

LESSON V.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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LECTURE V.

THE TEXT : USES, SOURCES.

5th, Continuing the discussion of the positive uses of texts, we notice, in the fifth place, that a text aids in the introduction of a subject of discourse.

(1) Upon this it should be remarked, that the pulpit without texts is inferior to other departments of public speaking in facilities for introduction of themes. A speaker before a legislative body has a theme pre-announced by the bill or the resolution before the House. A speaker at the bar has a similar aid. Occasional speakers, too, have assistance in the introduction of their themes, in the fact that an occasion is usually, in some sort, a preparative to an audience for the kind of theme and of discussion which are becoming to it. But a preacher has no such facilities in any degree proportioned to the frequency of his discourses. His range of topics is almost unlimited. He is constantly addressing one audience. His hearers can have no specific preparation of mind for one religious theme rather than another, until he creates it. The danger of formality, or of sameness, therefore, in his approaches to his themes, is very great, unless he has a singularly inventive mind. Here the custom of preaching from texts comes to his aid.

(2) Moreover, the brevity of a sermon renders facility

of introduction peculiarly needful in preaching. Usage rarely tolerates more than forty minutes to a sermon, generally less than that. Utility certainly requires restriction within that time. Whitefield said that there were no conversions after the first half-hour. Yet the subjects of the pulpit demand time for discussion. A preacher often wishes that he could have the three hours of a lawyer in a court-room; and on some themes what would he not give for the nine hours which Edmund Burke once occupied, or for the four whole days which he filled in Westminster Hall at the trial of Warren Hastings? The preacher has no time for leisurely, circumlocutory approach to his theme. Any thing which facilitates brevity of preliminaries is valuable. A text does this.

(3) But how does the use of a text aid in the approach to a subject? I answer, Often a text is the subject. When it is not such, it may suggest material for an explanatory approach to the subject. When it needs no explanation, it may suggest the best material for an introduction proper. Remarks not explanatory of the text, and yet suggested directly by the text, may lead to the theme quickly, and in a way which shall stimulate attention. Again: a text itself may be such as to awaken interest in a subject. The Rev. Horace Bushnell, D.D., late of Hartford, often insured the interest of an audience through a whole discourse by the ingenuity of his selection of a text. The instant inquiry of a hearer was, "What will he make of such a text as that?"

6th, A sixth use of a text is to promote variety in preaching. Vinet remarks, that, "in general, a text is an originality ready-made."

. (1) The Bible is full of diversified original forms of

truth. It contains every variety of style known to literature. If the prime object of the biblical revelation had been to prepare a book of texts for the pulpit, a more copious variety of fresh thought could hardly have been collected in any other form. Let a preacher stamp upon his ministry the biblical impress by representative texts, unfolded by sermons which are true to their texts, and he has an absolute guaranty of a symmetrical pulpit.

(2) This leads me to remark that inspired thought often presents in a single text original combinations of truth. One of the peculiarities which a student of biblical texts first discovers in them is that their ideas do not seem to have come together at the bidding of science. No inspired author seems to have aimed at the building of a system of any thing. If a metaphysical truth is stated, it seems as if it happened to be where it is: perhaps it stands side by side with a gleam of poetry. Pure intellect and pure emotion play in and out, often, in the structure of a text, with the artlessness, yet without the incoherence, of dreams. Passages in the Epistles of St. Paul and of St. Peter, and in the visions of Isaiah, remind one of a tropical grove, so free is the growth and the undergrowth of ideas, and so versatile is the play of that which, in any other production, we should call genius. It is a sequence of this characteristic of inspiration, that biblical texts frequently present combinations of truth which are full of surprises. A single text will often be a picture in its combinations. If a preacher is sensible that his mind is exhausting itself, and that he is falling into a dull round of repetitions, which make the Sundays like the steps of a treadmill to him, let him set about the study of the Scriptures more earnestly; let him study his

texts, and select rich texts, and then preach textual sermons for a while. It will make a new man of him.

