

## LECTURE IV.

### *THE SAME TOPICS CONTINUED.*

**I** RESUME, young gentlemen, the remarks which the expiration of my hour arrested, upon the proper nature of the practical sermon. I was remonstrating against vagueness in the application of obligations to duty upon the conscience. But there is an error to be avoided on the other side. There are species of details which are unsuitable for the pulpit. I do not conceive that much of casuistry should be introduced into practical sermons. This belongs rather to the pastor's study than to the desk. The minute distinctions by which nice cases are to be adjusted, if they be addressed to a promiscuous company of persons not vitally interested in the particular problem, will be surely misunderstood by many. Thus they will minister to the morbid scruples of some consciences and to the license of others. And even in our private instructions love is the best casuist. Let the great principles of gospel love be presented with a breadth and warmth which, instead of dissecting, will dissipate the doubt.

Nor should the preacher, under pretence of definiteness, encumber his sermons with secular details of the means for executing a duty which has been established. He may be assured that the attempt to do this will lead

him at once out of his province. He will enjoin on mechanics Christian honesty and fidelity to engagements; he will urge the agriculturist to diligence for the glory of God. But let him not then proceed to instruct the former of the materials and species of workmanship to be employed for executing faithful work, nor presume to dictate to the latter a rotation of crops. He would thus cease to be a minister of religion, and would be only a master among his apprentices.

In like manner I conclude that good habits or virtues of very narrow extent, or of secular concernment, should not be selected as prominent subjects of practical sermons. The preacher, for instance, who should fill his hour with recommendations to the habit of neatness, or of method in little things, would be but trifling. The Sabbath time of candidates for immortality in this fleeting world should have a more momentous concern. Let the grave truths and duties of the gospel be urged to save these souls in Christ; the vital grace which will then actuate them will, with very few words, set them aright touching all these minor morals. Is it argued that Christ has told us, "he that is faithful in the least things is faithful also in the greater;" that the apostle Paul requires us even when "we eat and drink to do all to the glory of God," and that the Holy Ghost, speaking by Solomon, did not disdain to teach that "he that hateth suretyships is sure," and that "much increase is by the strength of the ox"? I reply: let the preacher, like the sacred writers, inculcate these propositions as definite principles indeed, but not in beggarly details, and let him give them that small relative space in his sermons which the all-wise Spirit has given them

in the Bible. This will secure him against the error which I oppose.

The third class, of narrative or historical sermons, is not different in one aspect from the other two. Its peculiarity is that by employing the parables, biographies, and historics of the Scriptures, it teaches in the concrete. The truths taught may be either doctrinal or practical. It may be conceded that the practical is more frequent in these narratives, but doctrines are not excluded.

That this method of presenting truth should be often employed, might be inferred from the fact that more than half of the revealed Scriptures is narrative or biography. God, who knows what is in man, has evidently judged this a suitable way to instruct him. Experience shows that it is the way most intelligible and pleasing to the popular mind. Nor are the reasons of this obscure. A perspicuous narrative, with its lifelike personages and successive incidents leading to their catastrophe, presents the simplest food of curiosity, which is the appetite of the mind. The truths embodied thus are more vividly apprehended. Presented in the concrete, they relieve us in the labours of abstraction and generalization, which are so irksome to the common mind. This method has all the advantage of illustration over naked argument. As the picture of a human face is more intelligible than a verbal description, or as one derives a clearer view of a region from a map of its parts than from the reading of the field-notes of its survey, so is the narrative embodying a truth more perspicuous and pleasing than a didactic statement. Would the preacher define and recommend

the virtue of constancy in the right? The history of Daniel does it better than all his definitions and arguments. Would he illustrate faith? He has Abraham. In Peter at the cock-crowing he finds true penitence painted. Christ weeping over reprobate Jerusalem shows us compassion more distinctly than any description can.

The fact that the preacher is merely the herald to deliver God's message is sufficient to answer the question whence the materials for narrative sermons are to be drawn. The reply is: primarily from the Bible. The main storehouse is the parables and histories deposited there. Nowhere else have we sufficient guarantee for the certainty of the events and the impartiality of the portraiture. But I am persuaded that authentic and instructive incidents in the history of the Church, and in the lives of the martyrs, and even of the saints of our age, might be used with excellent effect, as subordinate illustrations of truth. The preacher, in employing these, should see to it, first, that the events recited be of unquestioned authenticity, and next, that they be of congruous seriousness and dignity.

