LESSON XVIII.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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LECTURE XVIII.

THE INTRODUCTION: MODESTY, SUGGESTIVENESS.

5TH, Continuing the discussion of the theme of the last lecture, I remark that the fifth characteristic of a good introduction is modesty.

What does modesty in an exordium require? The reply should aim at two things: one is to answer the inquiry as related to the exordium alone; the other is to treat by way of *excursus* the quality of modesty in all parts of pulpit discourse. This is one of the many topics of homiletic discussion which branch over the limits of the case in hand. Modesty limited to the introduction would not require prolonged treatment; but, extended through a sermon, it is a vital quality, and yet it comes most prominently to view in the exordium. To save repetition, therefore, let us consider it as a generic quality, essential to all parts of effective speech, the exordium included.

(1) Thus extending the inquiry, I answer, Modesty requires a sensible reserve in allusions to the person or character of the speaker. Such allusions should be made, if at all, only to meet necessities, never to gratify self-consciousness. It is said of Mr. Grattan, the Irish orator, that he never once indulged in such allusions through his whole parliamentary career. In listening for six years to the preaching of Rev. Albert

Barnes I heard but two allusions to himself from his lips. On the Sunday after his restoration to the pulpit, when he had been suspended for heresy for six months, and when a packed audience had assembled to hear from him a personal discourse, he said not one word about himself, or his recent history.

Three varieties of fault deserve mention with special reference to the modesty of the pulpit. Though not by any means limited to introductions, they are more frequent there than in the other parts of a sermon. One of these is a needless obtrusion of professional authority. It is an offense in the pulpit, if the preacher harps upon his divine mission, the sacredness of his trust, the solemnity of his vows of ordination, the obligation of men to hear him as the messenger of God. This seems very solemn: occasionally, peculiarity of circumstances may render it impressive. But it may be, also, and if often done must be, flat even to the point of disgust. Another form of unwise self-disclosure is the needless expression of the speaker's religious experiences. The principle here involved is the same as before. To speak of one's own awe in view of the magnitude of a subject, of one's inability to do justice to it, of the weight of its burden on the heart, of the prayers and the tears with which it has been considered, and of the overwhelming convictions of the truth which one is about to utter, may be occasionally pertinent, and may, therefore, carry its own justification on its face. But it may also be, and if often done it must be, religious twaddle. No man can safely make a hobby of his own religious life. Such self-disclosure in the pulpit will never be used by a modest preacher as a homiletic make-shift for a solemn introduction. The religious experience of a preacher must be worked

into sermons indirectly, and for the most part unconsciously.

Another form of immodest intrusion of self in discourse is a mannerism of style in the excessive use of the pronoun "I." Have you ever observed how much more difficult it is to avoid the excessive use of the *ego* in introductions than in any other part of a discourse? In the introduction we are struggling to lift our subject up into sight. The mind in that labor seems often to work as sailors do in weighing anchor, when they sing a chant which means nothing, but is a nervous help to the muscular strain. So a preacher will measure off an exordium with the formulæ, "I think," "I suppose," "I believe," "I know," "I feel," when he is not at all chargeable with conscious egotism. Yet the impression of egotism will be made upon an audience if the use of the *ego* be immoderately frequent.

(2) Modesty in the exordium requires certain things indicative of respect for the audience. A modest self-appreciation is twin-brother to a respectful appreciation of others. This will make itself obvious in the relations of a speaker to his hearers. Among other things of this class may be named a carefully constructed introduction. A sloven in his dress betrays disrespect for others as well as for himself. So a heedless jumble of materials in an exordium indicates indifference to the claims of an audience upon a speaker's courtesy. But, on the other hand, modesty requires freedom from excessive care to make things plain. Vigorous thought, a manly style, the omission of needless explanations, and celerity of progress in the exordium are tacit signs of the speaker's estimate of the abilities of his hearers.

Modesty demands freedom from arrogant insinua-

tions. You may betray disrespect for your hearers without uttering it in words. If you feel it, you will insinuate it unconsciously. One preacher says, "If I succeed in making you understand my meaning." Another says, "If I succeed in making my meaning understood." What is the difference? In words, almost nothing: in spirit, the whole distance between respect and arrogance. In countless forms of speech you may turn a contemptuous shoulder to an audience, and yet not utter a word of literal disparagement. On the same principle, modesty requires a genial judgment of the character of an audience. It stands to reason, that, if you would win men, you must assume all that can be honestly assumed of good in them. Modesty in any preacher will breathe into his discourse, wherever occasion calls for it, a genial opinion of an audience. Without a word of flattery, it will often disarm a suspicion, or break up indifference, by convincing a hearer that you are predisposed to think well of him.