(3) This suggests, further, that the usage of preaching from texts promotes versatility of habit in a preacher's mental culture. If mind grows by what it feeds upon, a preacher's mind can not habituate itself to thinking in scriptural lines of suggestion without acquiring some degree of scriptural versatility in its own lines of thought. What it originates will resemble the stimulus it has received. The preacher's sermons will become as picturesque as his texts are.

7th, But this consideration of the use of the text in promoting variety suggests a correlative object of the custom: it is to aid in the preservation of unity in a sermon. It is true that many texts appear to be heterogeneous in material: they are not a single thesis. But, on the other hand, the large majority of texts are logically one in their structure. They invite a strictly synthetic discourse. If a paragraph of a chapter does not, a single verse may: if a verse does not, a portion of it may. It is optional with the preacher to select more or less of the inspired record. A multitude of texts give a preacher no opportunity for rambling remarks. He must abandon them utterly, if he wanders out of their logical range. They are as rigidly one as a ¹ syllogism.

But, further than this, many texts are rhetorically one which are not logical theses in form. Vinet says that there are two kinds of unity; one logical, the other psychological. The psychological unity is the unity of soul in the text as an utterance of its author, and a corresponding unity of impression on the minds of hearers. A multitude of apparently heterogeneous texts have this psychological unity. The text — "The

1. Syllogism, Logic - A form of deductive reasoning consisting of a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion; for example, All humans are mortal (the major premise), I am a human (the minor premise), therefore, I am mortal (the conclusion).

fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance; against such there is no law" — is intensely one in the spirit which animates it. A preacher can not appropriate into his own mental working the aim of that text, and yet ramble into a centrifugal discourse on love, and on joy, and on peace, as themes of independent discussion. There is an aim in his text which steadies his aim in the sermon.

This suggestion is enhanced in significance by the fact that intensity of aim is characteristic of inspired thought. Intensity of aim is singleness of aim. An eager mind thinks in right lines: so an inspired mind thinks with a vigorous tension of intellect, and always for an object. Rambling thought is the work of an idle mind. The Scriptures have none of it. Hence paragraphs of inspired thought often develop the point of unity when a verse does not. A chapter may develop the point of unity when a paragraph may seem to have none. Even in those passages in which inspired emotion overflows into seemingly redundant parentheses, as is so often the case in the writings of St. Paul, we find, after all, a¹ "*lucidus ordo*," which threads the whole. The intellectual tension which is incident to the inspired state often gives to the scriptural style a ring which reminds one of the twang of a bow-string. Fidelity to the spirit of texts in preaching, then, will secure unity of aim through the force of the sympathy of a preacher's mind with the intensity of inspired thinking and feeling.

To these views of the point before us is to be added the fact that any collection of inspired words which have neither rhetorical nor logical unity is not a text. It can not be woven into a continuous discourse. For

1. *lucidus ordo*

A perspicuous (clearly expressed or presented; easy to understand) arrangement.

example, turn to the first three verses of the fourteenth chapter of Proverbs. They read thus: "Every wise woman buildeth her house; but the foolish plucketh it down with her hands. He that walketh in his uprightness feareth the Lord; but he that is perverse in his ways despiseth him. In the mouth of the foolish is a rod of pride; but the lips of the wise shall preserve them." Here is a continuous collection of biblical utterances; but they are not a text. They are independent proverbs. They have no unity, logical or rhetorical. They were not intended as a unit of thought by the inspired writers. No sensible preacher would force them into the attitude of a text.

The custom, then, of preaching from texts must be regarded as always tending to unity of discourse. We have no occasion to apologize for textual sermons, as Mr. Jay does. Sermons true to texts will have as real a unity as sermons on a logical thesis. Texts will invite unity of sermon, and to a good preacher will necessitate it, just as they promote variety. Variety in unity, unity in variety: this is nature, and this is the rhetorical drift of the influence of texts.

