

LESSON FOURTEEN

CHAPTER XIV
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I. THEIR IMPORTANCE.

One need scarcely speak of the great importance of the right use of illustrations in preaching. It is conceded on every side. The greatest preachers have been masters in the art of illustration. That the pictorial satisfies an inherent desire on the part of an audience cannot be reasonably questioned. Children love stories, and scarcely any man grows so old as not to enjoy a story. It is said that one of the leading Chicago papers pays its principal cartoonist \$20,000 a year; and many a reader has said that oftentimes the cartoon has been of more value than the rest of the paper. This was probably an exaggerated comparison, but it may illustrate the value of our subject.

Perhaps our Lord set forth by His example, more than anyone else, the value of illustrations in preaching. His discourses abound in anecdotes, illustrations, and similes. No wonder the crowds hung for days upon the words as they fell from His lips. The pictorial and picturesque preacher will always get a hearing. The ability of any public speaker to turn the ears of his audience into eyes constitutes an essential element in his success. As the apostle puts it, we are to "make all men see." It has been well said that "The eye is the pioneer of all learning." "Always throwing light upon the matter—that is the only part of the speech worth hearing"—said Carlyle.

The work of the preacher is to make men first *see* things, then *feel* them, then *act* upon them. If the first result is not gained, the others, of course, will fail; while often if the first is gained the other two go along with it.

The use of illustrations is a great help to the audience to enable them to carry home the truth of the sermon. How many times we hear of people who have forgotten the text, and the argument of the sermon, but well remember the illustration used—and, of course, along with it the truth the illustration was intended to convey and fix in the mind. Indeed, many an entire sermon, which otherwise would have been forgotten, has been recalled in its entirety by means of recalling an illustration used in the sermon. Just as scientists are said to be able to construct an entire animal from one bone, so many a whole sermon has been recalled by the use of one illustration.

Who has not noted the effect of an illustration upon an audience which was sleepy and listless? How quickly they prick up their ears as the preacher says: "Now let me illustrate this." How quickly every countenance is lighted up with an expectant expression! How alert is each mind! How entirely changed the complexion of the audience! The mere statement that a man is miserable who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God, might have been stated in ever so forcible language without reaching the conscience of the hearers. But when our Lord proceeded to say: "The ground of a rich man brought forth plentifully," etc., and closed with the words, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. So is every one that is not rich toward God," no conscience could remain unmoved, no hearer could any longer be indifferent to the truth proclaimed. Our Lord's auditors seem to have been so deeply moved, so intensely interested, so wholly absorbed in what He

had to say that they seem to have forgotten that He was using mere illustrations, so that once at least they interrupted Him, and broke in upon one of His parables with the declaration, "Lord, he hath ten pounds!"

How keenly David's conscience was aroused by the story of the little ewe lamb as told by Nathan the prophet! How vividly Ezekiel portrayed the religious condition of Israel by his use of such figures as scales, shears, razor, knife, fire, tiles!

II. THE PURPOSE OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

1. To Throw Light upon the Subject.

To "illustrate" means to light up, to give lustre to, to illuminate, to throw light upon, to make intelligible. Says Cowper:

The sense was dark—'twas therefore fit
With simile to illustrate it.

An illustration is to the sermon what a window is to a house—it lets light in. Illustrations are the windows of speech—through them the truth shines. Logic may lay the foundation and build the walls, but illustrations are the windows to let the light in. No one would want to live in a house without windows. So no one cares much to listen to a sermon which contains no illustrations to throw light upon the subject. "You have no 'likes' in your sermons. Christ taught that the kingdom of heaven was 'like' leaven, 'like' a grain of mustard-seed. You tell us what things *are*, but you never tell us *what they are like*." Such was Dr. John Hall's criticism of a brother minister. In every age of the church's history, the most effective preachers have been those who have made judicious use of illustration in imitation of Christ's method of proclaiming the truth.

