

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

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LECTURE IX.

THE TEXT: ACCOMMODATION, MOTTOES, MISCELLANIES.

It has been observed, that, in the use of accommodated texts, certain cautions are necessary. Of these, the first is that we should not select accommodated texts when logical texts can be found. Why do we need an indirect authority for a theme when a direct one is at command? Why should we be content with a hint of a subject when an expression of it is practicable? We sport with a truth which we seek to introduce by needless circumlocution. Earnest processes of mind are always as direct as they can be without hazard to their object. The pulpit suffers in its reputation for manliness, and it deserves to suffer, if it is tempted into dalliance with truth for the gratification of a fancy for a text. Why should we discourse upon the parental love of God from the narrative of Jacob's affection for Joseph, or of Abraham's for Isaac, when we have a text which seems as if inspired for our purpose: "If ye, then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" Why should we choose as the text of a sermon on the absoluteness of human obligation to God the words, "How much owest thou unto my lord?" when we have such a text as this by the side of it, "When ye shall have

done all those things which are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do"? If we gain nothing by an accommodated text, we may be assured that we lose something. Intrinsically, the logical text is the superior.

From this it follows that we should not generally choose accommodated texts. This is one form of abuse of this usage of the pulpit, — that preachers are servants to their fancy in the selection of texts, and therefore they preach disproportionately upon those which are not, logically, sources of their themes. It is no defense of such disproportion to say that the themes have no logical texts, and therefore the accommodation is a necessity. It is so much the worse for the themes then. That is a distorted ministry which deals in any large proportion with subjects which are not logically presented in the Scriptures. It is not a biblical ministry.

A regard for biblical authority requires, moreover, that we should not accommodate passages in such a way as to distort or degrade their biblical associations. This may be done, even when a remote resemblance in principle exists between text and theme. Bishop Latimer once preached a discourse on the text, "Who art thou?" The interrogation was originally addressed by the Pharisees to our Saviour. But Latimer employs it as a ^{*}monitory inquiry addressed by the Holy Spirit to sinners. He asks, "Who art thou?" and answers, "A lost sinner;" and, again, "Who art thou?" and replies, "A redeemed sinner." The sermon is a series of such repetitions of the query, with admonitory responses. This is accommodation on the ground of some distant resemblance of text to theme in point of meaning; but

* monitory, def, conveying an admonition or a warning

it is fanciful, because it distorts the associations of the text. Distortion of the biblical associations of texts sometimes takes the form of transposing classes of hearers to whom texts are supposed to be addressed; that is, addressing to Christians language which originally is addressed to sinners, and *vice versa*. Such transposition is not always a distortion of a text. Sometimes the truth declared is naturally applicable to both classes, though addressed to one; but in other cases a text has become localized in the midst of certain surroundings in a hearer's mind, so that no preacher of good taste would disturb those associations. On this ground we must condemn the choice of a clergyman who once preached on the text, "One thing thou lackest," and accommodated it to a discourse on the deficiencies of Christians. Are we not sensible of a violence done to the biblical associations of a text in this case?

Yet sometimes the danger is not only this, but of an absolute destruction of a text in its biblical significance. I remark, therefore, that we should not accommodate passages, which, by frequent accommodation, are in danger of losing their true meaning in the minds of hearers. The necessity of this caution will be evident from an illustration. The text, "Watchman, what of the night?" is one of the standards of the pulpit; but who of the people knows its legitimate meaning? The pulpit has appropriated it almost universally to sermons on the "signs of the times." If a preacher wishes to discourse upon the prospects of missions, or the prospects of reform, or the prospects of the nation, he turns to this as the most convenient passage in the Bible, because it seems to restrict discussion to nothing in particular. But in fact it is one

of the most individual and restricted of all texts. In its biblical significance it is a taunt of infidelity. The prophet is represented as stationed in a watch-tower, in a time of great peril, on the lookout for friend or foe. The triumphant Idumæan is then represented as passing along, and crying out in derision of the solitary sentinel. The elocution of the passage ought to express this derision. It is as if the Idumæan stranger spoke thus, "Ha, ha, watchman! how do you like the look of the night?" A sermon on this text, designed to develop the taunting spirit of infidelity in a time of misfortune to the cause of Christ, might disclose the significance of the language with great force. But the passage is scarcely known to the people in any such use of it. Such a discourse upon it would be a novelty. Preachers generally have used the text as it is used in the missionary hymn founded upon it by Bowring:—

"Watchman, tell us of the night,
What its signs of promise are."

That hymn and the usage of the pulpit have almost destroyed that text in the minds of the people. Such texts as this ought not to be accommodated by the present generation of preachers. They have been wrenched out of place in the popular thought of them. They are almost lifeless. They should be permitted to rest from accommodated uses till they have recovered their biblical force.

