

LESSON XIX.

THE

THEORY OF PREACHING

LECTURES ON HOMILETICS

BY

AUSTIN PHELPS, D.D.

LATE BARTLET PROFESSOR OF SACRED RHETORIC IN ANDOVER
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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LECTURE XIX.

THE INTRODUCTION : VARIETIES, COMPOSITION.

IV. WE may gain some advantage in the practical application of the principles which have been thus far advanced, by observing, as a fourth general topic, the most important varieties of method in approaching subjects of discourse.

In any prolonged service in the pulpit, the most serious defect of introductions will commonly be a want of variety. If you have ever listened for years to the preaching of one man, your experience has been exceptional, if you have not learned to anticipate his exordiums from the announcement of his texts. Not only is there a sameness of individual preachers, but certain hackneyed introductory thoughts and phrases are the common property of the pulpit. Because a preacher has a text, why should he never, by any felicitous accident, allow himself to practice the varied introductions which are often so stimulating and so graceful in the best addresses of the best class of secular orators? Certain it is, that the principles we have considered, if practically applied to the construction of sermons, would result in diversity. The most important of these varieties I proceed now to name at the risk of occasional repetition of things already discussed in other connections.

1st, I name them varieties of approach, rather than

introductions, in order to include the first of them, which is that of approach to a subject without an introduction. An explanation of a text, and a derivation of a subject from it are often the whole of the preliminary material. Such sermons have no introduction proper. I can not assent to the view of Theremin, which Vinet indorses, that what they call the "expository introduction" is always suitable. The expository equivalent for an introduction, as I should prefer to call it, often excludes more interesting materials which the subject needs. Sometimes, also, it is positively an evil, because it is needless. The text does not need it: the sermon does not need it. In such a case it is a heap of rubbish thrown in to fill a gap. Nothing grows in it: nothing is built upon it.

Further: it has become a stereotyped formulary of the pulpit. For this reason it is often less impressive than intrinsically it deserves to be. We shall be in little danger of an extreme, if we never use it when we can not defend it as the best approach possible. There is always one best avenue to the subject. The expository approach, if chosen, should be that one. Choose it for its specific congruity, as you would choose any other, never for its convenience only, never in blind imitation of clerical usage. One sign of the weakness of the German pulpit is the indolent frequency with which the text and the subject are linked by the most tame of commonplaces in expository remark.

2d, Another variety may be named the introduction applicatory of the text; not explanatory, but applicatory. Its design is to attract attention to the subject of the text as one which concerns the present audience. To this variety belong all forms of exordium which are designed to modernize the practical bearings of the

text. The text is a promise to Abraham, or a confession of David, or a rebuke to the Pharisees, or an exhortation to the Church at Laodicea. You wish to transfer it to modern times, to American hearers, to a dozen persons in the audience whom you believe to need it, to one hearer for whom your whole sermon is written. Whatever you say in making that transfer of the text, and in aiming it well, is an introduction applicatory of the text. The practical necessity of it is obvious.

3d, Another variety of approach may be named the introduction intensive of the text by comparison with other Scriptures. It may be much to your purpose to call attention to the fact that your text is not a solitary one; that it expresses a truth often affirmed in the Bible; that the doctrine of St. Paul was taught by Moses; that the precept of St. John was originated by Christ; that the fact in the Acts was foretold by Isaiah; that the principle in the Hebrews pervades the whole economy of the Old Testament. What is the exact aim of such comparisons? Not necessarily explanation, not chiefly confirmation. They are intensive expeditives. They magnify the importance of the truth which the text teaches: they are, therefore, a purely rhetorical method of setting the subject in position before the audience.

4th, A fourth variety of approach is the introduction explanatory of principles involved in the discussion. You propose, for instance, to show "the necessity of an Atonement from the convictions of the human conscience." You introduce the subject by remarks upon conscience as a source of evidence of truth. You affirm that it is a reliable source; that it is one form of divine revelation; that the common sense of men recog-

nizes its authority. You proceed, therefore, to interrogate it, to learn what are its teachings as to the forgiveness of sin. Such a train of remark has nothing to do with the text: it is explanatory of a principle which underlies the whole argument which you are about to unfold. This kind of introduction elaborate preaching will often necessitate.

