

LECTURE VI.

THE TEXT.

THE student will bear in mind that by "the Text" I intend that passage of Scripture which introduces and contains the sermon, whether it is a single proposition, or even clause of Scripture, or a portion of many verses to be expounded. When we proceed, therefore, to the rules for selecting texts, our matter divides itself naturally into two parts.

The selection of the text for an expository sermon has virtually been discussed in previous remarks. The reasons urged for this mode of preaching will usually dictate, that the pastor shall treat some important book of the Scripture "in course." What books he shall select must be determined by his pastoral experience and good judgment. They should obviously be such as are rich in evangelical facts and doctrines, and so chosen that, taken as a whole, they will form a complete outline of the system of revealed religion. But the book to be expounded being chosen, no farther question as to the choice of the text may be supposed to remain; the preacher's work is laid out ready to his hand. This is usually true, save that an important point remains—the fixing of the *termini* of the passage to be treated in the next sermon. The extent of Scrip-

ture to be embraced must be determined partly by its richness in matter. If the passage be very fruitful, a smaller compass can be taken. If it consist largely of perspicuous narrative, or such-like detail, not requiring explanation, the preacher may despatch a much longer portion. But the chief consideration to guide him here will be the unity of the topic. He will terminate his exposition for the occasion, where he finds such a natural change of subject as introduces independent matter. And in choosing this *terminus* he will pay little regard to those artificial divisions into chapters and verses which, as you know, have no inspired origin, and are often far from judicious or discriminating.

A few more detailed remarks may be necessary for the selection of single texts. I hardly need repeat the rule, that they should belong either to the class of capital texts or of epitome texts. And the theory of the preacher's function which I have asserted will show you, without many words of mine, that it is never proper to employ a text as a mere *motto* to introduce the sermon. This vicious usage degrades the Bible into a mere collection of literary apophthegms. Nor will the true minister select and mature his subject in his own mind, and then seek a text for it. The sermon should not dictate the choice of a text, but the text should determine the whole character of the sermon. But, affirmatively, I would impose the following rules:

1. The text should be God's word. This rule has not been to all preachers as self-evident as you may suppose. Nor will one be sure of its observance by seeking his texts always within the Bible. He will, of course, not take them from the Apocrypha. Nor

will he found a sermon on a faulty rendering of the English version, nor on a false or questionable reading of the original. For even though, in the case last mentioned, the preacher may honestly believe that he can clear away the question as to the genuineness of the reading, it will be better for him to leave the text unused, than to inflict upon an audience so little accustomed to critical discussion the arguments which will make them think with him. But the chief danger of violence to this rule is in the adoption of sentiments uttered by mere men and recorded in the Scriptures, as texts for sermons. The thoughtlessness of preachers in this particular is illustrated by the divine mentioned by Dr. George Campbell,¹ who took the words of Satan to Eve (Gen. iii. 5), "Ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil," as a text to discuss the future glory of the Christian. So another was betrayed into adopting the words of Gamaliel (Acts v. 38), "If this counsel or this work be of men, it will come to naught," as a scriptural and infallible maxim. You will observe that the only thing for which inspiration makes itself responsible in such a passage is the truth that this man actually did utter these words, and that they, with their attendant circumstances, are recorded with perfect historical correctness. When the book of Acts tells us that Festus exclaimed, "Paul, thou art beside thyself: much learning doth make thee mad," are we to understand the inspired historian as vouching for the apostle's lunacy, and for the still more false assertion that learning causes madness? It is preposterous: all that the inspiration

¹ Sacred Eloquence, Lec. VII.

of Luke guarantèes is the simple fact, that this scene did occur, and that this wretched pagan, Festus, was a sufficiently great fool to utter this slander and nonsense. I need not point out to you how much more preposterous it would be for the Christian minister to wrest the sacred narrative so as to make the Holy Ghost teach either that learning produces lunacy, or that St. Paul was a madman. I have selected an extreme instance in order to give you a plain caution against this mistake. Yet there are two cases in which the things done or spoken by uninspired men, but recorded by inspiration, may be made the foundations of sermons, if they meet the other requirements. There may be a sanction of the act or sentiment by the Holy Ghost which is sufficiently intimated in the context or in the other Scriptures. If this sanction is sufficiently ascertained, then the words of man are covered by the infallibility of God, and are therefore of authority to us. The other case is that in which the sentiment or act of the uninspired creature, although not sanctioned as either right or true, may give an instructive example of some scriptural truth. Thus, the preacher may not take the falsehood of Satan (Gen. iii. 5) as authority for teaching the future deification of the minds of believers: he might perhaps use it as an illustration of the important fact, that those who tempt to sin, like their father, usually employ some flattering lie. Or the story may teach us, as Eve learned by her sore experience, that an overweening ambition leads in the end to disaster instead of gain.

