

LESSON SEVEN

CHAPTER VII
SERMON MATERIAL—ARRANGING IT

This problem was lamented by brother Evans in the early years of the 20th century; and now, a century later (2011), it is still a common defect in sermons. Dr. VBK

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There should be no question as to the great importance of a proper arrangement of the sermon material. Very often the only difference between a sermon great in power and one lacking in power is a difference in the arrangement. Some sermons remind us of the account of the dawn of creation as recorded in the first chapter of Genesis—"without form, and void." The story is told of an old man who was a regular church attendant, and who always pitched the tunes at prayer-meeting. The hymn-book used contained the words of the hymns but not the music. This regular attendant was depended upon to start the hymn. One night one of the elders gave out a new hymn; he said it was a beautiful hymn, and he wished they could sing it. The old chorister called out, "What is the metre, brother?" The elder replied, "It ain't got no metre." And about as much can be said of many a sermon—it is minus arrangement.

Lack of, and carelessness in the matter of arrangement is one of the most common faults of preaching today. It ought to be considered inexcusable because it implies a lack of labor, and an unwillingness to spend time on the sermon. Laziness is a sin that many preachers need to repent of and forsake.

Rousseau said that when writing a love-letter, "you should begin without knowing what you are going to say, and end without knowing what you have said." This may be good advice as to the writing of love-letters but

it is certainly fatal advice when applied to sermon preparation.

The preacher is somewhat of an architect: it is his business to erect a structure out of the material he has on hand. Out of the same material can be built a prison, a stable, a mansion, or a palace. Which shall be built depends altogether on the arrangement of the material. The preacher may also be likened to an army general who distributes his regiments in different places but with one objective point. The preacher ought to arrange his material so that it will all converge to the one main purpose of the sermon. To some men the matter of arrangement comes somewhat natural; to others, and possibly to most, it is the result of hard work. At any rate and at any cost every preacher ought to seek to excel in the arrangement of sermon material.

I. THERE ARE CERTAIN ADVANTAGES IN THE ARRANGEMENT OF SERMON MATERIAL.

1. To the Preacher.

It is of great advantage to the preacher himself. Clear arrangement involves clearly defined thought, and yields a clear grasp of the subject.

Many preachers have great difficulty in memorizing their sermon notes. The reason for this lies in the fact that the notes lack arrangement. Whatever is clearly and logically arranged is easy to memorize—at least very much easier than matter that is without form or order.

2. To the Sermon.

It matters a great deal as to the effectiveness of a sermon whether or not it is clearly thought out in the mind of the preacher. If a subject is misty and hazy in the

preacher's mind and disorderly in arrangement in the sermon notes it is almost an impossibility and requires a miracle of grace for the audience to get a clear grasp of the subject.

3. To the Audience.

The audience is a great factor to consider in the matter of sermonizing. Whatever makes it easy for a congregation to remember and carry away the general plan and outline and consequently much of the matter of a sermon, is something not to be neglected by the preacher and is worth his constant toil to attain. It is absolutely certain that the average audience can carry away a sermon that is well planned and arranged a thousand times better than one that is poorly arranged, or has no arrangement at all. Good arrangement on the part of the preacher is absolutely necessary for good following on the part of the audience. Many an audience can truthfully say to the preacher: "We know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way." The preacher may imitate Abraham, who went out not knowing whither he went. But Abraham had a command for such conduct; the preacher has not. How often we hear this remark at the close of a sermon: "Oh, but we had a fine sermon today. I do not believe I ever heard a finer one." "Indeed," says the other, "and what were the leading thoughts of the great sermon you heard?" "Oh, well," replies the first speaker, "I cannot tell you just what the chief points were, but it was a great sermon." Is not such a confession very often an indication of the lack of sermon arrangement on the part of the preacher? Specific thoughts were not clearly defined, consequently the hearer was not able to clearly define either the thoughts of the sermon, or the duty that should arise therefrom. The result of

the sermon is, therefore, evanescent; it soon passes away and the place thereof knows it no more.

4. To the Theme.

Is there not something due the theme or subject of the sermon in this matter of arrangement? Does not the theme cry out against injustice in this direction? Does it not rebel against chaotic treatment? Does it not demand that in order to be pleasing and convincing, and remembered by the audience, that the material be arranged so as to bring about these desirable results? Assuredly it does.

II. CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITIES OF A GOOD ARRANGEMENT.

1. One Theme.

One of the first lessons the preacher should learn is the importance of concentrating upon one theme in his sermon. It can justly be said of many sermons that they are composed of a series of homilies on various subjects. This is evident from the fact that a preacher, after he has been in the ministry some years, can examine his first sermons and find material enough in any one of them for four or five sermons on altogether different subjects. Herein lies a danger that besets expository preaching which must be constantly guarded against. Have but one theme in your sermon and concentrate all your argument, proof, testimony, illustration, etc., towards the enforcing of that theme. If you find yourself wandering from the path of your stated theme, bring yourself back to it. At all costs do it. Disobedience to this law is practically death to effectiveness in preaching. The exceptions to this rule are not numerous enough to invalidate it.

2. The Divisions of a Sermon Should Have a Logical Connection and Sequence the One with the Other.

It is out of place to exhort before you instruct, or to apply before you explain. First the seed, then the blade, then the ear, then the full corn in the ear. Make your argument to the intellect before you appeal to the emotions and through them to the will. Let there be first the negative, then the positive; the abstract, then the concrete; the general, then the particular.

3. Remember That All Parts of a Sermon Are Not of Equal Importance as to Time or Honor.

Which line of thought shall have the most prominent place in the sermon depends altogether on the theme and purpose of the sermon. Yet all the parts of a sermon, both major and minor, must bear a symmetrical relation the one to the other and of the various parts to the whole.

III. THE ARRANGEMENT ITSELF.

It is conceded that *a sermon needs an outline* just as a man needs a skeleton. It has been said that "Sometimes Providence makes man without a bony skeleton, though even then the place is occupied by cartilage." Sometimes sermons are made without a skeleton or even a cartilage. A minister who had preached one of these sermons said to his elder, after the close of the service: "Do you know I did not know what I was to preach about when I went into the pulpit this morning." The elder was honest, and replied, "Do you know that no one knew what you had preached about when you had finished?" The preacher is dealing with the human mind and its operations are subject to immutable laws as much as the stars. Rhetoric is not a human invention for the annoyance of students.

Generally speaking, the plan of a sermon should be *easy to follow*—easy for the audience to follow particularly. Nor should it be so arranged as to become a stereotyped thing weekly. It was said of a preacher that when he had announced his first point, it was easy to tell what the remaining points were for they were always the same. The power of reserve, surprise, and unexpectedness must be manifest in the arrangement as well as in the delivery of a sermon. Outlines that are striking are easily remembered. Some preachers, for this reason, make their outline so that each general heading begins with the same word or sound. Others use the law of opposites and contrasts. A sermon preached some time ago had these headings: Theme—The Transfiguration: I. Place; II. Purpose; III. Persons; IV. Power. Another: Theme—How to Become a Christian: I. Admit; II. Commit; III. Submit; IV. Transmit.