

LESSON VIII.

THE

# THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

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## LECTURE VIII.

### THE TEXT: PERTINENCY, COMPLETENESS, ACCOMMODATION.

4th, We have thus considered the sources of texts, and the form of texts, and the relation of texts to the audience. Let us now advance to a fourth class of inquiries, which concern the relation of a text to the main body of a sermon.

(1) Of these the first is, On what principles shall we judge of the pertinency of a text? Pertinency to the sermon is the most vital quality of a good text. Vinet says that no human book has been so tortured and jested with as the Scriptures have been by preachers in their choice of texts. With equal justice, he charges the Romish pulpit with having been specially culpable in diminishing thus the respect due to the word of God. Protestant usage has been corrupted to a greater extent than is commonly imagined by the relics of Romish levity in the treatment of the Bible. Yet a very large proportion of these abuses would have been prevented, if a manly taste had protected the single excellence of pertinency between text and theme.

Let it be observed, then, that the pertinency of a text relates chiefly to congruity of sentiment between text and theme. A perfect text will express exactly the subject of the sermon, no more, and no less. Con-

gruify of sentiment, then, may be sacrificed in several ways. It is sacrificed by the selection of a text which does not contain the subject, either expressly, or by implication, or by natural suggestion. For example, one clergyman—the author, by the way, of a treatise on preaching—has a sermon on education, the text of which is, “Thou shalt not steal.” An English preacher selected as his text the words, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will toward men,” and then proceeded to announce his subject, which was, “to examine the doctrines of Calvin as laid down in his Institutes.” A French preacher selected the text, “Therefore thou art inexcusable, O man, whosoever thou art, that judgest;” and from these words he professed to derive the subject of capital punishment. These are flagrant cases of incongruity, but in principle they are the same with the entire class of texts, which, by misrepresentation, are made to introduce a theme which is foreign to their real meaning. A text foreign to the subject is no text.

Again: the pertinency of a text is sacrificed where the text contains the subject, but not the proposition; that is, where it contains a different aspect of the subject from that which the sermon discusses. Some preachers are fond of making a text and a proposition seem to contradict each other. One preacher discourses on the perseverance of the saints, designing to vindicate the doctrine; but he adopts as his text the words of St. Paul to the Galatians, “Ye are fallen from grace.” Dr. South has a sermon on the truth that “Good Intentions are no Excuse for Bad Actions;” but the text is, “If there be first a willing mind, it is accepted, according to that a man hath.” These are frivolous uses of the inspired thought: the remote consequences of them may

be more serious than the immediate evil. One abuse invites another: one abuse justifies another. The principle of a slight abuse is the principle of an extreme abuse. The moment we abandon common sense in interpretation, we abandon all sense which can command respect. The mystical uses of the Scriptures advocated by Origen and Augustine, and revived by Swedenborg, are the logical result of some of the homiletic usages adopted by preachers in the choice of texts.

Furthermore, the pertinency of a text is often sacrificed by the choice of a general text for a specific subject. "Grow in grace" is not a good text for a sermon on humility. "They went out and preached that men should repent" is not a good text for a discourse on encouragements to repentance. A more pertinent text would be, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out." On the same principle, the passage, "They shall be my people, and I will be their God," is not a pertinent text for a sermon on the sympathy of God with his people. Saurin has a sermon on this theme from a far better text, because more specifically expressive of the theme: "He that toucheth you toucheth the apple of His eye." This text thrills the hearer with its image of the subject.

We should observe, however, that a specific text for a specific theme is not always practicable. Some subjects are not specifically named, or implied, or suggested, in the Scriptures. For such themes we are compelled to choose a general text; that is, an inferior text. Still this quality of pertinency of sentiment is the crowning virtue of a text: it should never be needlessly sacrificed or impaired. Many preachers habitually choose unsuggestive texts. They seem to think that any thing

will do for a text, if the subject has even a remote connection with it. On the contrary, a reverent preacher, and a live man in the pulpit, will aim to make a text, if possible, strike a good blow for his conclusion.