2. To Explain.

Yet, to illustrate has a wider meaning than to throw light; it is used also to explain the subject. An illustration setting forth something similar or analogous to the case in hand will often make the subject plain. The power of the Holy Ghost which cannot be seen but may be felt can be helpfully explained by the illustration of the galvanic battery, the power of which one can feel but cannot see. "Many of Jesus' parables and pictures are more than mere illustrations; they have in them the imaginative power of interpretation, the revealing of the vision of the poet. The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18), is more than an illustrative example, it is, as Julicher classes it, 'an example of the spiritual worth of humility before God.' It reveals, as in a transparency, the essential and hidden evil of a religious class. Our Lord's controversy with the Pharisees sums itself up in this revealing picture where the inner spirit and tendency of Phariseeism is brought to a luminous point. The parable has the force of a revelation, suddenly illuminating the whole spiritual world. The same quality is in the illustration of hypocrisy in the sixth chapter of Matthew. Jesus takes the cases of almsgiving, prayer, fasting. These were the fashionable religious virtues of the day, and therefore the chosen theatre of hypocrisy: self-seeking in religion leads the humble sequestered virtues alone; and Christ's picture of ostentatious service there, have that direct illustration of the religious and ethical imagination which sets it free from the bondage of all externalism. Many of the parables have this quality, such as the seed growing in secret, the Good Samaritan, the Unmerciful Servant, the Prodigal Son, the Two Debtors."—See article in *Dictionary of Christ and the Gospels*, entitled, "Illustrations."

3. To Prove.

Illustrations may be used for the purpose of proof. Especially is this true of illustrations from analogy. For example: in Romans, chapters six and seven, the apostle uses three illustrations to show the absurdity of supposing that justification by faith will encourage to sin. Believers are *dead* to sin, and *risen* to another life; they have ceased to be the *slaves* of sin, and have become *servants* unto holiness; they have ceased to be *married* to the law, and have become united to a new husband to whom they must now bear fruit. Each one of these illustrations is not merely explanatory of the believer's position but involves the argument from analogy (cf. W. J. Bryan on *Christ Jesus' Proof of Immortality*.)

4. Ornamentation.

Illustration may serve the purpose of ornamentation. Of course, one must be guarded in this use of illustration, and remember always the old saying, "We ornament construction, and not construct ornament." That is to say, we use illustrations in order that we may make the style of our discourse more interesting, not merely ornamental. Some writer has well said: "Those whose style is barren of such ornament should seek after it, not by tying on worn and faded artificial flowers, but by encouraging the subject to blossom, if that be at all its nature." With this the preacher has little to do, for the cultivation of style is not his main purpose.

5. Conviction.

An illustration may be used to arouse the conscience and clinch the truth. How grandly and vividly this use of illustration is exemplified in Nathan's dealings

with David (2 Samuel 12). The hammer of argument may drive home the nail of truth, but it takes the sledge-hammer of illustration efficiently to clinch it.

III. THE SOURCES OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

1. In General, One Should Be on the Lookout for Them Everywhere.

He should seek to "Find tongues in trees, books in running brooks; sermons in stones, and (illustrations) in everything."

It is said of Christ, in the Gospels, that He marked how the Pharisees chose the chief seats. Note the words—"He observed"—how they did the marketing, dressed themselves, trained or mistrained their families, went to church for good or evil purposes, families, went to church for good or evil purposes, spake hard words to or concerning one another. This is how Christ got His illustrations—He observed. He kept an open eye for them. The audience gave this great preacher His illustrations, and what they gave Him He took, and gave back to them. Christ drew his illustrations from the lilies, the raven, salt, a candle, a bushel, a long-faced hypocrite, gnats, moths, large gates and small gates, a needle's eye, yeast in bread, a mustard-seed, a fishing-net, debtors and creditors, etc.

What a wonderful eye Jesus had for the suggestiveness of the material world! The falling of a sparrow to the ground, the growing of a lily, the sailing of a ship, the readiness of the fields for the harvest, the grinding of meal by women at the mill, the reddening glow of the evening sky—all these things were quickly caught up by Him and used in His sermons. The whole heaven and earth became to Him a picture gallery of illustrations. He saw the deepest truths illustrated in the world around Him. The star, the dew-drop, the

flower, the field—all were ablaze with lustrous truth for Him.

Why should not we behold all these things which God hath made: the sky, the star, the dew-drop, the lily, the sparrow? These all are here with us as they were with Him. Having eyes, let us see; and, having ears, let us hear. Let us not be content to find all our illustrations in musty, worn-out books of stock anecdotes when all around us nature is alive with illuminated and illustrative truth. The preacher who has wide open eyes and ears will always be looking for things about him to which he can *liken* the truth he is seeking to present.

2. Coming More Particularly to the Sources of Illustration, Mention May Be Made of the Following:

The Newspapers—to see how “our Father is ruling the world.” One of the most interesting pages in the *Christian Herald* is entitled, “The Bible and the Newspaper.”

History—ancient, medieval, modern. It has a peculiar and almost unrivalled charm for illustrative purposes.

Poetry should not be neglected as a fruitful field for illustration. Be at home with the poets. Read a good poem each day. Classify it after you have read it, so that you can have it ready for use any time you need it.