Such are the most important of the uses of the custom we are considering, and of the objects to be aimed at in the selection of texts. From these considerations it is obvious that the selection of texts is of vast moment to the power of the pulpit. It is to the pulpit what the work of adjusting the range of guns is to a battery. A false range, or a range at random, is equivalent to none. It is not an exaggerated indication of the importance of texts, that sometimes a text itself is the occasion of the conversion of a soul. This occurred under the preaching of Whitefield. In powerful revivals it is no uncommon occurrence.

The study of texts, also, which is essential to intelligent selection, is of itself one of the most healthful moral preparations to a preacher's mind for the work of constructing a sermon. It enriches his emotive nature. The tendency of it is to subdue unhallowed emotions, and to bring a preacher, as a messenger of God, into sympathy with his work as the work of God. Have we not all learned the importance of cultivating habits of mental intensity in our religious experience? The most perfect example of such intense experience that we have on record, next to the life of our Lord, is found in the working of inspired minds. That is a most wonderful law of inspiration by which thought direct from the mind of God comes to us in solution with the religious emotions of the human soul chosen for its utterance. It comes in such form, that often you can not separate the divine thought from the human feeling which embodies it. The moral individuality of the man is as intense as the truth which is communicated through him. Hence we are never sensible of distance, or of conflict, between the intellect and the heart of an inspired writer. His intellect is never chilly: his heart is never empty.

An experience closely resembling this is practicable to every preacher. It creates the perfection of preaching. The prayerful study of texts is one of the direct means of acquiring it. I think that preachers of earnest piety are more frequently sensible of intuitions which seem to them to be direct from the Holy Ghost in their selection of texts than in any other portion of their preparation for the pulpit. Whitefield, Summerfield, Edwards, Payson, — all of them recognized such hints from the Holy Spirit in their ministerial experience as of frequent recurrence. In many less celebrated in-

stances it is not so much a theme which unfolds itself richly to the mind, as it is the suggestion and opening of a text, — often sudden, and by no laws of association which the mind can detect. You will be sensible of this in your own pastoral experience, if you are eager biblical students, and intensely prayerful men. As the rainbow often gives a reflection of itself, so the promise of Christ to his disciples will seem to have a secondary fulfillment in your life: “The Holy Ghost shall teach you in the same hour what ye ought to say.”

If the business of selection, then, be so important to the management of texts, it may seem natural to proceed to lay down rules of selection. But we experience a difficulty in practice as soon as we attempt to subject ourselves very rigidly to rules on a subject like this. I prefer to consider the principles of selection under the general title of *inquiries*, rather than *rules*, respecting the choice of texts. This is the precise form in which the subject comes before a pastor's mind practically. It is, “Shall I choose this, or shall I choose that, for a text?” With very few exceptions, principles will require diverse applications in different cases, and our practice will often overleap them, if we have suffered them to stiffen into rules.

IV. The most important inquiries respecting the selection of texts group themselves naturally into four classes.

1st, The first of these classes relate to the sources of texts.

(1) And of these, the first is the query, May we select and use as a text an interpolated passage, or a mistranslation?

In reply, it should be observed that plausible arguments are often given in the affirmative of the question

The convenience of such texts is frequently urged in defense of them. The text (1 John v. 7), "There are three that bear record in heaven," is a very convenient proof-text for the doctrine of the Trinity. The passage in Prov. viii. 17, "Those that seek me early shall find me," is a very useful text for a sermon on youthful piety. If homiletic reasons alone should control our usage, we should deem it a misfortune to part with these passages. Yet the first is an interpolation, and the second is a mistranslation. The latitude adopted by opponents of evangelical truth in their use of the Scriptures is also urged in vindication of such uncanonical texts. We can not afford to be scrupulous, it is said, while our opponents are not so. The failure of audiences to detect the error, if we use these texts, is further alleged in their support. Why may we not use their ignorance for their own good? Said one preacher, "In using this ignorance of my audience, I am only doing that which God does with us all. The use of human infirmity to the extent even of a deceptive silence concerning human ignorance is a principle very largely wrought into the divine administration of this world." The ostentation of correcting the accepted Bible of the people is also adduced in behalf of the larger liberty in using such passages. The Bible of the people is the English version, not the private though unanimous reading of the schools.

