

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER THREE

THE TEXT (CONTINUED)

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTORY. The relation of the text to the context. The text need not necessarily call for a discussion of the context. Yet it must be so used as to do no violence to the context.

I. THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE TEXT IN ITS RELATION TO THE CLAIMS OF SCRIPTURE

1. The text must be reverently treated:

- (1) No excuse for the deliberate and intentional misuse of a text;
- (2) Unworthy motives must not influence us;
- (3) Care should be taken in the use of accommodated texts;

- (a) Occasionally permissible;
- (b) But as a rule not.

2. The text must be intelligently treated:

- (1) Study, so as not to err through ignorance;
- (2) Do not spiritualize texts which have no spiritual meaning;
- (3) Do not use the uninspired utterances of Scripture as if they were inspired.

II. THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF THE TEXT IN ITS RELATION TO THE THEME OF THE DISCOURSE

1. The subject-matter should, if possible, form a complete theme.
2. The text should be suitable to the theme:

- (1) The character of the subject ought to decide the selection of the text;
- (2) In the matter of selection the preacher should be conscientious;
- (3) As a rule the text naturally suggests the theme;
- (4) The text should clearly express the theme;
- (5) The text may be so chosen as to be a fresh presentation of the theme.

COUNSELS

1. Find less known texts for the enforcement of familiar truths.
2. Keep a notebook for texts.
3. Occasionally revise lists of texts preached from.
4. Frequently use the words of the text while preaching.
5. Suggestions as to announcing a text.

The Subject-Matter

WE are now prepared to consider the special thought in the text, with which the preacher proposes to deal in his sermon. This is what we understand by the “subject-matter.” It is plain that the subject-matter of the preacher’s text is related to the book from which his text is taken, and to the theme of which he treats. Before speaking of these two points it may be well that we glance at the relation of the text to the context.

1. As to this we remark that the limit of his sermon and of his subject will generally preclude the preacher from discussing at any length the verses on either side of his text. When he is preaching from a detached portion of Scripture – a proverb for example – to do this is evidently unnecessary; but even in the case of a context such as he finds in an argumentative text – the kind of texts which abound in the Epistles of Paul for instance – it will not be possible for him to do more than glance at it.

The tourist who has himself photographed at Niagara with the falls as a background must see to it that the grandeur of the background does not make his own figure insignificant. Let the text stand out prominently; let it be superior, for this occasion certainly, to its context, however grand and impressive that may be.

2. Yet the text must be so used as to do no violence to the context. The familiar verse, “**Be sure your sin will find you out,**” if it be restored to its connection will be seen to deal not with what men do but only with what they fail to do. If Gad and Reuben, content in their own rich pasturages, should refuse to help the other tribes of Israel, then let them rest assured that their sin of omission would surely be punished (Numbers 32:23).

An intelligent study of the context, to say nothing of a preliminary study of English grammar, would have saved the Baptist preacher from perverting Paul’s words, “**I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things and keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you**” (I Corinthians 11:2), by slicing a bit out of the verse and using it as if it were mandatory, “**Keep the ordinances as I delivered them to you.**” A pastor who lives long enough with one church to preach his twentieth anniversary sermon to them is so worthy of our honor that we may pardon him for taking a text from Jacob’s complaint to Laban, “**Thus have I been twenty years in thy house**”; but even he would scarcely dare restore these words to their true setting, “**I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle; and thou hast changed my wages ten times**” (Genesis 31:41). Not oftener than once in twenty years, and then only under such exceptional circumstances, should Scripture be so wrested.

I. We come now to the subject-matter of the text in its relation to the claims of Scripture

1. As to this we remark, first, that the text must be reverently treated.

(1) There is no excuse for the deliberate and intentional misuse of a text.

“Dear George,” wrote quaint John Berridge when he heard of the death of Mrs. Whitefield, “has now got his liberty again,” but the fact that the great field preacher was not happy in his domestic life does not excuse his taking as a text for his wife’s funeral sermon the words: **“For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope”** (Romans 8:20).

Not even hill ingenuity condones the offense of the preacher who drew from the word **“certain,”** in the verse **“A certain man went down from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell among thieves”** (Luke 10:30), the four points that he was sober, punctual, industrious, and married. It is hard to acquit the minister of frivolity who preached to the police from the injunction of Paul to Timothy, “Lay hands suddenly on no man” (I Timothy 5:22).

(2) Unworthy motives have sometimes influenced the preacher in the choice of his text.

A fierce partisan, taking sides with the enemies of the king, celebrated the coronation of George IV of England by preaching from the text-which we will not give in full, although he did – **“Belshazzar the king made a great feast to a thousand of his lords, and drank wine before the thousand”** (Daniel 5:1, 2).