Biography—What a rich mine is to be found in this subject! How full of illustration is human life! Is not that the reason why the Old Testament is so interesting—it is so full of biography? How often Paul intersperses his discourses with little personal snatches from his own life. Everybody is interested in real life, in biography. Read the lives of great explorers, great missionaries, great preachers, great men, great women.

The Sciences, the Arts, and the Inventions furnish rich

material in this direction. Music, painting, sculpture, electricity, wireless telegraphy, radium, astronomy, geology, chemistry, etc.,—all are rich in illustrative material.

Then you may draw from the three Kingdoms: animal, vegetable, mineral. Jesus did it: He spoke of wolves, sheep, goats, camels, insects, birds. He referred to the vine, vegetables, grain, seed, corn, wheat, tares, lilies. Pearls, gold, salt, were used by Him to set forth phases of truth. Scenes from domestic life were abundant in his discourses—wardrobe, banking, marriage, grinding, baking. In *religious* matters He referred to fasting, praying, tithing. In *anatomy* He spoke of the lips, heart, feeling, eyes, body, hands. He made use of *astronomy* when He referred to the signs of the sun and the moon, the falling stars, the condition of the sky in the morning and in the evening. When He referred to the rocks, the mountains, and the stony places, did He not hint at *geology*? Even *architecture* did not escape Him, for He spoke of the two buildings, the one built on sand and the other on the rock. *Music* did not meet with a slight from the great Teacher, for He said, "We have piped unto you, and ye have not danced."

Children are an unfailing source of illustration. Christ likened the generation in which He lived "to children playing in the market-place." The temper, habits, play, disposition, of children are instructive, and may be found helpful in the illustration of certain phases of truth.

The imagination, within a limited sphere and carefully safeguarded, may be drawn on as a fruitful source of picture making. It is perfectly proper to invent an illustration, providing you let your audience know it is an invention, and do not seek to palm it off on them as having a reality in fact. Such an illustration

may be introduced with the words, "It is as if," or, "Suppose a case," or "Let us imagine."

A word or two may be said here with reference to what may be called *Object Illustrations*. A flower may be used to illustrate the resurrection; a magnet, the mysterious power of the Holy Spirit; a watch, the complex character of the human frame as it sets forth the wisdom of God; a blank book, how God keeps a record of our lives; an artificial flower, hypocrisy; a single thread easily broken but being manifolded, is hard to break, the binding force of habit; an ordinary trap, the deceptiveness of temptation; the process of photography, the sensitiveness of the heart to good and evil influences.

IV. SUGGESTIONS AND CAUTIONS WITH REGARD TO THE USE OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

1. Beware of Books of Stock Illustrations.

Avoid the practice of feathering your arrows with illustrations from such books. The book of life and nature is open before you; make your own illustrations. Said the late Henry Ward Beecher: "Do you suppose I study old musty books when I want to preach? I study *you*. When I want to deliver a discourse on theology I study *you*. When I want to study more about the doctrine of depravity I study *you*. When I want to know what is right and what is wrong, I see how *you* do, and I have abundant illustrations on every side." Take another instance from Beecher. "He steps into a blacksmith's shop, and watches the sparks fly for a few minutes, then to his study and his pulpit to talk about 'the steel that has suffered most.' If the blacksmith were there, he understood all about the effect of life's discipline upon character—furnace, anvil, vise, the rasp, the emery, the hammer, were tools of which he knew well the operation.

Beecher took his sermons and illustrations from life instead of from books. He put the repose of the granite hills, the smell of the new-mown hay, the lowing of the cattle, and the gambols of the lamb into them. Every sunset cloud effect he ever saw paid tribute to his sermons. The beggar was there, the student, the clerk in the store, and the waiter in the restaurant. He preached where people lived. He brought God down into the streets and workshops and homes of Brooklyn, a God full of sympathy for men's weaknesses and helpfulness for their daily trials!"

No sensible person casts any slur upon the use of illustrations in preaching. Men do complain sometimes, and rightly so, as to their source. That illustrations be fresh, new, helpful, and gathered as the manna was—fresh every day, is what an audience asks, and has a right to expect. Held-over, stock illustrations soon run to seed like a pansy garden, whose owner refuses to pluck the blossoms.