While the narrative method is so valuable to the preacher, its peculiar difficulties should not be concealed. One of these will be found in the recital itself, by which he places the events before his hearers. It must be specific, that it may be graphic; for unless there is defined outline, there is no picture. Yet it must be brief, lest it should weary. If he employs the very words of the sacred narrative, he seems to his audience not to be an orator, but the mere repeater of a familiar lesson. If he paraphrases it in his own language, then he is set

in dangerous contrast with the inspired story, which the hearer has before him. For such is the life, compactness, expressiveness, eloquence of the scriptural histories, he must be no mean artist whose recital of the same events does not suffer by comparison with theirs. But, for the tyro, the chief difficulty of historical sermons is to catch correctly the precise didactic scope of the sacred narrative, and to limit himself to it. Certain schools, of even Protestant preachers, have given us deplorable examples of error here. They have used the plain histories of the Bible as though they were riddles for the exercise of an ingenious fancy. They have formed allegories where the Holy Ghost has warranted them in seeing none. They have interpreted these histories as though any analogy which a vagrant imagination could invent, between a Bible fact and a supposed moral, were a perfect demonstration that this was the truth which the Spirit intended to teach in that place. Your own good sense should show you that a mode of interpretation cannot be correct, which enables different men to extract the most variant meanings from the same words. It is utterly condemned by what has been established concerning the preacher's mission. He has naught to do save to deliver God's message out of the Scriptures; his only concern is with the intended meaning of the Holy Ghost in the place expounded. Hence, in a narrative sermon, the preacher's first task must be to ascertain faithfully, from the whole context, the precise scope of the Spirit in placing these events in the infallible record. What principles of truth or duty did He here illustrate to the Church? This must be his topic; and nothing else. When Moses tells us

how Jacob made for his darling son a coat of many colours, we are not authorized to teach our hearers that the righteousness of the saints was there presented in type. We have only an infallible portraiture of the mischiefs which parental partiality may work. When another prophet tells us how the priests of Dagon in Ekron, professing to desire the restoration of the ark of God to its sanctuary, shut up the calves at home from the unbroken kine which drew the cart, he does not give us an allegory to teach us the exclusion of infants from membership in Zion. He only intends to teach us the dishonesty of unbelief. The perverse taste for thus abusing the historical Scriptures may be accounted for, in part, by the influence of such books as Bunyan's "Temple of Solomon Spiritualized;" but more, by a guilty vanity in preachers, who desire to make the multitude gape with some mighty conceit of their wisdom.

To overcome these difficulties, no little good sense, taste and diligence in the preacher are required. A fine narrative sermon is perhaps the highest work of sacred oratory, and demands the greatest skill. But it is also the most attractive species of sermon.

Under this class comes what has been called, in the modern religious cant, the "occasional sermon." This is a discourse headed by some words of Scripture, which professes to employ some grave or startling event of the day to enforce the principle of religion suggested by the text. Thus, the death of a popular public man, the fatal wreck of a ship, a conflagration, or a flood, produces in some quarters a shower of these occasional sermons. The plea for their defence is drawn from the

doctrine of divine providence directing these instructive occurrences, and from the utility of improving the impressions which they make on the sensibilities of men. But a sound taste will usually condemn the custom. Facts show that the apparent awe produced by these catastrophes is not directed by such sermons to a sacred end. The more usual result is the gratifying of curiosity and the unwholesome love for new sensations. The explanation of this is not difficult: it is found in the fact that these discourses are almost unavoidably social, instead of spiritual, in tone. The practical effect of the very selection of this event, as of sufficient gravity to displace God's own word and occupy the sermon, is of itself fulsome. It seems to say, "So important a people are we, the death of our public servant, the sinking of our ship, the burning of our town. rivals in moment the mighty events of Eden and Calvary." The pulpit-sycophant, usually, does not fail to reflect this overweening idea in all his style. His whole effort is to exalt and exaggerate the tremendous occurrence; whereas the real duty of the pulpit is to endeavour, both by act and word, to sink all human events into insignificance beside the sublime facts of redemption. The acute observer, accordingly, does not fail to perceive that the main effect of these commemorative sermons is to inflate the self-importance, instead of alarming the impenitence, of the hearers. If there is any force in the plea that these striking extemporaneous events may and should be employed to impress divine truth (as I freely admit), this good end may almost always be sufficiently gained, by introducing the incident, with suitable modesty and brevity, in the application of scriptural truth, during

a customary sermon. By this means, all is made of such events which can be legitimately made of them, and good taste and propriety are saved.