2. The text must be accepted and discussed only in the very sense which it had in the mind of the Spirit

as he uttered it. The preacher has no concern with, and no right to, any other. It is nervously remarked by the Rev. Richard Cecil, that "the meaning of the Scripture is the Scripture." The propriety of my law is plain from the fact that the preacher is a herald, and that it is God's word which is committed to him as his instrument for the redemption of men. If his task is to deliver and commend God's message, what right has he to change it or to represent it as other than it is? Besides the risk of giving a fatal and specific wrong guidance to some soul in the very perversion of that particular proposition of Scripture, such a custom confuses the minds of hearers in their efforts to understand the word, and cultivates irreverent feelings toward its authority. The falsehood of that man is full of impiety, who, avowedly standing up in a sacred place to declare God's message to perishing souls, says that the Holy Spirit has said what he has not said. I would impress you with a solemn awe of taking any liberties in expounding the word. I would have you feel that every meaning of the text, other than that which God expressly intended it to bear, is forbidden fruit to you, however plausible and attractive—fruit which you dare not touch on peril of a fearful sin. One may ask, "Am I not justified, provided the meaning I give, although not actually placed in that text by the Holy Ghost, is still a scriptural truth taught elsewhere in the Word?" I answer, No; this is only a palliation. This secures you from positively destroying the souls of your hearers by giving them, then and there, false directions as to the way of life. But the license still does mischief; because it confuses and misleads them in reading the

Scriptures and undermines their reverence and confidence toward you and them.

The exact mind of the Spirit in the text must then be ascertained, before you presume to preach on it. The methods for doing this, by the grammatical study of the original with all accessible learned helps, and by meditation on the context and the connection of thought in which God has placed the passage, belong rather to the science of interpretation than to sacred rhetoric. I need only add that a proper apprehension of the preacher's mission will make him intensely honest and prayerful in his study. My second rule is violated when the text is discussed in a sense which it bears while disjoined from the context. Thus the words of Rom. xiv. 23, "Whatsoever is not of faith is sin," when read without any attention to the apostle's scope, have been wrested to teach the doctrine that the obedience of a sinner cannot be accepted by God until he is a justified believer. This is a scriptural truth; it might be correctly preached, for instance, from Heb. xi. 6: "But without faith it is impossible to please Him." But when we advert to the subject of Rom. xiv. 23, we find that the inspired author is speaking of the sin of disregarding positive precepts of the old ceremonial law, while the conscience and judgment were still in suspense concerning their obligation on Christians. So that the meaning of his concluding proposition is, every act is wrong which is not prompted by a full conviction of its lawfulness. A similar error was committed when a venerable prelate chose the words of Ezek. xxxvii. 3, "Son of man, can these bones live?" to preach at the funeral of a Christian the doctrine of the resurrection

of the body. The death and the resurrection of that text are both symbolical, and God's question is, whether a people so obdurate and ruined as the Jews then were could be restored.

The rule is sometimes violated by taking the mere illustration for the truth illustrated; as when Blair founds a sermon touching "the Sentiments Appropriate to Middle Age" on the words of 1 Cor. xiii. 11, "But when I became a man, I put away childish things." The apostle merely borrows this fact from the history of his youth, to explain the difference between the spiritual knowledge of the Christian in his militant, and that of his glorified state.

The rule is also outraged by all those liberties in accommodating texts which are so common even in our own pulpits. I have heard more than one Presbyterian minister derive from the words of God to Moses (Ex. xiv. 15), "Speak unto the children of Israel that they go forward," the proposition, that it is the duty of the Church to make ecclesiastical and spiritual advancements. What is this more than a species of sober punning on the words, "Go forward"? All that the expositor is entitled to draw from this incident, for instruction of modern Christians, is the plain principle which finds example in this command to Israel, and its issue. And that principle is, that the people of God must "walk by faith and not by sight;" that they must regard the express command, and not the seeming obstacle. A very different thought, truly! These familiar instances have been detailed to guard you against violations of this imperative rule.

3. No passage of Scripture is suitable for a text

which does not contain a distinct and important point. Because a sentence is a part of that Scripture which is declared to be all inspired and all profitable, it does not follow that it is a suitable proposition to furnish instruction for a sermon. Every continuous composition must contain many passages which are not cardinal, but yet are necessary to connect those that are. Let the student compare Rom. i. 10, "Making request (if by any means now at length I might have a prosperous journey by the will of God) to come unto you," with Rom. iii. 28, "Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the law." The former is only incidental to the introduction of the Epistle. The latter is a great truth falling at once under the classes of the capital and the epitome texts, containing the designed summation of a most important inspired argument, and a doctrine of prime rank in the theology of redemption. He who should attempt to make a whole sermon of the former must needs trifle or go out of his text. The latter furnishes grave matter for a volume. That conceit of some of the Puritan divines, which caused them to compose a separate sermon on each verse of a book of Scripture or of a Psalm was therefore but a serious trifling. Under an appearance of great reverence and value for the Scripture, it really misrepresented and perverted its fair meaning. The Holy Spirit did not mean a sermon in every sentence he uttered: it is incorrect for us to represent him so.

