

THE MAKING OF THE SERMON

For the classroom and the study

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

RHETORICAL ELEMENTS IN THE SERMON-CONTINUED

SUMMARY

IV. SOURCES FROM WHICH ILLUSTRATIONS MAY BE DRAWN

1. The Bible.
2. Daily life.
3. History.
4. Travel and scenery.
5. Natural history.
6. Literature.
7. Science.
8. Art.

V. COUNSELS

1. Keep illustration subordinate to thought.
2. Do not illustrate over much.
3. Remember that an illustration must illustrate.
4. Let your illustration be apparent at once.
5. Let your illustrations be suitable:
 - (1) Not equally good in all places; or
 - (2) Under all circumstances;
 - (3) Should be accurate.
6. Make your Bible the storehouse for your illustrations.

Illustration (continued)

WE may now pass on to glance at the various sources from which illustrations may be drawn.

1. Among these not alone his reverence for the book as a divine revelation but also his appreciation of its worth for this special purpose, will lead the preacher to put the Bible first.

The same volume which gives him his text will also furnish him with his clearest statements of doctrine, his most convincing arguments, and his most effective illustration.

How well the Puritans knew this their sermons, studded with Scripture names, incidents, and allusions, testify (See Nichol, *“Library of Standard Puritan Divines”*).

“No illustrations,” says Spurgeon, “are so good as those from Scripture.” Its biographies and histories, its types and ordinances, its felicities of thought and language have all of them this in their favor, that they are already familiar in our mouths as household words.

“Woven for three centuries into the life of all that is best and noblest in English history” (Professor Huxley), the Bible in our version has a record almost as extended and quite as illustrious in America. The ear of the congregation welcomes any allusion to the book which has “taken such hold of the world as no other” (Theodore Parker).

Where Washington Irving wakened many a sleeping fancy, as he gratefully acknowledged in his old age, our hearers will find their minds quickened as well. We counsel that, so far as it is possible to do so, you draw the illustrations for your sermon in the first instance from the text. In preaching, for example, from Isaiah 40:6-8 (“**The voice said, Cry,**” etc.), the hillsides and villages of Palestine will enrich your sermons with material.

Paul’s words in II Corinthians 3:18 will suggest a group of images drawn from the phrase “**beholding as in a glass.**” A whole sermon lies in the etymology of the Greek word translated of “**clothed upon**” in I Peter 5:5-7.

2. A true preacher is seen to advantage in the use which he makes of the incidents of daily life.

His pastoral experiences, his own observations on the streets, in the home, while traveling, and in mingling with his fellows, will all enrich his treasury of illustrations.

What Mr. Ruskin calls “imagination penetrative,” the faculty which teaches us to realize the actual rather than the invisible, is of service here. Of course the life all about him must be referred to judiciously by the preacher. What comes to him in confidence he must never make public, he must avoid becoming too familiar and commonplace in the illustrations taken from unheroic scenes and incidents, and he must repress the egotism which in the fluent speaker so easily becomes a second nature.

But no preacher will go astray so long as he takes Jesus as a model. His figures were drawn, oftener than not, from his own life and from the lives of his neighbors.

- The lamp and the bushel,
- The coin lost in the dusky Oriental cottage,
- The hen and her chickens,
- The sheep wandering on the hills or safely sheltered in the fold,
- The wheat and tares springing up together in the field,
- The net cast into the sea,

- The wind blowing now east and now west,
- The ruddy heavens promising a fair morrow,
- The lowering sky forecasting foul weather.

These and a hundred other homely touches, gave life and animation to the discourses of our Lord.

3. Illustrations drawn from history are not so popular now as they were in the days of the Puritans, whose pages seem to lay under contribution all the resources of heathen mythology and classical story. The preacher of to-day needs to avoid two extremes; he must refrain from referring to facts which are not well understood, and yet he must not fall into triteness. The familiar terms on which he lives with the lives of Caesar or Alexander the Great suggest that he has been ransacking his Cyclopedia of Illustrations, the common pasturage for so many pretentious sermons.

“We have heard much of late about Socrates, but very little about the Saviour,” was the hint which a young preacher received from one of his judicious hearers, and which sent him home resolved to turn from his second-hand storehouse to the words of eternal life.

Yet by a wise employment of historical illustrations you can give prominence to the truth that through all the ages God has been controlling his world, and your experience will no doubt bear out Dean Stanley’s assertion that “of the three great manifestations of God to man - in nature, in conscience, in the course of human events - God in history will to a large part of mankind be the most persuasive” (*Life of A. P. Stanley*, Vol. II., p. 318).

4. Travel and scenery are of especial service to a preacher who is blest with “the painter’s eye,” and who has learned the truth of Shakespeare’s words:

What if earth
Be but the shadow of Heaven, and things therein
Each to the other like, more than on earth is thought.