But pertinency in a text is not restricted to the sentiment. It relates, also, to congruity of rhetorical structure between the text and the sermon. Is there not, to the eye of good taste, an incongruity between a very imaginative text and a severely argumentative discourse? Do we not feel a similar infelicity between a difficult logical text, and a hortatory address? Neither an argumentative nor a hortatory address on the duty of religious conversation with impenitent men would very congruously follow the text, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver." Pertinency of rhetorical structure is one of the secondary excellences of a text. Often it is not practicable. We should not subject ourselves to a rule requiring it: still it is a beauty where it is attainable, and very many themes of the pulpit admit of variety of choice in this respect. Let me illustrate this. Here is a hortatory text, "Fear not them which kill the body." Here is a historic text, "And, when he had said this, he fell asleep." The following is an exclamatory text, "O Death! where is thy sting?" This is an argumentative text, "There remaineth, therefore, a rest to the people of God." Another is a didactic text, "Into thy hand I commit my spirit." We have a text of soliloquy in the passage, "All the days of my appointed time will I wait, till my change come." From all these texts might be derived, either by logical deduction or by natural suggestion, the subject of a good man's peace in death. Yet it is not difficult to see that a keen sense of rhetorical pertinency would require some

reference, in the selection, to the rhetorical character of the sermon.

But pertinency in a text is not confined to congruity of sentiment and of rhetorical structure: it relates, also, to congruity of the associations of the text with the object of the sermon. The associations of a text should, if possible, be such as to aid the subject of the sermon. This kind of congruity will be best understood by some illustrations of the want of it. A preacher discoursed upon the exalted rank of the redeemed in the future world, and he chose for his text the words "Ye shall be as gods." Here the subject is above the text, and the associations of the text tend to drag down the subject to a level with the work of devils. An evangelist in the State of New York preached upon the solemnity of the close of a protracted meeting, and selected as his text the dying words of Christ, "It is finished." Such conceits as these degrade texts into connections with themes which can not by any ingenuity be forced up to a level with the texts. Apologies for such uses of texts should go for nothing. We should not be deceived, if we can palliate them plausibly. They are deformities, often monstrosities, however blandly or reverently we may disguise them in an apologetic introduction.

Observe, now, how the associations of a text may aid a subject by the force of sympathy with it. You wish to preach a discourse on diligence in the Christian life, and you select as a text the words expressive of the youthful awakening of Christ to his life's work, "Wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?" You wish to preach a sermon to Christians on neglect of prayer, and you adopt the words of Christ in the garden, "What! could ye not watch with me one

hour?" You wish to preach on the forgiveness of injuries, and you take as your text, "Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do." Would not the associations of these texts be auxiliary to the object of the sermons? I have said that this congruity of association should be obtained, if possible. Sometimes it is not possible. We can not, therefore, prescribe any rule of universal application. We can only say that the congruity of association is an excellence in a text, when it is practicable.

(2) A second inquiry concerning the relation of a text to the body of a sermon is, What principles apply to the regulation of incompleteness and redundancy in texts?

In answer, let it be observed that good taste requires that a text should comprise no less material than is discussed in the sermon. The text should, in some natural development of thought, cover the whole area of a sermon: it should not be a patch upon the fabric. Dr. Emmons has a discourse on the being and perfections of God. You observe the subject is of the most general kind: it suggests a broadcast discussion. But what is the text? Is it an equally comprehensive passage, like the words of Jehovah to Moses, "I am that I am;" or the words of the Psalmist, "Know ye that the Lord he is God?" Not these, but the argumentative passage from St. Paul to the Hebrews, "Every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God." Why is not this a perfect text? Because it covers but a portion of the theme. It is an admirable text for a sermon on the being of God as proved by the argument from design; but for a discourse on the being and perfections of God it is incomplete. A text may not specify all the topics of a

sermon ; but it ought to comprise them all, as a principle comprises all its applications.

Further, good taste requires that, if possible, a text shall comprise no more material than is discussed in the sermon. The reason for this is its obvious tendency to promote unity of impression. Study of texts for the sake of retrenchment down to the precise limits of the subjects is the mark of an accomplished preacher. A text is for use. Enough is better than more. Dr. South's precision in his selections is often excellent. For instance, he discourses on a subject which he entitles "Christianity mysterious, and the wisdom of God in making it so;" and his text is, "We speak the wisdom of God in a mystery." He preaches on the love of Christ for his disciples, and chooses the text, "Henceforth I call you not servants; . . . but I have called you friends." One advantage of deriving subjects from texts, instead of choosing texts for subjects, is that redundancy of text is more easily avoided. But sometimes, often indeed, it can not be avoided. We can not always find a passage which expresses exactly our theme, no more and no less. We must, then, admit redundancy as a less evil than incompleteness. Too much is a less evil than too little.

