

How to Prepare Sermons
Lesson V.

CHAPTER V

THE THEME

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The wise choice and proper wording of the theme of a sermon is a matter of no small moment. The attractiveness of the title of a book is sometimes the greatest factor in its sale. While this should not be so in the case of a sermon, yet, it must be admitted that a wisely chosen theme has much to do with the interestingness of a sermon.

A few general suggestions may here be made bearing on the subject.

I. BY WAY OF SUGGESTION.

1. Know Your Theme Thoroughly.

This does not mean that you must know absolutely everything connected with the subject. It does mean, however, that the preacher must have a clear, definite, intelligent, masterly grasp of the subject. Familiarity with the theme may be secured by talking the subject over with some one. If one cannot express the theme colloqually, it is doubtful if he can do so from the pulpit.

It may be said in this connection that it is by no means always wise to preach at once upon a theme because one is deeply impressed with it at the time. One will preach better if he allows the matter to revolve more and more in his mind. Live in the theme; let it be the atmosphere which you breathe; let it master and take complete possession of you—*then* preach about it. Knowledge is

power in this as well as in all other respects. From this it may be said—preach on familiar themes, at least to begin with. This is good advice to young preachers: the older ones do not need it, they know it from experience, and oftentimes bitter experience at that.

2. Be Sure Your Theme is One That the People You Preach to Can Readily Understand.

Do not preach over people's heads. Remember that they do not live in the same kind of atmosphere that the preacher does throughout the week. What is very commonplace to him, may be quite strange to them. Hence it is not prudent to discuss from the pulpit the authorship of the Pentateuch, or whether one or two authors wrote Isaiah. The average audience is not at all interested in the discussion of such questions. The people are soul-hungry; they want bread and not stones.

How disinterested the average audience is in such themes may be seen by watching their faces. How bored they look when such abstract subjects are discussed! How bright and interested when the appeal is made to something that will help them in their every-day life!

It is not intended by these remarks that one must never preach on a theme unless the audience is familiar with it. The preacher is an educator, and as such there are times when he will find it necessary to deal with a theme which may be new and strange to the hearers. But even in such cases let the arguments, illustrations, and analogies be such as the congregation may reasonably be expected to understand.

3. Do Not Let Your Theme Be a Trivial One.

Usually one has but two sermons a week to preach, therefore, choose a theme that has weight and dignity. Read the headlines in the daily papers and learn a lesson

from them in this direction. Sermons have been preached on such themes as "The Crown of Thorns," "The Folded Napkin," "The Rainbow about the Throne," details which no doubt are interesting in themselves, but which are not in themselves big enough to constitute a sermon. These things make nice scenery, but very small subjects. It would be better to preach about the Christ who wore the crown of thorns; the resurrection, of which the folded napkin was but an incident; the Judge who sits upon the throne. The sculptors of Greece, famous in history, did not spend their time carving cherry stones; they carved Minervas, Apollos, and Jupiters. Preach on the great doctrines, the fundamentals, the stupendous truths of the Bible and our redemption. As some one has said, it is not necessary to expend consecrated energy in striking gnats with a club of Hercules.

4. Have a Definite Aim in the Treatment of Your Theme.

Do not go into the pulpit simply because it is Sunday and you are expected to deliver a message. It is not so much the question of preaching something, as preaching with a definite end and aim in view. Preach so that if anyone were to stop you in the midst of your preaching and ask you what you were aiming at, you could give a definite answer. Aim to hit something. Do not ramble here and there. Have a mark; aim at it; hit it; stop and see where the shot struck, and then fire another shot straight from the shoulder. Letters not addressed, or addressed wrongly, are sent to the dead-letter office; they are of no use to anybody. Preach for conversions, for decisions. There is too much generalized preaching nowadays—in fact, there always has been since apostolic times. A young preacher once expressed his sorrow to Mr. Spurgeon that there had been so few conversions

under his preaching. "Why," said Mr. Spurgeon, "you don't expect conversions to follow every sermon, do you?" "Oh, no, of course not," the young man replied. "Then you certainly won't have them," responded Mr. Spurgeon. One minister said to another of a newly settled metropolitan pastor, "They say he actually expects conversions at the morning service!" How would it do if this winter every evangelist and pastor were to "expect conversions in the morning," and preach with that end in view? Paul's idea of preaching was to persuade men to be reconciled to God. That seems to be a desirable end today. Let us have less firing of blank cartridges, and more shooting to kill.

5. Do Not Choose a Theme That is Not in Accord with Your Experience, and with Which You Have No Mental Sympathy.

This does not mean that one shall never preach on a theme the fullness of which he has not yet reached in his own experience. There will always be illimitable stretches in Christian experience of which we must say, "I have not yet attained," but which "I follow after." Nevertheless there are certain phases of Christian life and character, even above that attained by the average Christian, which a congregation has a right to expect from its minister.

Do not preach holiness if you are not living a holy life. If you are constantly sad, do not preach on the joy of the Lord. Be joyful; then preach about it. Do not proclaim in loud pulpit tones the blessedness of a life of victory over sin if you are not enjoying a victorious life yourself. "Physician, heal thyself." No preacher can afford to falsely impersonate. An actor may play a role, a preacher should not.

The result of such inconsistent, unsympathetic preaching will be a hardening of the preacher's heart, a blunting of his preceptions, and the cultivating of a general tone of insincerity. Hear the words of the apostle: "Thou that preachest a man should not steal, dost thou steal? Thou that makest thy boast of the law, through breaking the law dishonorest thou God?"

6. Let Your Theme be Suitable to Time, Place, and Occasion.

If it is Easter, preach on the resurrection of Christ; if Christmas, on the birth of Christ; if Passion Week, on the death of Christ. In so doing you are able to take advantage of the sentiment already existing in the minds of your people in favor of your theme. Ordinarily the preacher has to pour floods upon the dry ground of the minds of his hearers before the seed of truth can find lodgment. Recognizing these festival seasons the ground for the reception of the truth has already to a very great extent been prepared.

This conception is true also with reference to the adaptation of the truth to the various kinds of congregations to whom we may be called to minister. The truth itself does not need to be changed; merely the adaptation of it to the particular congregation. The late Dr. John Hall, of New York, is reported to have once said before a graduating class of theological students, that he preached precisely the same gospel truth to his rich and cultured congregation on Fifth Avenue, that he did to his first charge in a very rural district. Of course he presented the same truth in a form which his changed audiences could appreciate. He adopted the same truth, but adapted it to the varying conditions. The Apostle Paul presented the same truth to different auditors in different ways. For example, when speaking to the Athenian phil-

osophers, he refers to their “poets,” while in speaking to a rural audience he spoke of the “fruitful harvests” God had sent them.

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