He is indeed fortunate if he possess in any measure what a critic claims for Tennyson, “the power of compelling the external world to lend him a language for the noblest feelings” (R. H. Hutton, *Essays*, Vol. II., p. 315).

Jeremy Taylor comes back from the fields in springtime and writes, “Every furrow in the book of Psalms is sown with seeds of thanksgiving.”

Spurgeon passes some fine old trees which are marked with a white cross to indicate that they are soon to be cut down”, So,” he comments, “everything we have here is marked with the woodman’s cross, and the axe must fall on all our joys.”

Dr. Raleigh turns from a map of Palestine and commenting upon the danger which besets us of being too much self-enclosed, says that the Christian must beware lest he have “a Dead Sea in the Holy Land of his nature.”

Mark Guy Pearse sees the upward swirl of the turbulent waters just where the tidal current and the strong set of the ocean meet around Cape Horn, swarming with fish which are brought to the surface only to fall victims to the hungry sea-fowl, and he catches the picture of those who are at once too religious to belong to the world and too worldly to belong to religion, torn by both and satisfied by neither.”

“A Christian’s old age,” says another preacher, “may be like Mount Hecla, which bears snow on its crest and a fire in its heart”; in the nests of birds plainly visible on the naked branches, Dr. J. W. Alexander finds a comparison for the hiding places of man discovered by affliction; the remembrance of his father’s orchard gives Beecher an illustration of a good old age: “I think every man ought to carry his boughs so full of fruit that like the apples which drop from silent dew they may fall by the weight of their own ripeness for whoever needs to be refreshed”; “Niagara stopped once,” a preacher of our own time says; “the ice got into it, and the rainbow disappeared and the music was hushed: but no ice ever gets into the stream of God’s love”; and from another pulpit we gather a singularly happy use of the art of navigation:

“The mariner must pay attention to four L’s, namely, the log, the lead, the latitude, and the lookout. The log tells of what is behind, the lead speaks of what is below, the latitude shows what is around, and the lookout declares what is before. And herein is a sea parable, speaking plainly of the voyage of life.”

5. A mine of illustrations too much neglected by most preachers may be found in natural history.

To find how rich the Bible is in allusions to its stores may be alike a discovery and a reproof to him who for the first time makes a study of the plants and trees, the insects, reptiles, and beasts, mentioned in its pages. The works of Dr. Hugh Macmillan will discover to him how an excellent preacher, who is also an enthusiastic lover of nature, can find “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.”

Bunyan knew his garden or he would not have written, “Christians are like the several flowers that have each of them the dew of Heaven which, being shaken with the wind, they let fall at each other’s roots, whereby they are jointly nourished and become nourishers of others”; and the old preacher was no stranger to the barn, who prayed: “When the flail of affliction is upon me, let me not be the chaff that flies in thy face, but let me be the corn that lies at thy feet.”

An Australian pasture, where the cattle seeking for grass find only a brown stalk that crumbled to dust in their mouths, suggests to Dr. Maclaren “the world without Jesus Christ.”

Robertson, of Irvine, draws a lesson from the symbolism of trees when he says: “Some may never carry in their hands the palm branch of fame, some may never hold the olive branch of peace, some never handle the evergreen of hope; but all must bear the myrtle and cypress, as they march on to the dirge-like music of ‘**All flesh is grass.**’”

From the fact mentioned by Mark that Jesus before feeding the multitude made them sit down on “the green grass” (Mark 6:39), Ruskin draws the lesson, “He gave them the seed of the herb; he bade them sit down upon the herb itself, which was as great a gift in its fitness for their joy and rest as its perfect fruit for their sustenance” (*Modern Painters*,” Vol. IV., Chap. XIV). “

“If all that you want out of Christianity,” Professor Drummond says, “is that it shall keep you straight, you cannot get it. Keeping straight is only one of the functions of the new nature. You cannot get a wing without getting a muscle which will work the wing, or the muscle without a bone which will form a fulcrum for the muscle, and you cannot get this bone without getting proportional bones for the rest of the body.”

6. The vast resources of literature offer another most profitable storehouse of pulpit illustration.

Let the preacher make his sermon the richer for Macaulay’s vivid portraits, and the rugged but powerful outlines of Carlyle, and the pathos of Charles Dickens, and the not unkindly home thrusts of Thackeray. Let him profit by the harvest of the quiet eye in many of Wordsworth’s single lines, the rare felicity of Tennyson’s epithets, the noble suggestion of Browning’s “Saul,” the glowing imagery of John Ruskin, and by the often profound reflections of George Eliot, “who has perhaps influenced preachers more than any other novelist.”