The funereal discourse is also usually classed under narrative sermons. Upon this species of sacred eloquence I must pass the same verdict with that given against the occasional sermon. Against the custom of delivering a gospel sermon at a funeral I say nothing. But this is wholly distinct from the funereal sermons proper, where the preacher is expected to delineate the life and character of the deceased, to pronounce a pious eulogy upon them, and to determine the destiny of their souls for heaven. Such discourses are usually unmingled evils. There are a few of God's servants whose sanctity is so universally approved even by those who are without, and on whom the Redeemer has so manifestly set his divine image, that it may be the pastor's duty to urge their example upon the Church. But if he is wise, he will find exceedingly few instances of such; and in all other cases he will content himself with presenting at the funeral some appropriate gospel truth without encomium upon the dead. To commend this rule, the consideration of taste urged above will usually be sufficient. It is fulsome for us to set any human character, or career habitually in competition with the gospel in the claim upon men's attention. The preacher is often liable to the odious imputation of prostituting his holy office to gratify the social importance of survivors. If he is honest, he will, of course, only applaud those whom he honestly esteemed as true Christians. But when he is called to bury others, of whom he cannot but have an ill opinion, he

must observe an absolute silence. This itself, standing in contrast with his customary eulogies of others, is a significant reproach, and is felt by the bereaved as such. It is better, therefore, to avoid the dilemma by a uniform silence. But chiefly, the tendency of funereal eulogies is to degrade, in the estimation of the hearers, the standard of that piety which is necessary to save the soul. The pastor should remember that he is probably more ignorant than any one else of the blemishes of the brethren. Before him they are always reserved. When he visits them, they array themselves in their Sunday clothing and their Sunday manners at once. If he has the dignity of bearing appropriate to a pastor, the tongue of the tattler is stilled in his presence, which elsewhere ventilates so freely the faults of his neighbours. Hence, there is usually danger lest the people should be possessed of a just suspicion against the deceased, of whom the good pastor knows and speaks only praise. If his error is glaring, his credit for good sense and discretion is fatally wounded; if the discrepancy is slighter, the tendency of his eulogy is to produce the impression that redemption is an easy task, and heaven may be lightly won. For has not the preacher seen this man enter that blessed place? "And yet," say the people to themselves, "we know how sorry a racer he was in the Christian course." I ask, emphatically, are they not the few in our churches, whose faith and hope are so approved and clear that they themselves judge any other sentiments appropriate, in view of death, than solemn awe and trembling doubts? Now, since good manners forbid the pastor to re-echo their own estimate of themselves, and since honesty forbids his

uttering the contrary one, his wisdom will usually be to say nothing upon the subject.

You will observe that I have said nothing of hortatory sermons as a separate class. In strictness of speech there should be none such. Action is only produced by conviction. The only legitimate weapon of conviction is the truth. The well-ordered, warm, and logical argument is indirectly the best exhortation you can apply. Direct exhortation, which is not founded on argument, is meaningless. There are sermons, sometimes called hortatory, in which the appeals to the conscience and will are grounded on simple and obvious truths. Here the direct argumentation may be exceedingly brief. "Life is uncertain, therefore prepare to-day for its end." The ground of hortation is disputed by none, and so requires no argument; yet is the appeal based upon a reason, which is not the less a reason because it is very conclusive to every mind. But there is another just sense in which all sermons are hortatory; for have we not learned that the characteristic of the orator is to impel his hearers to some action?

This review of the three classes of sermons will assist the pastor in cultivating that variety, within scriptural limits, which is so useful to interest and instruct his people. By preaching doctrinally, practically, and historically, with judicious alternations, he will show himself "a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth."<sup>1</sup> Not a few young pastors are harassed with the fear of exhausting their stores of instruction. They dread, with a species of terror,

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Tim. ii. 15; see also Matt. xiii. 52.

the time when they will have discussed all the topics of redemption, and will have nothing more to say, except they repeat. And unfortunately this fear is confirmed by the dulness of too many of their seniors. They even argue a justification of their fear, saying: "Is not the circle of revealed truths a definite one? Are not the points which are of sufficient importance to require or permit pulpit discussion limited in number? Then after a time that circle must be completed by the pastor. And just in the degree that his treatment of the several parts has been what it ought to be, thorough, perspicuous, impressive to the memory, will he find himself precluded from a second discussion; for if the right things were said by him at first, shall he now say the same things? Or shall he say new things which are less correct?" The answer to these difficulties is, that while the truths which make up the circle of gospel theology are limited in number, their applications to the different phases of human experience and character are infinite. The true pastor will find a fountain of inexhaustible variety if he will become acquainted with his own heart and the hearts of his charge. Faithful communion with himself, under the guidance of the Word, and an intimate inquiry into the wants of the souls over whom he watches, with diligent study, will always furnish him out of his treasury with things new and old. He will find his mind so teeming with scriptural and timely topics of instruction that his only difficulty will be to find occasions enough to present them.