It is further affirmed that evil is done by disturbing popular associations with biblical language. The Bible of the people, again, it is affirmed, is King James's translation. Their faith in the whole may be impaired by the loss of their faith in a fraction. The reverent lady who declared her faith in the narrative of Jonah, saying, that, if the Bible had said that Jonah swallowed

Ed. Note 1:

Bro. Phelps is incorrect in his assessment of both the passage in I John and the passage in Proverbs. The first passage, I John 5:7, and the second passage, Prov 7:17, have both been found to be accurate translations and preservations of the originals.

During brother Phillips' time, the movement to discredit the KJV, orchestrated by the devil, was beginning to pick up momentum. Today, 2010, it has become a juggernaut and has threatened to topple general belief in the Bible concerning its inspiration and preservation and has fostered the resultant general distrust of it. The general public, and I am speaking of those that are saved, now views the Bible as a mere approximation of what God originally said rather than the infallible, inspired and preserved, Word of God. The penetration of it, the movement, during brother Phillips' day had already infected even some of the best preachers and scholars. Therefore, even those of the caliber of brother Phillips began to introduce questions of the accuracy of the KJV into their writings.

This is the reason that we require that all students take the course on The Bible before taking this present course. That allows them to become well-grounded in the accuracy, through examination of the inspiration and preservation of His Word as promised by God himself and the texts from which it is translated, of the KJV before being exposed to inaccuracies in the textbooks of courses such as this current one that cast doubt, from time to time, upon the KJV.

The homiletic teachings put forth by brother Phillips are accurate ones, even in this current section. It is unfortunate, however, that he chose those two particular texts as examples around which to discuss his point and that he did so based upon his inaccurate assessment of the validity and accuracy of those texts.

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the whale, she should have believed it, might not have borne complacently the loss of the celebrated Trinitarian interpolation in the First Epistle of St. John. We must concede, even on the ground of the largest liberty, that it is a misfortune that Christian scholarship has lost from the Bible the only literal declaration it was once thought to contain of the triune existence of the Godhead. Other passages, too, are so enshrined in the reverent associations of the people, that the loss of them would be like the loss of the ancient hymns of the Church. So strong is this feeling, — prejudice, if so you please to call it, — that Noah Webster and his successors, in the editing of his dictionary, though revolutionizing the orthography of every other kindred word in the language, did not venture to exclude the spelling of the word “Saviour” with the “u,” as they should have done if they had been self-consistent. They have yielded scholarship, as they regard it, to popular reverence for a single letter. This inherited popular feeling is so powerful, that, in the judgment of many, if the reverend and scholarly authors of the “New Version,” now in progress, should decide to abandon the closing ascription of the Lord’s Prayer, the Church of the people probably would not accept the scholastic decision in a thousand years. Why, then, it is plausibly asked, should we be punctilious about a few uncanonical texts?

This strain of reasoning leads us to observe that some concession to the affirmative of this question is but reasonable. For instance, it is reasonable that a preacher should not needlessly obtrude the scholastic correction of these passages upon an audience. We should never go out of our way to encounter and rebuff the popular faith in them: we may be justified

in going out of our way to avoid such an encounter. A profound principle was that of our Lord respecting the tares and the wheat: it has innumerable variations. Truth bears an immense amount of association with error with less evil than human nature suffers from the convulsions necessary to a rapid rectification of the wrong. Our Saviour was an adroit preacher: he knew when to hold his peace. So may we, upon occasions, let these questionable texts alone: to do so is no violation of Christian simplicity. Further: it is obviously reasonable, that, under any circumstances, we should not *commonly* choose for texts passages which need correction. So much is to be conceded to the affirmative of the question.

