts. From the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries short texts were popular. Nowadays the tendency seems to be towards the choice of long texts. The popular preaching promises to be expository preaching.

II. THE CHOICE OF A TEXT.

The importance of the right choice of the text upon which the sermon is based should not be underestimated. A young preacher, on asking what text he should choose for a sermon, was answered, "Oh, any text will do; speak on the Medes, Persians, Elamites, and the dwell-

Only utility, convenience, and abrogation of stress is being commended here.

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ers in Mesopotamia." This was certainly fatal advice to give to any young preacher.

The choice of a right text is often a difficult task for the preacher. No one better than he knows how nerve-wrecking it is to have Saturday come and yet not have found a text for the coming Sunday sermon. And oftentimes, when a text is chosen under such conditions, it is more of a pre-text than a text.

Roman Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopalian preachers have a great advantage over preachers of other denominations in that their texts have already been chosen for them by the Church. By reason of the *Pericopes*, and Gospel and Epistle lessons for the year, as found in the prayer books of these churches, they are saved the trouble of searching for texts. The Scripture lessons and the texts for the sermons are already mapped out for them. It may be that this is a good thing for the preacher, and, doubtless, it has many commendable qualities. While, at times, if considered an iron-clad rule, it may seem arbitrary and binding, and cause a man to preach on a subject with which, for the time being at least, he is not in sympathy, yet, on the other hand, it settles the mind, and allows the preacher to quietly and calmly be gathering material for his sermon all the time. He is thus saved many a sleepless night.

III. THE ADVANTAGES OF HAVING A TEXT.

There certainly are advantages accruing from having an aptly chosen text, and they are many and important. Textless preachers are great losers in the matter of effective preaching.

1. It Awakens the Interest of the Audience.

This is by no means an advantage to be ignored. To pass it by is fatal to the preacher. How many times,

as we have listened to a preacher announce his text, and our attention has been aroused by the very reading of it, have we said within ourselves, "I wonder what the preacher is going to get out of that text?" Thus at the outset has our interest and attention been secured. To be able to secure this state of mind in the audience is of great advantage to the preacher. He can well afford to give diligent attention to whatever will produce this result.

2. It Gains the Confidence of the Audience.

Confidence—in that you are to proclaim to the people the Word of God and not your own opinions. To many people the Word of God is—to everyone it should be—an end to all controversy.

3. It Gives the Preacher Authority and Boldness in the Proclamation of His Message.

He need speak in no vacillating, or uncertain tone. With a "Thus saith the Lord" as the basis of his sermon, he may speak with the authority of heaven, for, after all, it is God and not man who speaks from the text. With such an authoritative message no preacher need be timid about proclaiming the will of God. A timid preacher is a caricature, and useless in the pulpit. To be sure that one has a direct message from God gives the messenger a sense of authority and holy boldness.

4. It Will Keep the Preacher from Mind-wandering.

As any preacher, or any audience, for that matter, well knows, this is something greatly to be desired. Some preachers are like boys swimming under water: you see them when they dive off the text, and then you see them when they bob up again at the "Amen"; but all

through the sermon you lose sight of them because they have gone in over their heads. The text is a good thing with which to round a man up and bring him back from his wanderings. It constantly arouses the query, "Am I keeping to my text?"

5. It Will Keep the Preacher Biblical.

This is a valuable thing in itself. There is not very much danger of running away from the Scriptures if you stick closely to the exposition of the text. If ever there was a time when biblical preachers are needed it is now.

IV. THE PRINCIPLES WHICH GOVERN THE CHOICE OF A TEXT.

Phillips Brooks well said: "The ease and facility with which a text is chosen depends upon two things: the preacher's own mind, and the idea of a sermon." If the preacher's own mind is barren and sterile; if it is not fertile by being rooted in the Word of God; if, because of not bathing the heart in the laver of the Word the mind is dry and unspiritual, then, the choosing of a text will be a difficult task. If, on the contrary, the mind and soul of the preacher is being continually steeped in the Word of truth; and, if there is a daily walk and fellowship with God, then, it will be a comparatively easy matter to find a text from which to proclaim God's message to a hungry world. Then again, if the minister has the idea that a sermon is a stilted affair, a great oration, an extraordinary deliverance, instead of a message from God through the life of the preacher to the hearts of men—a message straight from the preacher's heart to the hearer's soul—then it will indeed be a difficult task to choose the proper text.

