

How to Prepare Sermons
Lesson VI.

CHAPTER VI
SERMON MATERIAL—GATHERING IT

ASSIGNMENT: Choose a Text and a Theme for a sermon. You will be asked on the test at the end of this Lesson what Text and Theme you have chosen. You will be required to write a sermon using this Text and Theme.

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It is assumed, of course, that the text and theme of the sermon have already been decided upon. This being done we must now ask ourselves questions. This implies reflection. Reflect before beginning to write a single word of the sermon. And in reflecting one must value his own thought. He must be himself; insist upon himself; be willing to be himself, and believe in the worth of his own reflection. No matter what it may cost by way of self-denial and self-sacrifice one must insist on thinking for himself. To do this may lead to being cannonaded instead of being canonized by the people to whom we have been preaching other people's thoughts, and, perhaps, sermons. Do it at all cost, however; success will be the outcome. Be your own self, present your own thoughts and reflections in your preaching, shine in your own star rather than in someone else's sun. You may lose some of the popularity you have falsely made, but inevitably and ultimately you will gain your own respect and that of your audience. Many a preacher knows well what it is to have a sermon pass over him but not go through him; to have it pass over his lips, but not through his own brain and heart. Be yourself, your best self; be willing to shine in your own light rather than in the light of others. "Thou shalt not steal" is a commandment that may be broken by the appropriation or, better, the misappropriation of another man's sermon preached as though it were altogether one's own production.

I. THE GATHERING OF MATERIAL.

What are the questions that should be asked as one proceeds to prepare the sermon?

1. What Have I Ever Read on This Subject?

Gather your thoughts together. Think; and write as you think. Pay no attention to the order in which the thoughts come into the mind. Thought is of primary importance now; the order of the thought, secondary.

Some people do not have many thoughts on the particular subject because they are not readers. To be prolific in thought one must be a faithful reader. Reading makes a wise man. The constant reader will not be at a loss for thoughts. The man who does not read much will not make much of a preacher. One good sermon a day, and one good book a week, at least, ought to be the intellectual diet of every man who would be a good preacher. Not to read is to have nothing to draw from except oneself, and oftentimes one feels himself to be a dry subject indeed. Reading is a tonic; it has a reactionary effect upon the mind.

What should a man read? History, science, biography, books of scientific illustration, the daily papers, magazines. No good reading, even fiction, is to be lightly cast aside. Above all else in importance is the reading of the Bible. The reading of the Bible should not be spasmodic, but systematic and regular. To read the Bible simply for the sake of getting a text from it, and then closing it to resort to books of sermons for material, is a practice that must end disastrously for the preacher. Never, on any account, neglect the study of the Bible. Read good books, then. Cherish the companionship of great minds. Neglect not what God has said to the race through the minds and words of good and great men. He is a great

scholar indeed who thinks he can afford to dispense with reading what others have written

2. What Have I Observed That Will Throw Light on This Subject?

The preacher needs to have wide-open eyes. To have eyes and see not, ears, and hear not, is fatal to the preacher. There are men who can never see "sermons in stones, and books in running brooks" because they are used to seeing sermons in books and stones in running brooks. Said the prophet of the olden days concerning the dry and uninteresting preachers of his day: "They have seen nothing, they have no vision, and my people are perishing for the lack of preachers who have wide-open eyes and ears." ← paraphrase of Ezekiel 13:1-16 & Proverbs 29:18

What is the difference between the man standing there in the meadow and the cow feeding by his side? In the one instance the cow has eyes and ears but sees nothing except the grass it is eating, and hears nothing but the inarticulate bellowing of the other cattle; whereas the man lifts up his eyes and sees afar off the beautiful hills and the enchanting landscape, and listens to and appreciates the babbling of the little brook that runs at his feet. Man has been endowed by the Creator with eyes to see, ears to hear, and a mind to appreciate the beauty and utility of that which surrounds him.

It is said of Henry Ward Beecher that one day he stood in front of the window of a jewelry store in Brooklyn for about one hour; then went into the store and asked the proprietor, who was a personal friend of the great preacher, to allow him to have a few jewels to take home with him for a day or two. This permission was granted. On the following Sunday the great preacher announced as his text the words: "And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels." Those

who heard that sermon spoke of it as one of the best ever heard from the pulpit of the Plymouth Church. Beecher had eyes and saw things. Many a less observant preacher would have seen and admired and gone his way, and that would have been the end of his seeing.

How observant Christ was. His sermons abound with illustrations taken from the things He saw and heard. For example: "Behold a sower"; "Two women * * * grinding at the mill"; "Consider the lilies"; "Have ye not heard?" etc. Jesus was all the time seeing and hearing things and making use of them in His sermons.

Carry a note-book with you. Jot down the things you see and hear that impress you. Wherever you are and whatever you may be doing, keep an open eye and ear for material to use in your sermons. You will then have less need, if, indeed any, of resorting to stock illustration books. Your matter will be fresh and interesting.

An Irishman stood beholding the Niagara Falls for the first time. An American stood by his side, entranced by the greatness and grandeur of the mighty scene. "Is it not a marvelous sight?" exclaimed the American. "Faith," said the son of the Emerald Isle, "an' I see nothing to hinder it." The Irishman had eyes and ears but he neither saw nor heard. The American woman who, beholding the same wonder of nature, and on being asked what she thought of it, said, "Isn't it cute?" also lacked the powers of observation. How different with the keen business man, having the open eye and the open ear, who, when he looked at those immense falls, said, "Give me the use of those falls, and I will light the city of Buffalo and run all its machinery with its power." This man had eyes to see and ears to hear.