When pleading for the preservation of the Irish Episcopal Church as part of the State Establishment, Bishop Magee delivered a most eloquent sermon on *“The Breaking Net”* (Luke 5:7), in which he pictured the Irish clergy as beckoning to their partners in England to come and help them; but he carefully shut his eyes to the incongruity that the stagnant waters of the Irish Church Establishment contrasted unfavorably with the great multitude of fishes which caused the nets of Peter and his companions to break, in the miracle on the sea of Galilee.

(3) We should be very careful as to the use of accommodated texts.

A text is accommodated when it is so applied that the subject-matter of the sermon differs radically from the subject-matter of the verse when that verse is properly treated:

There is only surface and incidental resemblance between the text as it is used by the sacred writer and as it is used by the preachers (Phelps’ *“Theory of Preaching,”* p. 114).

We do not say that such texts are never permissible. The burning of the Royal Exchange, London, suggested to Henry Melvill the mourning of the merchants made rich by her over the fall of Babylon, when **“in one hour so great riches is come to nought”** (Revelation 18:15-17); and the same preacher found a text for his discourse on the destructive fire in the Tower of London, in Peter’s warning,

“Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness” (II Peter 3:11).

The long-suffering chaplain who ministered to the students at Cambridge University, England, did no violence to the thought of the original passage when by the text, **“Keep thy foot when thou goest into the house of God”** (Ecclesiastes 5:1), he entered his protest against the prevalent vice of foot-scraping; and a proposal to disturb the body of Shakespeare was fairly enough reproved by the preacher who chose for a text the words, **“Let no man move his bones”** (II Kings 23:18).

These are examples of accommodated texts in which while, on the one hand, no direct reference is made to the circumstances which first inspired them, yet, on the other hand, there is no affront passed upon them. Was not the preacher before the Eton schoolboys happy in his selection when he announced for his text on the anniversary of Queen Victoria’s succession, the one word *“Shout,”* and still more so another preacher to boys when he addressed the quaintly clad bluecoat boys at Christ’s Hospital School, London, from the **“little coat which Hannah made for Samuel”** (I Samuel 2:19)?

And how much pertinence must have been added to Horace Bushnell’s sermon at the time when the doctrine of repudiation was unhappily popular, by his selection of the word, **“Alas, master, for it is borrowed!”** as the motive for his indignant plea for national honesty (II Kings 6:5). These, however, are exceptions.

It is better as a rule to refrain from the use of accommodated texts. They dishonor Scripture, and encourage the general belief, which preachers in all the centuries of Christian history have done too much to confirm, that we can treat the Bible as we treat no other book.

The medieval preachers were notorious offenders in this matter, but they are not alone. When Pitt, the youngest of British prime ministers, came to Oxford with several church appointments in his gift, and found there far more applicants than there were offices, a sermon was preached before him from the text, **“There is a lad here which hath five barley loaves and two small fishes, but what are they among so many?”** (John 6:9)

To preach to journalists on the words, **“They could not come nigh unto him for the press”** (Mark 2:4), is of course unpardonable punning; but scarcely less objectionable was the text chosen on a similar occasion by a dignitary in an English cathedral, **“And he charged them that they should tell no man, but the more he charged them so much the more a great deal they published it”** (Mark 7:36).

The preacher who in the words, **“The voice of the turtle is heard in the land”** (Song of Songs 2:12), found the doctrine of immersion, probably erred by reason of his ignorance, which led to his getting hold of the wrong turtle; but no excuse can be urged for him who exhorted a newly married couple from the words of the psalmist, **“And abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth”** (Psalm 72:7).

2. Such perversions of Scripture suggest that the text must be intelligently, as well as reverently treated.

(1) It might be hoped that the days of our ignorance as to the meaning of texts were passed, but ignorance dies hard, and especially with the preacher who prefers darkness to light, and does not study.

A fervent evangelist in the early years of this century preaching from the words, "**Write, blessed are the dead which die in the Lord**" (Revelation 14:13), being himself able neither to read nor write, announced that he would "first consider who are right blessed, and secondly who are wrong blessed"; and one of the same simple class had a sermon on Peter's exhortation at Pentecost, "**Save yourselves from this untoward generation**" (Acts 2:40), in which with a fine disregard both of pronunciation and exegesis he sounded the word as though it were spelt "untowered," and explained that the ancient cities had walls and towers, that without them they were at the mercy of the enemy, and that what Peter intended was to urge on his hearers the duty of avoiding a generation which had not fled to the strong city of salvation.

Andrew Fuller did well to retort on the conceited young preacher who told him he was about to preach on Christ as the "**one thing needful**" (Luke 10:42). "Why then you are worse than the Socinians. They do allow him to be a man; but you are going to reduce him to a mere thing."