Illustrations which are taken from such a book as “*Pilgrim’s Progress*,” from well-known biographies, or from the best literature of the mission field, are often most effective. Into the interleaved Bible may be gathered apt and unusual poetical quotations; and as a general observation it may be said that the great poets of our own language, in whose works so many of the orators of our country have found strength and stimulus, should be the friends and companions of our preachers also.

7. The time has now come when science can be acknowledged as a most powerful ally of religion.

Even a cursory acquaintance with the discoveries and inventions which have made our century so memorable will enrich the preacher’s store of illustrations. Dr. Chalmers’ “Astronomical Discourses” set an example which the pulpit has been very slow to follow, of compelling the fairy tales of science to utter forth God; but probably ignorance more than prejudice is responsible for the neglect of one of the most affluent sources of pulpit illustration. Such ignorance is no longer pardonable.

Suggestions and similes taken from science are available to anyone who will observe the phenomena about him. It is due not to the pulpit alone or chiefly, but rather to him who is alike the subject of its message and the source of its strength that the preacher learns by careful observation to echo David’s burst of praise, “**O Lord, our Lord God, how excellent is thy name in all the earth.**”

8. It is time also that our preachers made far more use than they have hitherto done of art in their pulpit work.

“I am preparing myself,” wrote Prof. H. B. Smith, “to be a better preacher by the study of statuary and painting.” Beecher finds in the two pictures combined in Raphael’s Transfiguration” a figure of human life. Above, Christ often hovers in glorious light; while below, the devil is tearing the child.”

The fact that in a painter's studio he saw high-colored stones used by the artist to restore tone to his eyes when he has been working in pigments which had insensibly weakened his sense of color, suggested to the same preacher the thought that "every day men need to have a sense of the invisible God; to be tuned, chorded, borne up to the ideal of a pure and lofty life. The three points of one of the last addresses which Professor Drummond delivered - first, work; second, God; third, love," - he drew from the pathetic figures of the peasants who are seen resting on their hoes when from the village spire floats the sound of the evening bell, in Millet's "*Angelus*." Thus art becomes more than art as it aids the truth.

V. I conclude by offering some counsels as to the use of illustrations

1. Then, let me say, in your sermons keep illustration subordinate to thought.

Caligula was mad enough at times, but he was quite sane when he criticized the style of Seneca "as sand without lime."

Lord Bacon does well to insist that "reasons are the pillars of discourse, and similitudes the windows."

"Invent first," is the advice of Dr. Samuel Johnson, "and then embellish."

Spurgeon praises Manton, the Puritan, because he was "too intent upon telling his message to think about how his sentences might be adorned."

In his plain-spoken fashion Lyman Beecher counsels, "Never begin to flourish until you have said some thing substantial to build upon"; and to more than one writer is ascribed the happy maxim, "We must never construct ornament, but only ornament construction." The reason for this is apparent if we reflect that "it is the direct affirmation of fact that commands attention" (Dr. Marcus Dods).

We are not putting too much emphasis upon this point when we insist that no amount of illustration will make up for paucity of thought, or even for dullness of style. The jewel in the swine's snout may degrade the jewel, but certainly it does not attract admiration to its unlovely setting.

2. Do not illustrate overmuch.

To do this was the temptation of the Puritans, of the famous preachers of the eighteenth century (and especially of Jeremy Taylor), and in our own times of Thomas Guthrie.

As a rule it may be said that one good illustration is sufficient for each point, and there is danger in multiplying your similes that you obscure or destroy that "simplicity which is essential to true greatness" (William George Ward).

Yet brief illustrations following each other rapidly are often effective.

Spurgeon drives home a truth which needs emphatic enforcement when he says, “Cold prayers are like arrows without heads, swords without edges, birds without wings; they pierce not, they cut not, they fly not up to Heaven. Those prayers that have no heavenly fire in them always freeze before they reach as high as Heaven; but fervent prayer is very prevalent with God.”

In no case is it wise to elaborate an illustration overmuch. “Eloquence,” says Pascal, “is a picture of thought, and those who after having drawn a picture still go on, make a tableau and not a likeness” (Tulloch, *“Life of Pascal,”* p. 168).

For other and more serious reasons, because it is harrowing to the feelings, repulsive to good taste, and often degrading to the subject itself, it is eminently unwise to dwell in detail upon a painful theme. No elaboration can add to the solemn simplicity of the parable of the rich man who **“being in torments lifted up his eyes”** (Luke 16:23).

The reticence of the evangelists in their accounts of the physical sufferings of our Lord should be respected by the preacher when he is describing the crucifixion.

3. It may seem almost a commonplace to ask you to remember that an illustration must illustrate.

But the young preacher is so often beguiled into building an illustration into his sermon because it is beautiful or impressive that the counsel is not wholly unnecessary. There are discourses - and they are not entirely from young preachers either - which in the splendor and futility of their illustrations recall only the

Rich windows that exclude the light,
And passages that lead to nothing.