(4) Similar to this inquiry concerning accommodated texts, yet distinct from it, is a fourth inquiry affecting the relation of the text to the sermon. It is, May preachers properly employ motto-texts?

What is a motto-text? It is not necessarily an accommodated text. The subject may be a logical

deduction from a motto-text: it can not be such from an accommodated text. For example, "The field is the world" may be a motto-text for a sermon on the conversion of Madagascar to Christianity, but it can not be accommodated to that subject. The subject is logically related to the text. Again: a text to which no expressed reference is made in the discussion is not necessarily a motto-text. "What shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" may be the text of a sermon in which the text is not once repeated, or expressly referred to, throughout the entire discussion; yet it may not be a motto.

A motto implies two things,—remoteness of connection between the text and the theme, and independence of the text in the discussion of the theme. Observe one or two illustrations. Upon the text, "That the soul be without knowledge it is not good," Professor Park once preached a sermon on the value of theological seminaries. In this case, the text contained a principle. From that principle the theme was a remote inference. No further use was made of the text than to introduce that inference. From the text, "Prove all things, hold fast that which is good," the late Professor Edwards once preached a discourse on the state of the Roman Catholic religion in Italy. On the following Sabbath, in the same pulpit, a sermon from the same text was preached on education societies. In these instances, the text was a command to which the sermons were acts of obedience; yet no mention was made of the text after the subjects were announced. These were not accommodated texts. Why? Because the connection was logical between text and theme. Yet they were not suggestive texts as related to the themes. Why? Because the connec-

tion between theme and text was remote. Neither were they suggestive of the discussion, nor the discussion of them. Why? Because the discussion proceeded independently of the text.

Yet, again, a text may be both a motto and an accommodated text. Some years ago, on the occasion of a famine in Ireland, a charity-sermon was preached in Boston from the text, "I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction." This was an accommodated text: the subject of the original does not contain at all the subject of the sermon. The text was applied to the sermon only on the ground of resemblance in thought. But it was also a motto-text: no use could be made of it in the discussion of the theme. It represents an extreme class, yet not a small one, of instances in which the liberty of the pulpit takes the broadest range.

It is very popular to condemn the use of motto-texts, and for reasons which are not without force. It is urged that it is trifling with the Scriptures to choose a text, and then abandon it: the text is said to be, in such a case, only a pretext: therefore it is said to be unfavorable to evangelical preaching to employ motto-texts. We often hear objection made to them as facilitating literature or philosophy at the expense of the gospel. These are valid objections to the use of mottoes in preaching, but they are not conclusive. A decisive argument can be advanced in defense of such texts. Of this, one consideration is that the exclusion of mottoes would restrict injuriously the range of the topics of the pulpit. Such texts are a necessity to any broad compass of thought in preaching. Combinations of truth are suggested by the wants of a modern congregation which no text of the Bible will express, and which none will inclose otherwise than by remote rela-

tion. Occidental civilization renders some discussions needful which were not needed in patriarchal or apostolic times, and for which, therefore, the Scriptures contain no forcible texts. Modern methods of usefulness are affected by modern inventions. The invention of printing has created tract societies, for instance. Are not they a suitable theme for a sermon? Yet where is the text which names or implies this department of religious action otherwise than by remote suggestion?

Modern theological discussions render necessary some combinations of truth in preaching which were not needed at Ephesus or at Rome in the ministrations of St. Paul. We can find no texts for them other than mottoes. The local history of a parish may create an occasional need of certain methods of discourse, which no inspired thought embraces otherwise than by a general principle, that reaches the exact case of that parish, two thousand years later, only by remote connection. Shall these modern, occidental, local, in every way peculiar needs of a congregation be neglected for the want of texts by which a preacher can meet those needs textually? So far from promoting the evangelical spirit of the pulpit, such a principle would restrain and cripple that spirit. As a book of texts, the Bible is made for the pulpit, not the pulpit for the Bible. We must have freedom, or we can not have life, in the adaptation of texts to subjects.

Another consideration in the defense of motto-texts is that they are a less evil than a forced intimacy between text and sermon would be. An artifice to which some preachers resort to avoid the appearance of having a motto-text is to foist the text into the sermon by repeating it at every convenient landing-place. Another

artifice of this kind is to dwell upon the text by pointing out forced resemblances between it and the train of thought in the sermon. One need scarcely say that these artifices are unmanly. We see them to be so when they are stated in form. They are among the tricks of composition to which no manly mind will stoop consciously. But, as with some of the more venial faults of composition, we fall into them unconsciously. We need, therefore, to define such artifices as these to our own criticism, and see that they are in bad taste, that they are worse logic, and that, most of all, they are miserable exegesis. Admitting that a motto-text is an evil, it is a less evil than an unnatural connection of text and theme.