(2) To this warning against an ignorant use of Scripture, we add, therefore, Do not spiritualize texts which really have no spiritual significance.

This was the weakness of Origen and his school, and since his time it has not ceased to enervate the pulpit. "**The fowls of the air which neither reap nor gather into barns,**" said Hilary, "are the devils, and the lilies of the field which spin not are the angels."

William Huntingdon, the hyper-Calvinist, expounding Isaiah 11:8, "**The sucking child shall play on the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice' den,**" found in this passage his favorite doctrine. "*The Slicking child,*" said he, "is the babe in grace, the asp is the Arminian, and the hole of the asp is the Arminian's mouth." This conclusive method of silencing his opponents may have sufficed for Huntingdon's congregation. but it would suffice nowhere now.

The father of Robert Hall, an excellent man and often a careful expositor, saw depths of spiritual meaning in the fact that the candlestick for the tabernacle was made of pure gold (Exodus 37:17); and a popular preacher of our own day read the whole scheme of redemption into the direction that the same precious metal should be used in making the snuffers (*Ibid.*, 23).

This delusive spirit of exposition goeth not forth save by prayer and fasting. Let the preacher abstain from his own fancies and give himself instead to a devout study of the text. Thus will he learn what is the mind of the Spirit.

(3) As one more caution let us say, Do not use as inspired texts the uninspired utterances to be found in Scripture.

The record itself may be inspired when what is recorded is not.

A Universalist preacher founded an argument against future punishment on the words of the tempter to Eve, "**Thou shalt not surely die**" (Genesis 3:4); – a famous lawyer in Boston once affirmed in Court that we have "the highest authority for saying, '**Skin for skin, all that a man hath will he give for his life**'" (Job 2:4. See also II Kings 18:28-35; Job 1:9; Acts 5:35-39), a blunder which justified the papers of the following morning in their comment, "Now we know who it is that the honorable gentleman regards as his highest authority."

Passages such as these – and there are many of them in the Bible – may of Course be employed in the pulpit, but not as though they carried with them any divine sanction.

The subject-matter of the text

II. Consider next the subject-matter of the text in its relation to the theme of the discourse

1. Whenever possible let the subject-matter of the text which the preacher proposes to use form a complete theme. Do not take half a text when it contains only half a truth. The apostle's injunction, "**Work out your own salvation,**" cannot be separated from the words by which he explained it, "**for it is God which worketh in you both to will and do of his good pleasure**" (Philippians 2:12, 13; See also Revelation 3:19).

2. Further, the text must be suitable to the theme.

(1) *The character of the subject ought to decide the selection of the text.*

A doctrinal theme is made more impressive by a text taken from a doctrinal book The book of Proverbs may be used to furnish a text for a sermon on the atonement, but it is better to choose one from the Epistles. An evangelist closing a series of meetings with a sermon from the solemn words, "**It is finished,**" laid himself open to the charge of irreverence. To find a text for a sermon on the newspaper may be no easy matter, but that does not justify the preacher who selected, "**How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings**" (Isaiah 52:7).

Professor Jowett when discoursing, as he often did, on "*Conversation*" from "**Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth,**" was wont to justify himself by telling his hearers that the concluding words ("**of God**") were "an unnecessary addition of some of the manuscripts."

(2) *In this matter of the selection of a text the preacher should do his utmost to be conscientious.*

Let him lay down the rule that he has no right to take a text unless he means to use it. So obviously should his text contain his theme, that in explaining and enforcing his subject the very words with which he prefaces his discourse should occur to the minds of his hearers. Cowper might still find cause to complain of the unscrupulous abuse of texts in this matter of selection: -

How oft when Paul has served us with a text,
Has Epictetus, Plato, Tully, preached.

(3) *As a rule the text naturally suggests the theme which is fairly to be found in it, and in any case the text should not need to be flung on the rack and tortured before the theme can be extorted from it.*

Perhaps the preacher who chose for his text when preaching on “*skeptical questioning in religion*” a fragment from Paul, “**But some man will say, ‘How?’**” (I Corinthians 15:35) did no injustice to the apostle’s argument; but as much cannot be urged in defense of the Massachusetts minister who attacked his rebellious choir with the text, “**It is hard for thee to kick against the pricks**” (Acts 9:), or the Scottish divine who invited the cyclists to listen to his eulogy of the wheel which he based on the words, “**Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace**” (Proverbs 3:17). This was plainly a case in which wisdom was not justified of her children.