This suggests that good taste forbids the elimination of superfluous material from within the limits of a text. This error is not that of mutilating a text for the sake of a forced pertinency; nor is it that of elision from the end of a passage, nor that of omission from its beginning: it is elimination from within a text, as superfluous terms are thrown out from an algebraic equation. For example, in the Epistle to the Colossians occurs the passage, "Put on, therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, bowels of mercies, kindness, hum

bleness of mind, meekness, long-suffering." The late Rev. Mr. Barnes of Philadelphia published a sermon on a benignant spirit, of which the text was, "Put on, therefore, as the elect of God, kindness." This expurgation of inconvenient elements from the interior of a passage is not in good taste. Dr. Watts may thus pick up a version of a Psalm by eliminating from the original the fragments which are neither lyrical nor devotional; and on the same principle we may properly eliminate portions of the Scriptures in the public reading of them for devotional purposes. You may form a burial-service with which that used by the Church of England, impressive as it is, can bear no comparison, by weaving together selected fragments of the Scriptures. But the selection of a text for purposes of discussion is a different thing. Here no such skill in *ricochet* is agreeable.

Therefore, when a redundant text is necessary, we should repeat all that is needed to avoid elimination, and then specify the words which are the text. Many passages require this treatment. For example, you wish to discourse on Christian honesty; and you select as your text the eighth verse of the fourth chapter of the Epistle to the Philippians, reading the entire passage. Then you soon specify the phrase, "Whatsoever things are honest," as containing the theme of your remarks. In this manner you preserve the connection of inspired language, and do not distort or confuse the ideas of a hearer respecting it. This is good taste, because it is the dictate of reverence.

(3) A third inquiry respecting the relation of a text to the sermon is, May a preacher employ an accommodated text?

What is an accommodated text? A text is not neces-

sarily accommodated when it receives a different application from that which it has in its inspired use. A text may be a biblical fact; that fact may illustrate a principle; that principle may be susceptible of other illustrations; of those illustrations, one which is not expressed or implied in the text may be the theme of discourse. For instance, the evangelist affirms that "Pilate and Herod were made friends together." This illustrates the principle that wicked men who are enemies to each other often agree in their deeper hostility to Christ. This principle is further illustrated in a variety of ways in modern life. Of these ways, one preacher selected the coalition of two hostile parties against the temperance reform as the theme of a discourse on a Fast Day. This was not an accommodated text: it was a remote application, yet a perfectly legitimate one, of the principle illustrated in the original. Dr. Bushnell's sermon on unconscious influence, from the text, "Then went in also that other disciple," was not on an accommodated text.

An accommodated text is one which is applied in a sermon to a subject resembling that of the text, yet *radically* different from that of the text. Examine an illustration. Bishop Huntington has a sermon the subject of which is more properly termed regeneration. He defines it "the economy of renewal." His text is taken from Micah, "Arise ye and depart; for this is not your rest." This passage does not express the doctrine of the sermon; it does not imply that doctrine; it can not by any logical inference be made to reach that doctrine: it is, therefore, no authority for that doctrine. But it does resemble the doctrine; for there is in regeneration an arising and a departing from an old state to a new, and at the command of God.

This text, therefore, may be made to suggest the doctrine of regeneration, by accommodation. It resembles that from which it is radically different.

Accommodated texts may be of three kinds. One kind is where the resemblance between text and theme is only in sound. Thus an Episcopal preacher discoursed on the observance of Ash Wednesday, from the text, "I have eaten ashes like bread." Another preached on the duties of judges, from the text, "Judge not, that ye be not judged."