A third consideration in defense of motto-texts is that they are a less evil than accommodated texts. It is a singular fact that the very taste which declaims against the irreverence of using mottoes in the pulpit is especially fond of the accommodation of the Scriptures to uninspired trains of thought. The most unnatural conceits of the pulpit have been attempts to spiritualize passages which had no religious thought in them. But which is the worse, — to choose a text which logically contains the theme, and then discuss the theme independently of the text, or to choose a text which contains neither discussion nor theme, except as the preacher puts them there? Which is the more irreverent, — to neglect a text, or to force into it uninspired contents? The truth is, that, under proper restrictions, neither is an act of irreverence. But, of the two, the use of the motto is the more vigorous expedient. It is less liable to abuse; it has created less abuse of the usages of the pulpit than have the conceits of accommodation. Yet the clerical taste

which has rioted in these has been offended at the motto.

But if mottoes, in this view of them, seem to be a necessity, they suggest the question, Is it invariably necessary to have a text? This leads me to remark a fourth consideration in vindication of motto-texts, that they are a less evil than to preach, even occasionally, without a text. It seems plausible to ask, If a text is not needed in a discussion, why have a text for the theme? But the objection will not stand the test of practice. A custom like this of building the pulpit upon divine foundations will not bear tampering with. An invasion of it occasionally invites a longer suspension of it, and a suspension tempts to an abandonment. The custom as it stands gives a valuable advantage to evangelical preachers. It is a silent but powerful check upon a heretical pulpit, that usage requires its ministrations to be founded on inspired texts: it is compelled to use a volume which is its own refutation. This is too great an advantage to the truth to be lightly thrown away. Let an evangelical ministry allow occasional departures from the usage, and we may rest assured that preachers of error will very speedily widen the breach. They will often preach without texts; they will choose texts from uninspired sources; eventually they will abandon the custom, as Voltaire advised.

The liberty we claim, however, is obviously liable to abuses. We should, therefore, observe certain restrictions in the use of motto-texts. Of these, one is that mottoes should not be needlessly chosen. If passages can be found which are exactly fitted to the demands of a discussion, they should always have the preference. Another restriction is that mottoes should not be gen-

erally chosen as texts. Here, as in the case of accommodated texts, it proves a fault in a preacher's range of themes and methods of discussion, if his texts are in large proportion mere mottoes of his sermons. The proportion is, probably, the exact proportion in which his trains of thought are but distantly related to the Scriptures. A third restriction is that we should, if possible, refrain from employing as mottoes texts which are seldom employed in any other way. Some passages have been standard mottoes for ages. "The field is the world" has been the motto of missionary sermons innumerable. Who ever heard a sermon on it which was designed to unfold the principle of the text? "Glory to God in the highest" has been persecuted with sermons upon a vast variety of subjects. So has the text, "Faith cometh by hearing." A merciful preacher will be merciful to such texts. It relieves very much of the evil incident to a motto, if it be an unhackneyed passage.

This suggests a fourth restriction, that, in the choice of a motto-text, we should have special care for the pertinence of it to the sermon. An interesting coincidence of text and theme, though it be but momentary, will, by the pleasure it gives, balance the evil of seeming to neglect the text in the discussion. It indicates care on a preacher's part: it shows that he has chosen the motto thoughtfully; he has not chosen it simply out of deference to custom. Let us illustrate the point of this restriction by the contrast of two examples. A Sabbath-school missionary preached a discourse in Richmond, some years ago, on the text, "The field is the world." The object of the sermon was to give some information respecting the establishment of Sabbath schools in Minnesota. The result was the request

for the sum of twenty-five dollars for a Sabbath-school library. Of course, the text was necessarily a motto; yet it had a perfectly logical connection with the subject. "The world" includes Minnesota: the cultivation of "the field" includes Sabbath schools. But was it a becoming text? Was it an interesting text? Did it add any thing to the force of the sermon? Did it suggest any pleasing answer to the question, Why did the preacher have a text? Did it not leave bare the fact that he chose a text out of deference to usage, and for no other purpose?

In the same pulpit, at about the same time, a clergyman preached in behalf of the Waldenses. His object was to give the most recent intelligence concerning the state of that people, and to ask a contribution to the supply of their wants. He must, of course, select a motto-text. He had recently visited the Waldenses, and had been requested by them to present their good wishes to the American churches. He accordingly availed himself of this coincidence between his own experience and that of St. Paul, and selected for his text the words from the thirteenth chapter of Hebrews, "They of Italy salute you." This was both a motto and an accommodated text. It had no logical connection with the subject: it had no place whatever in the discussion. One can not conceive of a wider latitude between text and theme. The case represents the very extreme of usage respecting texts. Still who will say that it was not a good text? Did it not furnish a satisfactory answer to the question, Why did the preacher choose a text?