Under this rule I would also embrace the maxim of *Claude*, in his celebrated treatise of the "Composition of the Sermon," notwithstanding the opposition to it of some respectable writers. He requires that the text

shall be so taken as to contain not only a distinct, but a complete, compass of inspired truth. We must not take for discussion, he teaches, less of the passage than will give us the whole thought of the author expressed in that place upon the one point. For example, let the passage under consideration be 2 Cor. i. 3, 4. The text is not complete if we stop with the words, "Blessed be God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercy and the God of all comfort." Nor does it become complete if we add only the words, "who comforteth us in all our afflictions." We must proceed farther, and include also the design: "That we may be able to comfort them who are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God." For the apostle's topic here being his own gospel consolation, we have not fairly represented his thought until we cite all that he states on that point in that sentence. The reason which requires this completeness in the text is, that otherwise our presentation of the truth is fragmentary, and therefore incorrect. The objection to this requirement is not valid. It is argued that the rule compels the preacher to include perhaps more particulars concerning the topic than his time permits him thoroughly to discuss. The objectors claim that, if his discussion is faithful to the meaning of inspiration as far as it goes, this is enough, though it is fragmentary. I reply that our expository theory of the sermon leads us to a different conclusion: the preacher has no other task than to unfold the mind of the Spirit. And the whole force of the objection is removed by the remark that it is always legitimate for us, after having fairly stated, in paraphrase or sum-

mary, the whole meaning of the word, to inform our hearers that we limit ourselves, for the time, to the particular discussion of a part of the matter given us by the text.

4. The text should be perspicuous. The amount of our fourth rule is that the pastor will always prefer a passage of Scripture from which the meaning can be made plain to the people by a simple exposition, rather than one which would require an exegesis difficult and prolix. If the two passages compared contain substantially the same truth, let the simple one by all means be the preferred text. This rule will, of course, receive some modification from the facts that the preacher's business is to explain the Bible to his charge, and that there are a few truths of revelation not unworthy of occasional inculcation which are taught only in obscure passages. Must you wholly rob your people of this instruction because you can only introduce them to it by a somewhat laborious exposition? Surely not. And it may be wise sometimes to tax the powers of your spiritual pupils to their highest bent, in order to strengthen them. Should you push the principle so far as to forego every text which required your explanation, this would be a confession that the calling of the religious teacher is unnecessary—that the people understand all they need know without his help. You will, therefore, accept this rule as general only and not universal.

But I would urge, much more absolutely, that you should never indulge the affectation of choosing odd or curious texts. Some ministers are fond of selecting passages from which they may ingeniously deduce far-

fetched and unexpected propositions. Others perversely prefer to found the discussion of some well-known doctrine which is expressly taught in many plain declarations of the Bible, on some unusual text from which it can only be drawn, if at all, as a remote corollary, or obscure implication. These tricks are always attributed by sensible hearers to the preacher's vanity and conceit. They suspect that his prime motive is to cause people to gaze and gape at his ingenuity and wondrous learning. When the strange text is announced, it is intended that each hearer shall say to himself, "Now how on earth will he get anything from that?" But when the preacher has solved the riddle they will applaud him as a wondrous man! Only idle and shallow people can be pleased thus; to the well-instructed all such artifices are odious.

The plea may be made that it is lawful and desirable the preacher should evince the riches and harmony of the Scripture, by thus disclosing the same cardinal truths as taught by implication in the obscure, which are expressly set forth in the plain passages. True. It is claimed also that the pastor should not be ever teaching his people "which be the first principles of the oracles of God," but should so exercise their discernment by reason of use, as to solve for them the more difficult parts. True again; but the reasonable and natural order for each sermon is the same which governs the whole course of instruction. We proceed from the simple to the complex. The perspicuous passage should be the text, and the preacher should then apply this to solve the more remote and obscure. The latter he may skilfully introduce in the course of his discussion, after

the clearer text has prepared the way, that its light may be thrown upon them and thus facilitate their comprehension.

There are particular texts which are almost classical in the Protestant pulpit, and which in each generation have been made the foundations for great sermons upon capital topics of Christianity. Shall the young pastor attempt these? I reply, that his good taste will lead him to avoid such a treatment of them as will suggest to cultivated hearers the idea of either imitation or rivalry of the known master-pieces. But, on the other hand, it is both his duty and his wisdom to dwell most frequently on these grand subjects. As they occupy the major place in revelation, so must they in his preaching. And he who never grapples with great subjects will never have great powers.

In conclusion, the pastor should study appropriateness in his selections of subjects and texts. A sermon to be followed by the sacrament of the Lord's Supper should present some central doctrine of the cross. When God's providences call the people to humiliation, some topic of divine truth should be urged which displays the holiness of the Law and the evil of sin. When the people are bowed in true repentance they need the consolations of the gospel. The minister preaching by invitation to another pastor's charge will be chary in employing topics of reprehension. The people will receive such correction, if it be timely, more suitably from their own spiritual guide.