It was a caustic critic of the same nationality who curtly disposed of a sermon preached in his hearing by a young minister from the text, “**The angel did wondrously, and Manoah and his wife looked on**” (Judges 13:19), by saying, “The sermon was not unlike the text; the lad did wondrously, and the text looked on.” “The man,” the same critic observed on another occasion, “might have said to his text at the beginning what he said to the folks at the end, ‘We’ll maybe meet again and maybe no.’ “

(4) *Moreover the text should clearly express the theme.*

Avoid using a text which needs an extended introduction in order to make it suggest the theme on which you mean to preach. Robert Robinson preaching from the words, “**Skin for skin, yea, all that a man hath will he give for his life**” (Job 2:4), and interpreting it after his own original fashion to mean that in a time of famine the merchants in skins would sacrifice all the product of their hunting for wheat which alone could save them from starvation, was naturally obliged to begin his discourse with a long explanation before he was ready to say, “The proverb then means that we should save our lives at any price. Let us apply it to ourselves.”

It seems evident that when intelligently and conscientiously chosen, the text must powerfully influence the treatment of the theme (Phelps’ “*Theory*,” etc., pp. 110, 111). This you are wise to remember in selecting your text. Indeed, are there not texts which may be said to endanger the sermon? Either they are hard to preach from, because they raise expectations which the preacher is unable to satisfy; or else, by themselves epitomizing emotions, they express in one brief sentence what the preacher struggles in vain to amplify.

A text so sublime as “**Glorious in holiness, tearful in praises, doing wonders**” (Exodus 15:11), may leave the eloquence of the rhetorician panting far behind; and Dr. Lyman Beecher tells us that the words which describe the tears the penitent woman shed upon the feet of Jesus (Luke 7:38) were so much more forcible than anything which he could say about them that only by simply telling the story was he able to treat them at all.

Then the verse “melted the whole congregation and me too.”

(5) *It will be well if the text is so chosen as to be in itself a fresh presentation of the theme.*

“A novel text is a new voice.” A great national loss was fitly commemorated by a sermon from the words of Jonathan to David, “**Thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty**” (I Samuel 20:18). Spurgeon used as a text for “*The Return of the Backslider*” the unusual motto, “**Howbeit the hair of his head began to grow again**” (Judges 16:22); and Dr. Joseph Parker coming once more to his pulpit after a vacation found a text for his experience in the brief sentence, “**I am returned . . . with mercies.**” (Zechariah 1:16).

With five counsels we may conclude what has to be said on this subject.

1. Try and find less known and less used texts for the enforcement of familiar truths.

The principle of the final command may be impressively preached from the words, “**That which is wanting cannot be numbered**” (Ecclesiastes 1:15); and the doctrine of future punishment must be involved in the startling declaration of Jesus, “**Good were it for that man if he had never been born**” (Mark 14:21).

2. Keep a notebook in which to write down texts as they occur to you.

In this way, as Dr. Ker puts it, you will be “**prepared against the time of famine and dearth, and against the day of battle and war, when you are engaged with other things.**” Preserve in a few words, the circumstances connected with your finding the text – the book, incident, or illustration suggesting it.

3. Now and then revise your list of texts from which you have preached.

Dr. John Duncan thinks that the reason why the religion of Matthew Henry was so exceeding broad was that “he cast himself with equal reverence on the whole of the Bible, and had no favorite texts.”

Every preacher is apt to err by neglecting doctrines that need to be preached, characters that ought to be studied, and often whole books in the Bible that deserve to be expounded. Our preaching is often one-sided; sometimes, one fears, it is not even so much as that. “Doctrine, precept, history, type, psalm, proverb, experience, warning, promise, invitation, threatening or rebuke – we should include the whole of inspired truth within the circle of our teachings” (C. H. Spurgeon).

4. During the delivery of the sermon frequently use the words of the text.

Henry Melvin; the golden-mouthed preacher, was wont to work up his sentences to an argumentative climax, and then bring out his text so as to show that he had it on his side.

We counsel that in clinching an argument, in rounding a period, in capping a climax, and above all in closing the sermon, weight and authority will be given by the use of the very words of your text.

5. As to announcing the text, we advise that you preface the words by as brief a form as possible.

Do not hold your hearers in needless suspense. Yet at the same time by a quiet deliberateness of tone and manner you may give the impression that what you have to say is of great moment. Avoid abruptness and haste. Always tell your congregation where the text is to be found first; announce it in logical order – book, chapter, verse; and encourage the general use of the Bible in the pews.

Be careful as to the emphasis, try to read the text so that it may be in itself a sermon. Emphasis is exposition.

Who knows but that it may be all of the sermon some hearer will retain in his memory? Read the text, therefore, so as to stimulate interest and even to rouse curiosity. As a rule read it once only. The congregation soon knows how far the preacher will encourage listlessness. Let the whole sermon, from the text to the conclusion, be like fine music, to which an audience listens in the complete possession of all its powers of attention.

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