5th, A fifth form of approach may be the introduction narrative of facts which are necessary to an appreciation of the subject. The narrative introduction looks forward to the subject, not backward to the text. Dr. Blair introduces a discourse on "the value of religion in adversity" by describing human life as a series of changes, disappointments, bereavements. This naturally leads to the inquiry how men can best be prepared for such a life. The answer is the theme of the sermon.

6th, A sixth variety of approach may be the introduction illustrative of either facts or principles involved in the discussion. "The moral uses of the existence of wicked men" is a profound philosophical subject for a sermon. The patriarch furnishes a text inspired for the purpose: "Wherefore do the wicked live?" But how shall I come at the subject vividly? How shall I approach it by some other avenue than the hackneyed remarks that the author of the text was Job; that he uttered it in a mood of despondency; that we, also, often ask the same question; and so on? I answer, Take an individual case of the injury done by one wicked man. Take such a character as that of Richelieu, or the Duke of Alva, or Lord Byron, or Aaron Burr. Choose your example shrewdly from that class of minds which your hearers will be likely to appreciate. Show the evil of one such life to the world,

to the Church, to the souls of men. Paint it till it seems, as it is, a great mystery that such men live. Such an example might be so pictured that every hearer in your congregation would be silently asking the question of your text for himself. No other subject should seem for the time so natural and so necessary as that of your sermon. To this class of exordiums belong those which are founded on historical or mythological anecdote. A dignified anecdote may illustrate the germinal principle of a discourse, and therefore may introduce it felicitously.

7th, A seventh variety of approach to a subject may be the introduction commendatory of the subject. The object of this is simply to exalt the dignity of the subject in the estimation of the hearer. Several subordinate varieties are worthy of mention under this class.

(1) One is that in which the commendation consists in direct assertion of the importance of the theme. An ingenious assertion of the dignity of a theme may be a magnifying lens between it and the hearer. Said one preacher, after announcing his text, "The truth I am about to discuss is, in my view, of such magnitude, that it may probably decide the eternal destiny of some soul which hears it proclaimed to-day."

(2) Another variety of the commendatory introduction is that which consists of a comparison of the subject with an inferior topic of interest. When Professor Webster was on trial in Boston for the murder of Dr. Parkman, a pastor in that city preached on the final judgment. He began by alluding to the thrilling excitement with which many of his hearers had thronged the court-room on the day before; and from that scene he proceeded to lift their thoughts up to the great tribunal, which, also, they would one day

throng, no longer as spectators, but as sinners on trial. Such an exordium exalted the dignity of the subject by comparison with an inferior theme.

(3) A third variety is that in which the commendation consists of cumulative remarks from which the importance of the subject grows into view gradually. The plan of a discourse was once proposed in this lecture-room on "the ascension of Christ." The introduction was a series of philosophical remarks. The preacher observed that every event in the life of a founder of a new religion is important to a believer in that religion; that this is eminently true of Christ; that the significance of Christ's life accumulates in the events which crowd its closing scenes; and that with his ascension are associated the last words he uttered on earth. From this series of reflections the dignity of the subject of our Lord's ascension receives fresh illustration.

(4) A fourth variety is that in which a subject is exalted by association with illustrious human authorities. This is the effect of exordiums in which occur apt quotations of the opinions of eminent men. Introductions in which expressive proverbs are used are of the same character. Our sense of the worth of the subject is stirred by its association with authorities.

(5) To these may be added a fifth variety not often heard in the American pulpit. It is that in which the dignity of the subject is suggested by a prayer. In the German pulpit one often hears the text announced, and, soon after, a prayer for divine guidance in the discussion and the reception of the theme derived from it. In some parts of Germany this is the more usual method. What is the purpose of that parenthetical prayer? It has a double purpose. It is an act

of worship: it is also an indirect commendation of the subject to the hearers. It deserves to be named, because it exists among the usages of the pulpit. Still it is not a natural expedient. A simple rhetorical taste does not approve it. Prayer should, under no circumstances, be regarded or used as a rhetorical expedient. To an American audience, under any circumstances, it has the look of sanctimonious formality.