For this reason it is well to apply your illustration closely and with all your force of rhetoric. If it serves no better purpose than to excite feeling which exhausts itself with no practical effect, an illustration is a hindrance and not a help to the sermon.

The appeals to the sympathy of your hearers by pictures of suffering, by the pathos of a wandering son and a praying mother, or by the harrowing experiences of the deathbed, are of little use, and sometimes they are worse than useless. “An habitual attention to exhibitions of fictitious distress is in every view calculated to check our moral improvement” (Dugald Stewart).

4. I may add that your illustration must be apparent at once. It ought not to need explanation.

For this reason it should be taken by preference from familiar scenes or circumstances.

Recall the illustrations which Jesus used. For Him sufficed the most every-day articles of food and furniture, the commonest incidents of life, the most ordinary scenes and sounds of nature. The hen and her chickens, the leaking wine-skins of the vintner, the burning of autumn weeds, the peasant woman patching the old clothes of her husband or her boys, were not too trivial to be turned into themes for divine instruction by the Lord of glory. Such teaching is ever real and fresh and vivid. - Archdeacon Farrar.

5. Be sure also that your illustrations are suitable.

Without elaborating them, take care to make them fit the subject of the sermon and the circumstances of its delivery. We cease to wonder at the good taste and appropriateness which mark John Bright's illustrations when we learn with what pains he prepared them" (*"Life of Bishop Wilberforce,"* p. 436. *"Life of Dr. James Hamilton,"* pp. 140, 141. See also Davies' *"Successful Preachers,"* pp. 107, 328).

(1) Experience will teach you that an illustration which is good in one place and at one time may fail or positively offend when used under different circumstances.

Study your audience, their occupations and manner of life, their places of abode, training, and tastes.

Dr. John Ker wisely counsels the young preacher; "If you have to choose between the nightingale and the lark, by all means take the lark: it you have to choose between the passion-flower and the daisy, select the daisy; the people know the lark and the daisy, and they love them. They would rather hear of some Familiar matter of to-day, Some natural sorrow, loss, or pain, That hath been and may be again, than of 'old, unhappy, far-off things, and battles long ago.' "

(2) Equally important is it that your illustrations should be suitable to the circumstances under which they are used. Religion is too severe a matter to be treated in a trivial or jesting spirit.

Figures of speech may be in place in a platform speech which are not to be tolerated in the sermon.

Rowland Hill was often carried beyond the bounds of pulpit propriety by his sense of humor. It was lowering his subject to compare the love of our Lord to a large round of beef, from which "you may cut and come again." No worthy purpose was served, even with a coarse and illiterate crowd of hearers, when he said: "'You all know how difficult it is to catch a pig by the tail: you will find it equally so to catch the love of our Lord after backsliding."

(3) Another word of warning may be allowed here. Beware of inaccuracy in your illustrations.

Know of what you are talking when you take your similes from nature or science or the occupations of the men and women to whom you are speaking.

It was perplexing to any student of history when a Scotch preacher waxed eloquent over "the happy days that Cain and Abel had spent in their ancestral halls."

A preacher in the neighborhood of the London docks pictured a ship at sea when wind and water roared wildly around it, and not content with asking, "Under such circumstances what did the captain do?" proceeded to answer his own inquiry, "Why keep close to the land, to be sure."

This was more than one old sailor in the congregation could stand, and he muttered aloud, “Why don’t he say, ‘Keep her nose to the wind?’ “

“Begging your pardon,” interpolated another old salt, by way of correcting a mistake as to the signal light carried by ships into which a well-known bishop had fallen when preaching on a New York pier, “It’s the green light as hangs on the starboard and the red light to port, sir.”

The elder in a Scottish parish made no mistake when, being himself a farmer, he counseled his young pastor: “There’s John: now speak to him on any subject except plowing and sowing, for John is sure to remark your deficiency on these, which he perfectly understands; and if he should detect that you dinna ken about plowing and sowing, he’ll no gie ye credit for understanding anything else.”

On the other hand, if you will take the pains to acquaint yourself with the daily life of your congregation, no illustrations will be so sure to find a ready lodgment in their minds as those which come home to their practical experience.

Edward Irving, it may be remembered, conquered the prejudices of the infidel shoemaker and won him to the church and to Christ by “ kennin’ a’ about leather.”

6. Once more, I advise that you make your Study Bible the storehouse for your illustrations.

If the illustration which you desire to preserve can be cut out, paste it on the interleaved page. Where this is not possible, copy the quotation in full; or else in the margin opposite to the verse which it seems most aptly to illustrate write the reference to the volume in your library where it may be found. Thus in time your own Bible will become a rich and increasing treasury of material from which to illustrate your discourses.

~ end of chapter 18 ~

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