Another kind of accommodated text is one in which the accommodation is founded on a metaphorical resemblance; and this, again, may be twofold. A literal text may be used metaphorically. A sermon was once preached on the truth that "depravity pervades the moral virtues of man." The text was, "Now, in the place where he was crucified, there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulcher,"—a literal, narrative text used figuratively to express a doctrine of religion. A metaphorical text, again, may be used as figurative of a different sense from that of the original. Many sermons have been preached on the text, "Look . . . to the hole of the pit whence ye are digged," from which preachers derive the duty of Christians to remember the depraved state from which they have been redeemed. This passage is figurative in the original; but not at all figurative of any allusion to depravity. It refers to God's dealings with the Hebrew nation: it pictures their origin as a people. The figure in the original is not a pit, but a quarry. The sentiment is, therefore, "remember your national infancy, and the labor bestowed on your national training. You were once a rough, unhewn block: remember that." Yet, by a change in the character of the metaphor, this is made

a text on individual depravity. Professor Longfellow, in one of his works, introduces a preacher, whom he represents as discoursing on autumn from the text, "Who is this that cometh from Edom, with dyed garments from Bozrah?" This passage is figurative in the original; but the metaphor is referred by commentators diversely either to God or to Christ. It has, at least, no inspired reference to the autumnal foliage: it can be so applied only on the ground of metaphorical resemblance.

Still another kind of accommodation of texts is on the ground of resemblance in principle; that is, the principle in the text resembles the principle of the subject, but is radically distinct from it. The words of the text, therefore, will express the principle of the subject perhaps equally well with that of their true meaning. For example, Dr. South has a sermon on preparation for the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, of which the text is, "Friend, how camest thou in hither, not having a wedding-garment?" Here is resemblance between text and theme, not merely in sound, not only by metaphor, but in principle. Yet text and theme are radically distinct. Dr. Blair has a sermon on the importance of time, which he derives, by this kind of accommodation, from the inquiry of Pharaoh addressed to Jacob, "How old art thou?" A preacher in Maine, by the same kind of accommodation, preached upon the principle of subjecting the sale of intoxicating drinks to the Maine law, which he derived from a passage in Esther, "And the drinking was according to the law." These three kinds of accommodation should be remembered; for upon them depends the whole question of the propriety of accommodated texts.

We are now prepared to answer the question, May

a preacher use an accommodated text? The abuses of accommodation have been such, that many of the more manly of the ministry have said, without qualification, "No: let us have none of this puerility." But I think that a little discrimination will show that the question must be answered variously. Do not the following positions commend themselves to a manly taste?

First, accommodation of texts on the ground of resemblance in sound is puerile. A manly culture revolts from it. It degrades the Bible. It places texts on the same level of rhetorical character with puns. Rejecting this kind of accommodation, we should condemn all forced applications of scriptural names of persons and places. It was a frivolity worthy of a pope, that Pius VI. should flatter an Austrian general whose name was John, by preaching a sermon in honor of a victory which the general had gained, choosing for a text, "There was a man sent from God, and his name was John." It was an impertinence of which none but an idle mind would have been guilty, that a preacher, living no matter where, saluted an unruly parishioner whose name was Ephraim, on the Sabbath after his marriage, by choosing for the text of the morning sermon the words, "Ephraim is joined to idols; let him alone." These are specimens of a most unscholarly and unmanly taste, which has made the pulpit notorious. We owe a vast amount of it which still degrades the clergy to the mental idleness of the Romish priesthood. A mind which feels that it has any thing else to do will not, without violence to itself, stoop to this play upon a jew's-harp.

Further: accommodation on the ground of metaphorical resemblance is also to be condemned. Some examples of it may appear plausible; but the principle

involved in it is always the same. Such accommodation is not natural to a well-trained mind when that mind is in earnest. It belongs to a sportive or a fanciful state of mental activity. Least of all is it becoming to the use of a volume so burdened with thought as is the Bible. Some examples of this kind of accommodation are even more objectionable, because more elaborate, than the accommodation by jew's-harp, which we have already condemned. Can you conceive of a more ridiculous combination than the following, from one of the old preachers? He adopted the distinction between clean and unclean beasts under the Levitical law as emblematic of the distinction between Christians and sinners, after this fashion: "The clean beasts divided the hoof; so Christians believe in the Father and the Son: clean beasts were those who chewed the cud; so Christians meditate on the law: sinners do neither of these things, and therefore are unclean beasts."