8th, An eighth variety of approach is the introduction connective with the preceding discourse. This will often, not always, be the most natural exordium in serial preaching. In controversial sermons an exordium will often grow naturally out of a reference to the discourse of the opponent whose positions you are controverting. The late Rev. Mr. Merrill of Peacham, Vt., was once called upon to preach to an audience which had just listened to a terrific and denunciatory sermon by a preacher of the Second Advent. The preacher's text had been, "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead." When Mr. Merrill rose to address them, he began by turning the alarm of the audience into mirth, by saying, that, whatever might be true of the second coming of Christ and the world's end, there was one lesson of the text to which they had been listening, which the preacher had forgotten; and that was that it was of no use to attempt to scare men into religion, for even a ghost could not do it. His opponent's whole discourse, and the oppressive effect of it upon the hearers were swept away in a moment by that use of his opponent's text.

9th, A ninth variety of approach to a subject may be that in which the introduction is a condensed review of another subject related to that of the sermon

in hand. Some subjects are the natural preliminaries to other subjects: therefore a natural introduction of one proposition may be an epitome of a discussion of another. You will often find in published discourses the introductions of which strike you as especially weighty, that those introductions are practically compressed preliminary discussions. You may find that you have yourselves sometimes unconsciously fallen upon this method of introduction. Without designing it, you observe that a peculiarly rich exordium to one of your own sermons would, with little or no change, be itself the plan of a distinct discourse. Your oratorical instinct has done just that which rhetorical criticism would have advised as an expedient of condensation. This, if not carried to an extreme, is a grand quality in preaching. It enriches the productions of the pulpit. Often it is a necessity. No other form of exordium seems natural, for the want of this.

10th, A tenth variety of approach to a subject may be the introduction which consists of a request for the attention of an audience. Some subjects as developed from some texts need no other introductory process than this. A sacramental sermon may be so far suggested to a hearer by the time, the place, the symbols before him, and by the preparatory lecture, that no other preparatory process is needful than the single step of asking the audience to follow you in certain meditations on a certain theme. Liable as this method is to abuse, it is legitimate. It is not necessarily confined to a brief and single request. It may be expanded into an appeal for devout attention, for patient attention, for an uninterrupted attention.

I sum up the result of our discussion of the introduction, thus far, in this enumeration of varieties, not

as furnishing models by example, not as a schedule, from which selection in any given case can be made. They are useless for any such purpose. The main object of the enumeration is, by thus grouping these varieties together, to illustrate how much variety is practicable. There is no need of humdrum. There is no need of the uniform expository equivalent for an introduction. If you are once possessed of this conviction, and if, then, your critical judgment is disciplined by practice to a varied selection of methods, your rhetorical instinct will at length work unconsciously in shaping this part of a sermon, as in every other. Your exordiums will be rich, inviting, quickening, because they will be growths, — natural growths, — not pieces of mechanism.

V. Before passing to the next topic of discussion in the analysis of a sermon, I wish to suggest a few hints on the work of composing the introduction. The exordium has been called a preacher's cross. It is the most facile subject of criticism, but the most difficult of execution. Vinet says that it is like the fine and precise operations in mechanics, in which every workman may end in success, but only after having broken more than once the instruments employed. You have probably already experienced in some degree the common lot of preachers in this respect. A subject has opened richly to your mind; thoughts upon it have been fluent and affluent; illustrations of it have been luxuriant; details of style, even, have flashed upon you invitingly; your fingers have felt nimble with the pen; and you could have plunged into the heart of the discussion with bounding eagerness. But this drudgery of an introduction has balked you; it has exhausted your invention; it has chilled your imagination; it has put out the light

of your subject; and you have found yourself, perhaps, floundering in the middle of it, as in a slough of despond, feeling no bottom, and unable to reach a margin. Perhaps, after a hard morning's work, the thing is finished; but it dissatisfies and annoys you; it seems forced, insignificant, disjointed, objectless; and you feel that a critic, comparing your mental labor with its result, would be severe, but severely just, in saying with Ahimaaz, "I saw a great tumult, but I knew not what it was." To those beginners in the work of sermonizing who know any thing of this experience, the following hints will not be untimely.