But, when we are driven to face the question, the negative argument is conclusive; and this for imperative reasons. The license of using such texts without correction injures the moral and mental habits of a preacher. Whatever may be said in defense of it, it does involve an untruth. It imposes upon the faith of an audience. The audience will never know it? Perhaps so; but the preacher must know it, and, if it injures a preacher's moral tone, it must also injure his intellectual habits. Few things are so debilitating to intellect as special pleading. No man can afford, as a matter of mental discipline, to tamper with his own sense of truth.

An equally conclusive argument against the use of these texts is the hazard to a preacher's reputation. It is not true of all hearers in every audience, that they will not detect such liberties in the pulpit. It would not be safe to preach to any audience in New England on the text, "There are three that bear record in heaven," without disclosing its true character. If the

majority did not know it, an individual here and there would know it. You can bear a weak spot in your reputation as a scholar at any other point more securely than at this of biblical scholarship. One of the ablest laymen in Boston, the parishioner of one of the most scholarly pastors of New England, once turned away from him to seek direction elsewhere in biblical studies, because he had lost somewhat of his faith in his pastor's biblical scholarship. A scholar in every thing else, he was not a scholar in this; and the keen parishioner had found it out.

A third reason for the rejection of the class of texts in question is the fact, that, in an enlarged view, it is not an evil that popular ignorance of the English Scriptures should be enlightened. The mind of the Spirit is the Word, and nothing else. The inspired record is the Word, and no other. The genuine translation is the Word, and nothing different. Cautiously and reverently, but faithfully, we should transfer, if possible, the misplaced reverence of the people. Let it be affixed to the exact word of God, not to the most useful substitute; to the exact word of God, not to the interpolations of monks; to the exact word of God, not to the wisdom of King James's translators. Scholarly commentators have reason for their complaints of the pulpit in this respect. De Wette speaks the feeling of all candid commentators, in saying of the German pulpit, "It is unpardonable that preachers adhere purely to the version of Luther, so often faulty, especially in the Old Testament; and they thus preach upon a pretended biblical thought which is found nowhere in the original."

(2) A second inquiry of the class now before us is, May we select as texts passages the sentiment of

which is not inspired? These passages are of three kinds. One consists of the false sayings of wicked beings. The record is inspired of the sayings of Cain, Ahab, Saul, Herod, Judas, Satan. A second consists of false sentiments of good men. The complaints of Job, some of the arguments of Job's friends, the skeptical reasonings of Koheleth, are specimens of these. The third class consists of true sentiments uttered by men not inspired. The historical and biographical parts of the Bible abound with such passages.

These uninspired passages are a good source of texts. A good source, I say; not that they are all good texts. They constitute a large portion of the Scriptures. They are in the Bible by inspiration of record. They therefore hold a rank which an interpolation and a mistranslation do not. One who has not investigated the matter would be surprised to find how great a proportion of the Scriptures is inspired only in record. It is largely an inspired record of uninspired sentiments. These passages are a good source of texts because of the intrinsic value of the truth which many of them contain. "Who can forgive sins but God only?" was a truth uttered by men, who, in the same breath, charged our Lord with blasphemy. "Never man spake like this man" was a truth affirmed by men who had just returned from an attempt to arrest him for his destruction. "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian" was said by one before whom an Apostle was on trial for his life. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief:" "Lord, teach us to pray:" "Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life,"—these, and a multitude like them, are the utterances of infirm minds struggling into truth, and for that reason may be the more valuable for the purpose of a preacher.

Again: these uninspired passages are many of them confirmed by others which are inspired. Why not prefer those inspired passages as texts? Because those which are uninspired except in record may have rhetorical advantages which the others have not. "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief:" compare this with the text, "A bruised reed shall he not break." Might not the first of these be preferable as the text of a discourse to the weak in faith? Words from the lips of a doubting disciple may carry more weight than even inspired words addressed to such a disciple.