Modesty of discourse, and in exordiums especially, requires often a kindly treatment of the prejudices of hearers. None but an egotist of intense type will fail to see something to respect in a prejudice which is shared by many minds. Such a prejudice is always the extreme of a truth. An intelligent preacher can not help respecting it, and he may honestly express that respect as a help to correcting it.

(3) Modesty in introductions, and elsewhere as well, requires freedom from certain affectations of excellence in the preacher. A truly modest mind is wedded to realities. It will not stoop to an affected virtue. It demands, therefore, among other things, freedom from affected virtues of style. An inflated style not only offends simplicity, as we have seen, in the introduction

itself, but it implies vanity in the preacher. He affects a style which he knows to be unreal to himself. He puffs; he swells; he blusters. In like manner, modesty requires freedom from an affectation of dramatic power in the preacher The dramatic faculty is a magnificent gift for the uses of the pulpit, but a perilous one, there is so powerful a temptation to overact by affecting a form or a degree of it which is unreal.

Modesty of discourse, and in introductions especially, requires freedom from an affectation of humility. It is difficult to say which is the more repulsive extreme, — the vanity which parades itself in egotism, or the vanity which disguises itself in humility. Genuine modesty forbids each as imperatively as the other. If an affectation of this virtue could always be as transparently humble as it was on the death-bed of Dr. Samuel Parr, we might tolerate it as a *lusus naturæ*. "England," said he, "has produced three great classical scholars: one was Bentley; another, Porson; the third modesty forbids me to mention." But not all preachers have the artlessness of Dr. Parr. In homiletic exordiums this affectation is usually found in the use of stereotyped expressions of humility. Confessing personal unworthiness, acknowledging that the sermon is the least of God's mercies, invoking divine forgiveness for sin about to be committed in the preaching of it commonly mean nothing when thrust into the preliminaries of a discourse. They are relics of monastic morbidness, which, in a healthy Protestant mind, may be something much worse than that. If not conscious hypocrisy, they may make the worst impression of that upon an audience.

(4) Modesty of discourse demands freedom from excess of modesty. Affected modesty is not excess, but

an assumption of unreal virtue. A more respectable because a more honest fault is an excess of genuine modesty. In introductions peculiarly, it is apt to betray itself in apologies for the sermon, a pleading for charitable criticism of its defects, a depreciation of the preacher's abilities, all of which are perfectly genuine. They make the impression of entire sincerity, yet of a morbid selfhood. Modesty is a robust virtue. It has in it a large vein of self-respect. It not only consists with, but in part consists in, self-appreciation. It demands in a preacher a sense of what is due to him as a man, and due to his professional position as a religious teacher. A cringing introduction may be becoming to a speech on the scaffold, never to a sermon in the Christian pulpit. St. Paul's charge to Timothy probably had this virtue in view, among others, "Let no man despise thy youth." Be a man in thy youthful graces. Speak, act, look, the manly preacher. Robert Hall said the same thing more tartly, when he advised that no man should ask pardon for having been born.

6th, A sixth characteristic of a good introduction is suggestiveness. It is an advantage to a discourse, if the introduction be one which lays a moderate but positive tax upon the intellect of the hearers. Set them to thinking early in the progress of a sermon. Thus you most effectually prepare them for a vigorous train of thought in the sequel. Were you ever stimulated to an attentive hearing by listening to an introduction made up of such discoveries as these, "man is everywhere in pursuit of happiness;" "life is short, and death certain;" "by all men's confession all men are sinners;" "there is a great difference in the characters of men"? Yet are not these weighty truths? Doubtless. But stupendous truths must often be assumed as

too well known to excite interest in their hackneyed forms. John Foster remarks it as one of the collateral evidences of human depravity that men can think of the most affecting truths without emotion; but mental inertia, on even the most appalling realities, is not necessarily a sin. It may be only the inevitable sluggishness of the intellect over hackneyed thought.