1st, Define to your own mind, to start with, the specific object of the introduction in the case in hand. Inquire, What does this subject, as I propose to treat it on this occasion, for this audience, need in the way of preparatory remark? does it need one thing? more than one? any thing? what is the most imperative thing? will the expository equivalent be the best thing? not will the expository equivalent be passable, occupy the time, but will it advance my work to the heart of the discussion in the most natural and quickening way? These questions, perhaps, may be answered in the asking; but they should be asked. No other composing is so difficult as that in which the mind does not know itself. Did you ever witness the composition and the chirography of "Planchette"? How the pen sprawls and splutters, and caricatures sense, till it requires an expert in "spiritualistic" phenomena to make sense of it! Like that is the composing of an exordium in which the pen does the work without a self-conscious and intent mind behind it.

The effect is as painful to the hearer as to the preacher, if you labor to introduce a subject which

needs no introduction. It resembles the awkwardness of introducing to each other, with fastidious forms of politeness, two strangers, as you suppose, who happen to have been old friends before you were born. It is equally painful to see a preacher laboring at the wrong object in an exordium. Why should you insinuate your way along, like an Indian warrior in the grass, against a prejudice which nobody feels? Why vindicate your divine commission before an audience in which nobody doubts it? Why affirm and prop up your right to speak when the fact of your speaking is a proof of your right? Why wriggle your way to a theme which is one of the standard subjects of the pulpit? Why begin at the expulsion from Eden, to bring up the attention of your hearers, by slow and zigzag approaches, to a present emergency which they are trembling with eagerness to meet? What would Cicero have achieved in the first oration against Catiline, if he had begun with the story of Romulus?

More distressing still is it to see a preacher laboring in an exordium without an object. This you will find to be sometimes your real peril. We lounge and saunter into some introductions. We must say something. Something comes to mind which we can say. It may surely enough as well be said now as ever; and down it goes upon the page, and we try to feel encouraged that we have made a beginning. Then we go up and down in the earth, seeking what we may devour, till with another remark, and a third, and a fourth, we have gathered a sufficient number to make up a loose, ragged, patched piece of manufacture, rather than of brain-work, which, by the usage of the books, we call an introduction. But it has no object; therefore no cohesion; consequently, for the purpose of an exordium, no

meaning. One of the old creeds found in the archives of a certain church in this State, and once presented, according to the ancient Congregational usage, by a candidate for admission into the church, commences thus: "I believe in one God. I believe that he is the Creator of the heavens and the earth. I believe that he made this world, partly out of nothing, and partly out of unfit matter." A good symbol that of the materials of some introductions to sermons.

2d, Review the growth of your subject in its working upon your own mind. Every subject on which you are at all prepared to preach has a history in your own thinking. It has a growth there. You have not come to it at a bound. There is an avenue of thought somewhere by which you have come into consciousness of that growth. Some good angel has been practicing an introduction of that subject upon you. Look back, therefore, and recall your own mental history upon it. What has interested you in it? what has defined it clearly? what illustrations of it, or about it, have made it vivid? what uses of it have been valuable to you? Two benefits will be likely to follow from such inquiries. They will commonly suggest the best materials for an introduction of the subject to an audience. Nothing else is so prolific of available thought for transmitting a truth as the history of one's own mind upon it. That which has clarified a subject to you will help you to invent ways of clearing it to others. Difficulties conquered often show how they might have been avoided. A fortress taken by storm discloses how it might have been taken by stratagem. So your conquest of a subject may put you in possession of the means of leading others to it without the struggle of conquest.

Your own history upon a subject will be likely, also, to save you from the error of assuming too much in favor of the intelligence of your hearers. This is sometimes the occasion of a defective exordium. It assumes too much knowledge, too much interest, too much readiness, therefore, to follow the discussion. It gives to hearers no sufficient time or help to grow to the subject as the preacher grew to it in his experience. Results of a long mental training are sprung upon a hearer unawares. You will be spared this mistake, if you consider wisely the process of your own mind in mastering your theme. If preliminary thinking was necessary to you, still more may it be so to your audience. You will not be likely to ask them to leap a chasm under which you were obliged to dig a tunnel.