Even the best specimens of this kind of accommodation are objectionable. For instance, Massillon, whose taste was sadly corrupted by his Romish inheritance in culture, selects the text, "In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, and withered;" a purely literal, historical text, as it stands in the Bible; but Massillon accommodates it, on the ground of metaphorical resemblance, to three distinct classes of religious characters. Under the head of "the blind" he considers those who are deficient in religious knowledge; under the head of "the halt," those who are insincere in confession; and, under the head of "the withered," those who have no sorrow in repentance.

We feel without argument the levity of such uses of the Bible as these; but why are they not, in principle, as worthy of commendation as the following, which

is a specimen of a large class of very plausible conceits which have frittered away much of the dignity of texts? A preacher chose for his text the words, "Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent;" and he accommodated it to this theme, "the necessity of drawing near to Christ in hours of trouble and darkness." The whole usage of the pulpit by which metaphorical resemblance is tolerated as the ground of accommodation is false in principle, and puerile in taste. As culture advances, taste condemns it; and as piety grows in alliance with culture, the heart revolts from it. There is no Christian good sense in it. It holds the Bible at arm's-length. It is sympathetic with a religion of the fancy rather than with a religion of the reason and the conscience. One is not surprised to find it rife in the Romish pulpit: it is at home there. That superficial religious culture, and that idleness of mind which can amuse itself with subjecting the salvation of a soul to the cut of a\* surplice, are in perfect affinity with this frivolous method of using the word of God. Yet a considerable part of the literature of the Protestant pulpit is infected with the same abuse; and many Protestant commentators have encouraged it by cultivating the taste for "spiritualizing" the Scriptures.

The accommodation of texts on the ground of resemblance in principle between the text and the theme is admissible. William Jay preached a sermon on a national jubilee appointed in England on the occasion of the king's entering the fiftieth year of his reign. His text was taken from Leviticus, "It shall be a jubilee unto you." President Davies of Virginia preached a discourse on a New-Year's Day, and selected as his text the words of Jeremiah to the false prophet Haniah, "This year thou shalt die." Dr. Hitchcock of

\* surplice, def a loose wide-sleeved liturgical vestment of linen, reaching to the knees, worn over the cassock by clergymen, choristers, and acolytes

Amlherst has a sermon on the text, "Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile." His subject is, "certain mineralogical illustrations of character." In each of these cases the subject of the text is not the subject of the sermon. The text can not logically be made to cover the sermon; yet there is more than resemblance in sound or figure; there is resemblance in principle. Even this kind of accommodation may be abused; but its right use is defensible on several grounds.

Such accommodation is a natural use of a text. Our minds are so made, that similar principles suggest each other. If, then, the same language may express either, it is not unnatural to a manly train of thought to use that language by transfer from one to the other. Further, it is a scriptural use of a text. Passages from the Old Testament are sometimes quoted in the New Testament, introduced by the phrase *ἵνα πληρωθῆ*, on no other principle than this of accommodation. The quotation is transferred from its original sense to another, which that sense resembles, but from which it is distinct. Again: it is often a pleasing use of a text. So far from detracting from the value of a text, if not abused, it augments that value, through the interest which the mind feels in the discovery of resemblance. This interest is similar to that which attends the method of teaching by parables. What is a parable? It is a narrative illustrating a truth by means of resemblance. The language has its narrative sense, and yet is applied in a didactic sense on the ground of resemblance of cases. The hypothetical case resembles the real one. The conduct of the ten virgins was not identical with that of men under the conditions of probation, but it was similar. The theft of the ewe lamb was not the

same as the sin of David, but it was like it. Once more: this is often a necessary use of a text. Subjects must be discussed in the pulpit which can not be introduced by a text in any other way, and yet retain the significance of the custom of employing texts. Which is better, — to introduce the duty of sinners to seek eternal life in company with Christians by the text, "He that hath an ear let him hear;" or by the text, "Come thou with us, and we will do thee good"? Respecting many themes, we have no range of choice. We must do one of three things, — we must preach without a text, or we must take a general text, which as a text means nothing, or we must select an accommodated text.

For these reasons we accept the usage of accommodating texts on the ground of resemblance in principle, but reject all accommodation on the ground of resemblance in sound or in metaphor. Yet even this restricted usage is liable to abuse. We shall therefore consider in the next lecture certain cautions to be observed in the use of accommodated texts.