(1) The suggestive quality may often be cultivated by selecting the narrative form of exordium. Animated narrative always interests. An historical incident, a biographical fact, a mythological legend, a scientific phenomenon, if it illustrates a principle which the subject needs in the introduction, may be the most stimulating material for your purpose. One such brief narrative may be sufficient to save a hearer from listlessness.

(2) Nearly allied to this is the descriptive form of introduction. If description of a place, a scene, an event, a monument, a picture, a statue, a person, a process of manufacture, an invention, can be naturally made to freshen a stale truth of religion, and if your subject needs that truth in some unhackneyed form, one page of such description may be the one lively passage which shall arouse and hold a hearer's interest. A good description is a truth painted. Almost anybody will look at a painting of that which nobody would listen to, if droned in the ear. Nobody is uninterested in an illustrated newspaper. The eye is a lens; the ear, a drum. The eye magnifies; the ear only echoes.

(3) Raciness of introduction may often be gained by originality of philosophical remark. One thought which to the hearer is new may carry the weight of many old thoughts in company with it. The exordium need not sparkle with brilliants. Even one old thought

vitalized by a speaker's experience of it, so that, as rejuvenated by him, it emits the sparkle of novelty, may set a hearer upon the same experience. Original thinking is marvelously self-diffusive. Very little of such thinking exists. One such thought speedily becomes everybody's thought. The reason is that everybody's mind is a fertile soil for it, and instantly sets the reproductive energy of nature at work. You can never waste a new thought upon any audience, if you succeed in making it clear. Fairly plant it, and nothing is more sure to grow.

(4) Suggestiveness in an exordium may be promoted by tact in improving the circumstances of an occasion. Here opens an immense field of illustration from the history of eloquence. The pulpit furnishes its full share. St. Paul's introduction at Mars Hill is an example. Rev. Dr. Stillman, a pastor in Boston in the time of the Revolution, preached, on the Sunday after the arrival of the intelligence from England that the Stamp Act had been repealed, on this text, and with this introduction, "Were I to serve you in the ministry of the gospel for a century, I might never again have so favorable an opportunity to address you upon these words: 'As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.'" He then described the exultation of the people over the news from England, which was in everybody's thoughts, and from that he passed on to consider the greater joy which the gospel should excite in the minds of men. How to make the popular excitement tributary to the aim of the pulpit and the uses of holy time was a critical question. Many preachers would have given it up in despair, and preached a political harangue in keeping with the bonfires the cinders of which were smoking in the streets

Not so Dr. Stillman. He exhibited his power to control events, instead of being controlled by them, by that simple yet really studied and elaborate exordium. It combined the religious spirit of a preacher with the genius of an orator.

Great orators in the pulpit have generally evinced their oratorical tact in turning to account providential circumstances. One of the most successful pastors of New York owes his reputation largely to the fact, that, for many years after he began his ministry, he employed a member of his church to gather up for him all the local events of interest occurring during the week, in the politics, the commerce, the police, and the religion of the city, and to bring to him confidentially a *resumé* of them on the evening of Saturday. From these he then selected such as he could usefully employ in introducing his subjects of discourse on the following day. He had the reputation of being a studious man. His sermons were evidence that he did not spend his time in the streets. Yet often, on Sundays, he had a strange knowledge of events not announced in the papers till Monday morning. He seemed to be a marvelous combination of the studious pastor with the man of the world.

(5) The remarks above made indicate, further, that the suggestive quality of exordiums may easily be overwrought. This may be done by an over-crowded introduction. Being a preliminary, this part of a sermon will not bear to be crammed with materials. No matter how skillfully condensed, it must not be burdensome in its weight. It ought not to sparkle all over with gems of thought, and novelties of incident, and inventions of style. The raciness of an exordium may be overdone by a startling kind or form of material

A moderate paradox is not objectionable, but a glaring paradox is intolerable. Terrific material is not becoming to an introduction. Exclamatory exordiums are generally extremes. The boldest forms of rhetorical figure, like vision and apostrophe, are abuses of the exordium. Whitefield's famous apostrophe to "Father Abraham," in his well-known introduction to the sermon on the non-existence of sects in heaven, was too violent for the locality it occupied in the sermon.

The suggestiveness of an introduction may be exaggerated by a hortatory style. Very few forms of speech are so difficult to sustain as that of direct hortation. Extraordinary circumstances may justify it. Chrysostom, just after an earthquake, began a sermon thus, "Do you see the power of God? Do you see the benignity of God? His power, because the solid world he has shaken; his benignity, because the falling world he has supported." We may safely preach similar exordiums when our audiences have been shaken by earthquakes.