3d, Compose the introduction with the whole discourse in view. Does not this suggest a very obvious cause of unfitness in many exordiums? They are written before the subject is mentally digested. I sometimes detect evidence in sermons that the introduction was written before the subject was even defined. The preacher has started with a text, and has written up to the proposition. What the subject is has shaped itself on the way. A good exordium can not possibly be composed thus at random. To construct and charge, and aim and discharge, an introduction well, you must know what you want to introduce. The subject, the discussion, the application, all the structural elements of the sermon, should be before you. The living spirit of the sermon, too, must be in you. A lifeless exordium is often lifeless for the reason that it has no living union with the subject in the mind of the preacher. He has mechanized it, instead of grafting it. Worse even than that, it may be a piece of

dead timber nailed to a living tree. You can not neutralize this error by any artifices of style. Nothing can live but life.

4th, Therefore do not compose the introduction till the plan of the whole discourse is outlined. Write out a plan of the entire sermon from text to *finis*; adjust the form of the proposition; devise the outline of the argument; invent the chief illustrations; shape the application; decide upon the method of closing: in a word, get every thing before you which is to be introduced. Put it on paper, if your mind needs, as many do, the help of the eye. Then you know what the exordium ought to be: you can set about it intelligently, and you will save time by this preliminary work of getting ready to work. Why not, then, write the body of the sermon in full before composing the exordium? Some advocate this. I would not say that it should never be done. Some minds may work well in that way; but the majority of minds, I think, will experience in it this disadvantage, that, when the body of a sermon is written in full, the mind of the preacher has lost the introductory mood. This, too, is a matter for experiment. In composing a sermon, you will discover that your mind moves with your work. Transitions in that are changes of mental mood in you. Your sensibilities change with the demands of your work. You pass through an introductory mood, an argumentative mood, an illustrative mood, an applicatory mood. At the close you are absorbed in practical application. The excitement of your sensibilities is more intense than it was, or ought to have been, at the beginning. It is not natural, then, for your mind to go back upon its track, and set about introducing the theme.

5th, Throw yourself into the work with enthusiasm.

Daniel Webster said of the American Revolution, that our fathers went to war against a preamble. A preamble, then, may be the very gist of the business. Treat it as such in sermonizing. Prepare an introduction as if every thing depended on the first impression. Strike as if the blow were to be like that of stamping a coin — there being no second blow.

Critics have observed of Shakespeare, that he always aims to make his characters define themselves at their first appearance. Their individuality is clear in the first words they utter. They never run together in our first conceptions of them. They are like faces with strong features: we see them once, and always remember them. Guizot observes of Othello and Desdemona, that their characters are distinct on their first appearance, though one speaks but thirty lines, and the other but fifteen. So introductions should be composed with keen appreciation of the significance of first impressions. I repeat, therefore, make a business of them. Be in earnest in them, and you will find earnest hearers from the very first word. Not only strike when the iron is hot, but make it hot by striking. Modern science tells us that motion is heat: a blow, therefore, evolves heat. A flash of fire is often visible at the moment and at the spot at which a solid cannon-ball strikes the plate of an iron-clad ship. The principle involved in the phenomenon is as true of mind as of iron. Mind has a quality corresponding to that by which iron evolves latent heat. The concussion of mind with mind will often evolve an interest which will make itself obvious in the faces of hearers. It is quickening to a speaker to observe the instantaneousness with which the first gleam of earnest working on his part will reproduce itself in an audience.

Dr. John Blair Smith, president of Hampden-Sidney College, was the most eloquent preacher of his day in Virginia. He was accustomed to write in full no part of his sermons, except the introductions. These he elaborated with unwearied care. Such introductions gave to a man of his temperament a momentum in public address which enabled him to proceed extemporaneously on the same level. His experience justified his estimate of the value of a good beginning.