Furthermore, many of this class of texts are valuable specimens of the working of uninspired minds. Confirmation of inspired truth may spring from uninspired sources. The "Meditations" of M. Aurelius Antoninus are the more valuable for the tacit tribute which Paganism pays in them to the spirit of Christianity. "I know thee, who thou art, the Holy One of God," was a truth exploded by conscience from the lips of a demoniac spirit; and for that reason, used as a text, it may be the more impressive. On the other hand, it is an honor to the truth of Revelation to see how falsely men will often reason for the want of it. The theory of temporal suffering advanced by Job's three friends is a grand text to illustrate the danger of illogical working in minds devoid of divine illumination.

Still further: the class of passages under consideration contain valuable specimens of unregenerate character. "Let us eat, and drink; for to-morrow we die:" where shall we find another so fit a text for a sermon on the abuses of the certainty of death? Yet it is not inspired, and it is false in sentiment. Atheism is concentrated and exploded in it. What would the

pulpit do without the text from the troubled conscience and the trembling faith of Felix: "Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season I will call for thee"? "What will ye give me, and I will deliver him unto you?"—where is to be found another so apt a text for a sermon on the truth that "the extreme of wickedness is the extreme of meanness"? Nothing else discloses the theory of sin like examples of it from real life. The Scriptures would be less valuable than they are for homiletic uses, if they did not abound with such extracts from the real experiences of sin. Yet they are inspired records of uninspired falsehoods.

Certain cautions, however, should be observed in the selection of texts from this source. One is that we should never use them as proof-texts of doctrine. Job, Bildad, Zophar, Elihu, Ahab, Saul are no authority for revealed truth. They often contradict each other: they commonly contradict the direct teaching of the Holy Spirit. You make a hazardous concession to infidelity, if you use such texts as proof-texts. We must employ this whole class of texts for just what they are, and no more,—an inspired record of uninspired beliefs.

A second caution is that we should not give to this source of texts an undue proportion in our sermons. The history of a ministry of ten years might surprise some preachers by its disclosure of a disproportion between inspired record and inspired sentiment in their preaching. It is one of the most insidious of the temptations of this world that sin is so attractive in its forms of speech. Wicked men are very apt to be fascinating men. Periods in history occur in which the most charming literature is infidel literature. The reading public of England ran wild over the productions of Byron, Shelley, and Thomas Moore, when their

Christian contemporaries, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey, could scarcely command a hearing. The press could not supply the demand for Lord Byron's "Don Juan," while Coleridge's "Christabel" was circulating in manuscript. Even intrinsically considered, sin is racy in its utterances. Not only do its sentiments please depraved minds; but its style is apt to allure scholarly minds, and, among the illiterate, bright minds. The most popular wit in the world is blasphemy. To the mass of men the most forcible style is profaneness. Nothing else is so sure to command a round of applause on the platform as an oath.

This element of power in the style of speech adopted by sin runs into its utterance in the Scriptures. If, therefore, we pay no heed to our choice of texts, we may find ourselves unconsciously attracted by the raciness of sin to an undue proportion in our choice of the sayings of wicked men and even of other wicked beings. One preacher I knew, who seemed to have a mania for the character and doings and words of Satan. Preaching upon them was to him a safety-valve through which he let off a secret accumulation of the profane impulse. Very many preachers discourse upon the biblical expressions and illustrations of sin more frequently than upon the utterances and examples of holiness. Set a watch upon this peril in your own ministry. Preach rather on holiness than on sin; more often on God than on man; on the rewards of piety more frequently than on the doom of guilt; and choose texts accordingly. Valuable as many of these uninspired passages are, the richest texts in the largest profusion will be found to be the direct expressions of the Holy Spirit.

A third caution respecting the passages in question is that generally, when they are employed as texts, the

fact should be named that they are not from inspired sources. This need not always be done in express terms: something may be said which implies it. It need not always be done at all. Some texts, like the words of Felix to St. Paul, would never be mistaken for inspired sentiments. But in the majority of cases these passages are on neutral ground. Their sentiment and structure do not disclose whether Solomon is the author, or Zophar. In these cases the text should not be left neutral in the minds of hearers.