(6) An inquiry which deserves a brief *excursus* from this point in our discussion is this, Is it expedient to preface a sermon by remarks upon the topic of current interest in the community at the time? A sudden death, a political crisis, a recent effort of charity, a conflagration, a declaration of war, an insurrection, exciting news from abroad may often have filled the newspapers of the previous week. Everybody's mind is full of it. All are talking about it, before the service and afterwards. Some preachers so far bend to the breeze of local excitement, in such a case, as to remark upon it extemporaneously by way of preface to the sermon. Is it a wise method of introducing the sermon of the day? Much may be said for and against this habit.

The following particulars suggest the most important principles respecting it.

This expedient has certain obvious advantages. It is an advantage to a preacher to take hearers in their own mood of interest. The preacher thus comes down to the hearer. This gives him a powerful leverage in his attempt to move them.

It may be the means of augmenting a hearer's respect for the preacher. If he handles the interpolated subject wisely, it is a sign of his intelligence, it is a token of his enterprise. He seems to know what is going on in the world. He reads the newspapers. For the moment he is the peer of laymen in their own vocations. Therefore this expedient helps to relieve the clergy from the prejudice which always exists against them, — that they are men of a different world from the common world; that they live in the past; that they live in abstractions; that they move in ruts; that they are so intent on another world that they know little and care little about this world. The habit in question tends to rid a preacher of that stereotyped criticism.

Often such prefatory remarks can be made directly tributary to the purpose of the sermon. The theme of local interest may be directly in line with the theme of discourse. All human experience is an illustration of something with which the pulpit is concerned. Human government illustrates divine government; human society is full of suggestions of divine relations; the events of every man's life are divine providences; human actions are divine decrees; a sudden death is a voice from eternity; a shipwreck is a divine mystery suggestive of some of the profoundest problems of religion; a great crime is a divine warning; a great war may be the fulfillment of a prophecy; a commercial

panic involves the whole principle of faith, which is central to salvation. The analogies which bind together temporal life and eternal life are innumerable. The habit of a preacher's mind discloses them to him in their most instructive and fascinating forms. The Bible itself, the model of the wisest religious teaching, is but a section of real life, — the life of individuals, of families, of cities, of nations, of races, the life of our common humanity, taken from universal history, and recorded, under divine illumination, for a divine purpose.

Further: the method in question serves to unite a heterogeneous audience in the same mood of feeling. Often the prime difficulty in moving an audience is that of bringing them into unison about any thing. Much is gained if we can start the current of sympathetic interest. The magnetic influence of numbers may sustain it in a transfer, when it is once in flow. Again: it is something in favor of the device in question that it uses divine providence as a tributary to the preaching of the divine Word. In the profound Christian view of things, all events which arouse communities are providences. Divine providence is the ally of divine grace; and divine grace uses divine providence. The preacher's words are the connecting link. They may often be the "word in season."

These are weighty reasons for the habit in question, and would often be conclusive in the judgment of an alert preacher. On the other hand, certain perils attend the habit, specially if the habit of one becomes the usage of many. They may wisely restrict it to occasional use. One such peril is the danger that it may occupy time which would be more valuable in the delivery of the sermon. Often the sermon will be such that not a moment should be added to the service of the pulpit needlessly.

A second danger is that the topic of local interest may not be in keeping with the Lord's Day. The very thing most needful for the right use of the hour may be to divert attention from the secular fever. A third peril may be that the subject of popular excitement will not be in tune with the sermon. Unity of impression from the services of the hour may be hopelessly destroyed by it. A fourth contingency is that it may tempt to ill-digested remarks. They will often be made on the spur of the moment. A fifth danger is that such remarks may revive an interest which nothing in the sermon can equal. The sermon may, therefore, suffer in the contrast. Better silence than such an overwhelming of the sermon with matters superior to it in the feelings of the hearers.

These are perils which always threaten such a device, if it becomes the usage of the pulpit. They suggest obvious practical restrictions. The restrictions would, in the large majority of cases, prevent the expedient in question from being habitually used. They would make it an occasional device, not a constant nor a very frequent one. The advantages of it are contingent on the avoidance of its evils. The objections to it, when they apply, are imperative.