And, after all, what is a great sermon? We often hear it said—probably because of such stilted ideas as to the nature of a sermon—that it is hard for any pastor to preach two *strong* sermons each Sunday. What is a great or a strong sermon? Certainly a sermon that accomplishes the desired result is a strong sermon. That a man cannot preach two such sermons each Sunday is born of a wrong conception as to what a sermon should be. Sermons ought to be messages straight from the heart of the preacher to the soul of the hearer. A minister is a man who is supposed by the people to whom he ministers to have been in communion and fellowship with God all through the week in a sense in which it has not been possible for them to be, and that his messages on Sunday are to be to them the expression of what he has gathered from such communion and fellowship with God. Is it not strange that, after a week of such fellowship, a man should be able to deliver but a weak sermon on a Sunday evening?

GENERAL PRINCIPLES:

1. A Careful Consideration of the Spiritual Needs of the People to Whom One is Ministering.

Study your people. Consider their needs—physical, mental, moral, spiritual. Ask yourself what you have found out about their needs as the result of your visitation among them. Gather, in your imagination, the people around your desk as you consider what to preach about, and let their needs determine what shall be the nature of your text and sermon. The preacher who is thus led will not fail to preach helpful sermons; doubtless, he will often have his people say to him, "Pastor, your sermon has helped me; and I want to thank you for it."

2. There Should Be a Careful Consideration of the Cycle of Truth Preached.

You must ask yourself, "On what themes have I been preaching lately? Have I omitted any of the great doctrines of the Scripture? Has my preaching been symmetrical, and has it included the whole counsel of God?" The choice of a text and a subject is not something that can be left to chance or to the whim of the preacher. The entire cycle of what you have preached upon before must be considered. For this reason it is a good thing for the preacher to draw up at the beginning of the year a list of the subjects upon which he intends to preach during that year.

The Episcopal and Lutheran churches in arranging the gospel lessons which form the texts from which their ministers preach, divide the church year into two great parts: justification,—what Christ has done *for* us; sanctification,—what Christ does *in* us. Thus, beginning with the advent and concluding with the second coming of Christ, the whole cycle of truth is covered. Is there not a lesson for preachers of other denominations to learn from this arrangement? We shall, at least, thus be saved from being faddists or hobbyists in our preaching.

3. One's Ability to Deal With the Text and the Subject Derived from it Must Be Taken into Consideration.

It is not well for David to go to battle in Saul's armor. We must not choose subjects that are above and beyond our ability to handle. Little ships must keep near to the shore else they will be wrecked. This does not mean that we must never handle subjects that are in advance of our present educational attainments, for then there would be no growth in our experience or

preaching. It does mean, however, that before we preach on a subject we shall understand clearly for ourselves whatever phase of it we may present. It is well for the young preacher to avoid controversial themes.

Remember then, these three general principles when choosing a text: the cycle of truth preached; the needs of the people, and one's own ability to present the subject.

PARTICULAR PRINCIPLES:

1. The Constant Reading of the Word of God.

Study your Bible; it is the great quarry of the preacher. The Bible is not merely a text-book, it is a book of texts. Therefore let there be a constant reading of the Scriptures. "It (the Bible) contains the truths we have to teach, the laws which we have to illustrate in their relations to the lives of our people, the divine promises by which we are to console them when in trouble and to strengthen their faith in the love and power of God."—*Dale*.

2. The Use of a Note-book.

Read with a note-book at your hand. Whenever any thought, illustration, or argument impresses you, make a note of it. An hour's reading will often furnish suggestive material for two or three sermons. Again, you will find in your reading of the Scripture that a certain text will impress itself upon your mind very vividly. Indeed, an outline of the theme suggested by the text may loom up before you. If so, then write down the text and the thoughts that have thus associated themselves with it. Some day when it is difficult to find a text one need only turn to the note-book, and there one may be found already suggestively outlined. Jot down important thoughts as they come to you. Make a note

not merely of the reference to the page or location, but work out the headings with the thoughts that suggest themselves to you at the time. Work out the outline there and then. At some future time when you feel barren you may draw on this fresh manna. In this way you will have a constant supply of raw material. The preachers who form and keep up this habit are never at a loss for material.

3. Read Suggestive Books.

Read them not to copy and adopt, but to inspire and adapt. Read them as a tonic for the mind. Reading good books acts as water poured down a dry pump—it primes and has a reactionary effect. Read the lives of great preachers, missionaries, reformers, etc. The study of biography is a great inspiration to the preacher.

4. Seek the Guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Then, as Spurgeon so cleverly said, "You can say truly what Esau said falsely, 'The Lord hath brought it to me.' While other men, as Esau, may be hunting for their sermon material or texts in the distant places, you, by the help of the Spirit, may find the savory morsel right close to home." The man who is continually living under the influence and power of the Holy Spirit will scarcely ever be at a loss for something to preach about.