A fifth restriction upon the use of motto-texts is that we should not choose them if we do not mean to treat them in a manly way. We may better abandon them

than attempt to disguise them. We need not inform an audience that our text is not the best conceivable. The less we say of the processes of composition in the delivery of a discourse, the better; but we should manfully leave these processes to disclose themselves, if hearers have the skill to observe them. So we should leave a motto-text to speak for itself, without any effort to conceal the fact that it is a motto. If we do not need the text in the body of the sermon, we should let it alone. We should not thrust it into the interstices of the structure, as if to remind the audience, in the absence of better evidence, that we had a text.

5th, We have now considered the most important inquiries relating to the selection of texts. There remain a few topics, not of vital importance, and yet not matters of indifference, which may be considered, in the fifth place, under the title of "miscellaneous inquiries."

(1) Of these, the first is, Where should be the place of the text in the delivery of the sermon? The American and the German usages, as you are aware, differ. American usage is almost uniform in placing the text at the beginning of the discourse. The German usage is not uniform; but, more frequently than otherwise, it locates the text at the end of an introduction.

The German method has some advantages. It prepares a hearer's mind for the text. Some texts may need such a preparative process. A text may contain a repulsive doctrine. A preacher may have reason to prefer the conciliatory to the authoritative process in discoursing upon that doctrine: therefore he may deem it prudent to introduce the text with prefatory remarks. A text may contain an offensive simile: a preface not

apologetic, but commendatory, may rescue it from criticism. A text may excite undue expectations in an audience. It is sometimes expedient to forestall excessive expectations by remarks introducing such a text. Again: the German usage assimilates preaching to secular oratory. In itself it is a disadvantage to isolate the pulpit. As it is against nature to make monks of clergymen, so it is not in itself desirable to separate preaching from other methods of public, oral address.

Further: the German method is less formal than ours, and therefore is better adapted to appeals to the feelings of hearers. In this respect it is well fitted to the character of the German pulpit, which is more imaginative and emotional, and less argumentative and instructive, than ours. German preachers state and define truth less severely than American preachers; they argue less; they illustrate and appeal more. Moreover, the German method of locating texts, if not uniformly adopted, promotes variety in preaching. Any thing is valuable which prevents any usage of the pulpit from crystallizing. We may, therefore, with good effect, occasionally adopt the German form.

But the American usage should predominate in our practice, and this for several reasons. One is that it is the usage of our pulpit. Another reason is that the American usage gives greater prominence to the Scriptures than the German. Something is gained by beginning discourse with inspired words. The text of a sermon is like the title of a book. The place of honor, wherever that is, is the ordinary place for the text. This suggests, further, that it is accordant with the religious feelings of a preacher commonly to place scriptural language before his own. It is natural that we should follow, rather than seem to lead, inspired

thought. Again: the American method promotes brevity of preliminaries. The danger attends the German mode, of having a double introduction, — one for the text, and one for the subject. This is often the fact in German preaching. In earnest discussion, and especially in difficult discussion, such as is often heard in the American pulpit, economy of time in the delivery of preliminary matter is a necessity. The American custom, therefore, should predominate in the habits of an American preacher; but an occasional deviation from it is no eccentricity, and may be an excellence.

(2) A second miscellaneous inquiry is, Should a text be repeated in the announcement? This is not always necessary: the text may be short. It is not always convenient: the text may be long. No rule can be adopted. Sometimes emphasis may require repetition; again, elegance may forbid it. Why should we seek uniformity in a matter of this kind? Variety is better.

(3) Another inquiry is, What should be the order of announcement of a text? Always announce chapter and verse first; and this simply because it is natural. When we quote an authority, it is natural to give the authority before we cite the words. A text is an authority quoted. To cite the language first, and then give the reference, is always abrupt, sometimes affected, and occasionally ludicrous.

(4) Another inquiry is, With what kind of preface should a text be announced? Have no rule, except to cultivate simplicity and variety. It is a gross violation of simplicity to announce a text with a pompous or long-winded preface. I do not refer now to introductions of texts where the German usage is adopted, but to the prefatory words which almost all preachers use

to avoid abruptness. These are sometimes offensively elaborate. Have you never heard prefaces of texts of which this is a caricature? "You will find the particular passage of the Sacred Scriptures to which it is my present purpose to invite your earnest attention on this solemn occasion, in that most interesting and impressive description of the most blessed of the virtues, recorded in the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians, in the thirteenth chapter, the first verse, the last clause of the verse, and expressed in the following language; to wit, 'I am become as sounding brass.'"

I close these remarks on the subject of texts, with a statement of the general principle upon which all questions respecting them should be determined. It is that a keen sense of the reverence due to the Scriptures should be associated with a liberal construction of rules. That is the best text for a sermon which associates it in the most manly, free, and intimate connection with the Word of God.