2. Illustrations Should Be Simple.

How simple and easy of comprehension Christ's illustrations were. Any one, even a child, could understand them. The same should be said of the illustrations we use. It has been well said that the illustrations used in the average sermon "are so often cumbered with scientific learning and historic lore, so that like a stained glass window in a cathedral, however beautiful in pattern, they let in little light. But when Christ built up His discourses, doctrines were the pillars, and illustrations the open windows to flood the whole with sunshine."

3. They Should Be within the Comprehension of the Audience.

This is more than can be said of many sermons and illustrations used in these days. Not long ago a young

minister from one of our universities spent about ten minutes of the sermon time illustrating the doctrine he was inculcating by referring his audience—which, by the way, was composed of farmers in a village remote from a city of any size—to some latest discovery in science with which they had absolutely no acquaintance, and of which they doubtless had never heard. The result was tedious in the extreme. The audience was listless, restless, and sleepy. When, however, at the close of his sermon he referred them, for illustration, to the life-giving power that lay inherent in the seed, the restored and keen interest was very manifest.

Be sure your illustrations are understood by your audience. Let them spring from their level, from their memory, their experiences, their familiar observations, since illustrations drawn from a region remote from their actual life meet with no response. James Gordon Bennett, as the story goes, once drew an editorial writer, who prided himself on writing for educated men, to the window of the *Herald* office, saying, "Do you see those people down there on Broadway?" "Yes," said the writer. "Well," said Bennett, "I want you to write for those men down there." Consider your audience, and then talk to "those people." Find your illustration where you can, but be sure it finds them. It will, if you get their viewpoint and see what they are needing.

4. Do Not Lie in Illustrations.

Do not use illustrations from the lives of other men and say they occurred in your own experience. That is lying; lying does not redound to the glory of God; and "All liars shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone." "All liars"—that means lying preachers too.

5. Never Make a Point for the Sake of Telling a Story.

Such a practice may be admissible in an after-dinner speech, but is strictly out of place in a gospel message. An architect on being advised to use certain decorations said it would violate the first rule to architecture. He replied: "We must never construct ornament, but only ornament construction."

6. Be Sure that the Illustration Illustrates.

Ask yourself, "Does this story or illustration throw light on the subject for me, does it help me to understand the subject better?" If it does not help you, it will not help your audience. If it throws light upon the matter for you, it very likely will for the people to whom you speak. When you hold a light for anybody, it is usual to hold it so that you yourself can see by it. It is the rule, also, for effective illustration. Be sure that your illustration does not exclude the truth you are seeking to illustrate.

7. Do Not Use Too Many Illustrations.

Usually one illustration for each point is sufficient. If two are used for one point there is danger that they may neutralize each other. A second illustration should be used only when the first has failed to do its proper work. This is sometimes necessary.

8. Know Your Illustration, and Know How to Tell It.

Be sure you know your illustration as to nature and to fact. Know that it is true. Not long ago a preacher used the following simile as setting forth power of influence: He said, "One drop of iodine will give a purple hue to

a thousand gallons of water." A physician who was present took the preacher to task after the sermon for stating what was not true. Iodine, he claimed, had no such strength.

Know how to tell a story. Many a good illustration has been spoiled by poor telling. To be able to tell a story well and effectively is quite an art. Special attention must be paid to details. Here are some borrowed suggestions on good story-telling:

See it. If you are to make others see it, you must see it yourself. You cannot make clear to others what is not perfectly clear to you.

Feel it. If you are not moved by the illustration, how can you expect to move others by its recital?

Shorten it. Brevity is the soul of story-telling. Short stories are in demand by the pulpit as well as by the press. The probabilities are that your illustration is too long.

Expand it. It may be very meagre in the necessary background; it may be deficient in detail necessary for effective impression.

Master it. Practice it, repeat it so often that you can tell it without reference to your notes. Notes are fatal to the effectiveness of an illustration. Repeat it often in private before you give it in public.

Repeat it. Repetition is the mother of good story-telling. Do not be afraid of telling a good story many times. Even "twice-told tales" may be interesting.

9. Be Sure You Have Something to Illustrate.

Illustrations have been compared to the barbs that fix the arrow in the target. But we must remember that barbs alone are useless. An archer would be poorly off indeed if he had nothing in his quiver but arrow heads and feathers. For an illustration to be useful or effective, there must be something to illustrate. It is possible to

make a sermon consist of all stories. The sermons of some evangelists bear ample witness to this fact, for if the stories were to be extracted from their sermons there would be nothing left on which one could make an intelligent and legitimate appeal.

10. File Away Your Illustrations.

Have a scrap-book or filing index so that you may file away your illustrations according to the themes or subjects they throw light upon. Keep a record as to when and where you may have used them.