V. CERTAIN PRECAUTIONS NECESSARY IN THE CHOICE OF TEXTS.

1. We Need to Be Warned Against the Choosing of Odd Texts.

A few illustrations will explain what is meant. A minister preached a sermon to a number of tailors, and took for his text: "A remnant shall be saved." Another,

addressing an audience of newspaper reporters, took for his text the words: "And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press." An English minister, addressing a bench of English judges, based his remarks on the text: "Judge not, and ye shall not be judged." A young Episcopal clergyman made himself ridiculous in the eyes of his congregation by preaching, on a certain Ash Wednesday, from the text: "I have eaten ashes like bread." Other illustrations are the following: "Take it by the tail" (Exodus 4:4); "I have put off my coat, how shall I put it on?"

A sermon aimed against women coiling their hair on the top of their heads, had as its text the words: "Top-(k)not come down," a gross violation of both the grammar and sense of the Scripture as found in Matthew 24: "Let him which is on the house-top not come down." It is recorded that a minister preached eleven sermons on the letter "O."

"Such texts," says Joseph Parker, "may please the idle-minded and vain, but will distress all who come to worship God and receive His message at the preacher's lips. Have you any particular sermons on striking texts? Take a friend's advice and burn them." "When I hear a man announce a text of this sort and watch the process by which he develops from it the doctrine of justification by faith, or the necessity of regeneration, or a theory of divine providence, or some interesting speculations on the millennium or the future blessedness of the righteous, I always think of the tricks of those ingenious gentlemen who entertain the public by rubbing a sovereign between their hands until it becomes a canary, and drawing out of their coat sleeves half a dozen brilliant glass globes filled with water, and with four or five gold fish swimming in each of them. For myself I like to listen to a good preacher, and I have no objection in the world to be amused by the tricks of a clever

conjurer; but I prefer to keep the conjuring and the preaching separate: conjuring on Sunday morning, conjuring in the church, conjuring with texts of Scripture, is not quite to my taste. When the text is only a deceptive signal, or when a steeple surmounts a play house, it would doubtless be better to remove the signal and throw down the steeple.”—*Dale*.

2. Do Not Choose a Text Which, in View of the Surrounding Circumstances, Will Make it Appear Ludicrous and Ridiculous.

The feature of such blunders which is especially bad is that associations clinging to a passage of Scripture may be of such a character that its repetition shall ever after occasion a smile, even in the house of God. For this reason we hesitate to give the reader the following illustrations, and do so only to leave a deeper impression touching the dangers to which preachers are unfortunately exposed.

A minister upon the first visit after his marriage to the home of his bride, surprised and convulsed with laughter the congregation by announcing for his text, “Oh that I were as in months past.” A preacher of ponderous physical proportions, with a corresponding ponderous manuscript, which he placed on the desk after having piled thereon two Bibles, and several hymn books, rose to his full height, took a long breath and read for his text the words:—“Thou shalt see greater things than these.” An extremely corpulent clergyman announced for his text, “If any man thinketh that he hath whereof he might trust in the flesh, I more.”

3. Do Not Choose Texts that Create Expectations Which Neither the Sermon Nor the Preacher Can Fulfill.

Young preachers, for instance, should hesitate before preaching on such themes as, “The glory of heaven”;

"And there was a rainbow round about the throne"; "We all do fade as a leaf"; "And the streets of the city were of pure gold"; "Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard"; (What, then, is the use of trying to picture it?) But, we may ask, what shall we do with such texts? Shall we ignore them altogether? By no means. Take a more simple text and weave these grand thoughts into the sermon.

4. Do Not Choose Questionable Texts.

John 9:31 furnishes a good example: "We know that God heareth not sinners." These words, spoken by the blind man, can hardly be true for God does hear sinners (the publican in the temple, for instance).

Care should be exercised with reference to the choosing of texts from the books of Job and Ecclesiastes. The purpose of the book, and the character of the spokesman should be taken into consideration, also the analogy of faith.

5. Do Not Use Mutilated Texts.

It is neither wise nor right to use as texts for sermons such passages as only partly express the mind and sense of the writer, e. g., "All men are liars"; "There is no God"; "John the Baptist is risen from the dead." A half truth is worse than a lie. Dr. A. T. Pierson says: "Satan's first lie was a half truth. He told our first parents that to eat the forbidden fruit would open their eyes, and it did, but it was to see themselves sinners; he said they would know both good and evil, and so they did; but how much better it would have been to know only good! He said they should not, in the day they ate, surely die; and they did not, in the low sense of physical death, though they did die to God's favor and sympathy. Satan's favorite device for deluding and destroying souls is to use half truths."

Let preachers beware lest they fall into this snare of the devil.

6. Old Testament Texts Should Not Be Neglected.

The Old Testament as well as the New is the inspired Word of God. "All Scripture * * * * is profitable" for the preacher to choose his texts from. The Old Testament as well as the New instructs in righteousness, and should not, therefore, be neglected, even though the New Testament may yield the richer sermonic treasures.

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