When riding on the street-car or the train, when walking through the woods and fields, when sailing, when participating in the social functions of life, or engaged in

the commerce of the day, see that you keep eyes and ears open for matter to illustrate and enforce truth. How many people spend hours in the woods, surrounded by all the beauty and glory of nature and yet see nothing. The poet speaks of such an one in these words:

A primrose by a river's brim,
A yellow primrose was to him
And it was nothing more.

* * *

One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man,
Of moral evil, and of good,
Than all the sages can.

* * *

Therefore, as you see things with your eyes, and hear them with your ears, observe and record in a note book. At the close of each day ask yourself, "What have I learned from the things I have seen and heard today?" Do not allow one day to pass without making some record, no matter how small, of something you have observed. If you are a keen observer your sermons will show it and your audience will recognize and be profited thereby.

3. What Have I Ever Thought on This Subject?

Dr. A. T. Pierson speaks of what is called the principle of "unconscious cerebration—a process which corresponds to the incubation of an egg; the gradual and unconscious formation of an idea in the mind. You have a thought today; you make a record of it; you draw it out somewhat in a memorandum and lay it aside. A month later you take up your memorandum. The thought has unconsciously matured. You have been incubating your own conception, and it is growing towards completeness

though you have been unconscious with regard to any mental process concerning it." So a man ought to be writing down thoughts on various subjects as they come to him from time to time, and adding to them continually as they develop in his mind. Many of our best thoughts have been lost because we have failed to write them down. It is a good thing for a man to write down at least one thought a day.

"It is a wise proverb," says Watts, "among the learned, borrowed from the lips and the practice of a celebrated painter, '*Nulla dies sine linea*,' let no day pass without at least one line. It was a sacred rule among the Pythagoreans, that they should every evening run over the actions and affairs of the day, and examine what their conduct had been, what they had done and what they had neglected; and they assured their pupils, that by this method they would make a noble progress in the path of virtue."

4. What Have I Gathered on This Subject?

A pitiable and deplorable sight it is to see a minister a day or two before the week's end fuming and fretting about his sermon for the coming Sunday. Friday has come and he has scarcely a single thought on the subject of his Sunday sermon. He has now to begin to create all new material for the sermon. It is nothing short of a disgrace for any minister to have to create weekly all the matter for each sermon he prepares. It indicates that he has not been in the habit of preserving the results of his reading, observation, and meditation. He has been treating his mind as a sieve—allowing every thought to pass through it. Or it may be that he has overburdened his memory by committing to it impossible and, in this day of filing devices, unnecessary tasks.

Not long ago a minister came into a fellow-minister's

study in a state of great perplexity. Said he: "I have to deliver an address on Washington, before a large assembly within a few days, and, I regret to say, I cannot lay my hand on any material for the address. I am sure I have material somewhere in my library on this theme, but just where I do not know. I am almost distracted; can you help me?" Here was a preacher, and supposed therefore to be constantly reading, observing, meditating, with eyes, ears, hands, pen and paper, and yet had gathered nothing in all the years on such an important personage as George Washington. It was not that he had not read, or heard many things in connection with this great historical character, for he had; the trouble was that he had not preserved the results of years and put it away in such shape and manner as to lay hands on it whenever needed. For this state of affairs, it seems there is absolutely no excuse. Said his colleague to him: "My friend, do you see that index filing cabinet yonder? Well, just stoop down, put your hand on the envelope marked 'Wa,' take it home with you, and you will find material enough there to make six addresses on Washington."

When we remember that a man's future success may depend upon one address, and that he may be called upon to deliver that address at a few hours' notice for preparation, does it not seem utter folly to neglect the proper classification and filing away of the material he may gather each day from reading and observation?

The preacher must be gathering constantly. The danger of gathering only at the time of preparing the sermon is, that the preacher will possess and the people will receive only half-digested thoughts. How many a preacher, reading over a sermon preached a few months, or perhaps only a few weeks before, has found himself saying, "Well, did I say that? Did I really give

expression to that thought? Did I really teach that truth? I did not know I ever preached that." Thus, you see, the thoughts preached have gone over the lips of the preacher, but not through his heart and mind. They were not really his. Many a minister's sermons are scattered over with thoughts he possessed but for a moment. The good preacher will be gathering material for his sermons all the time, and will file it away daily for future use.

After all, the preacher's main business is not to preach sermons; it is to gather and proclaim truth. Therefore the preacher's whole life should be spent in seeking for truth for truth's sake, and not for the mere sake of sermon preparation. Learn to gather your material before you undertake the preparation of your sermon. Does a builder quarry the needed stones during the process of building, putting one stone into place, and then go away to quarry, cut and shape another, and so on? No; he sees to it that the material he needs is on the ground before the building is commenced, or at least he has made such provision that the material will be on hand just when he needs it for its proper place in the structure he is erecting. And is it not true that the more material you have on hand and laid out before you when you are about to begin the preparation of your sermon, the greater the choice of material to be used will be at your disposal? And will not your sermon preparation be facilitated thereby? The less of "special" reading and preparation there is for each sermon the better.

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