

PRESENTATION: PRESENTING A SERMON

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past nine lectures we have looked at the essential elements of sermon preparation:

1. Preparation: How to prepare to preach
2. Selection: How to select a text
3. Interrogation: How to examine your text
4. Variation: How to vary your sermons
5. Introduction: How to introduce your sermons
6. Organisation (1): How to organise a sermon – The Principles
7. Organisation (2): How to organise a sermon – The Practice
8. Application (1): How to apply a sermon – The Principles
9. Application (2): How to apply a sermon – The Practice

We now come to the final lecture:

10. Presentation: How to deliver a sermon.

The behind-the-scenes work is over, and now the sermon is brought out into the light of day. How, then, are we to deliver what we have prepared? What should we bear in mind as we open our mouths to speak in God's name? What will enhance our delivery of God's Word? These are the questions we wish to address in this lecture.

I. PURITY

No amount of theological substance nor oratorical skills will make up for a preacher's lack of personal holiness. This is true if the pastor obviously does not practice what he preaches. However, it is also true when the inconsistency is not so public – when there is secret and private sin. The spiritually discerning among God's people can detect when the preacher's life does not match his lips. They may not be able to put their finger on it, and they may not be able to put their instincts into words, but they will have an unease, a sense of something not quite right, which will undermine and render impotent much that the preacher says.

Equally though, purity of life will lend a power to a preacher's words which cannot be explained by the substance nor style of his words. There will be an unction from on high, a moral and spiritual power which will impress and influence even the hardest of hearers. Dabney said:

The hearer's apprehension of their minister's character is a most important element in his power of persuasion....The pastor's character speaks more loudly than his tongue.¹

II. PRAYER

There is no secret behind powerful preaching – apart from secret prayer. The biggest mistake we can make as preachers is to think that we can learn to preach powerfully from books, from seminars, from lectures on preaching. No, for preaching to be powerful it must be preceded by, accompanied with, and followed by prayer.

¹ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 261.

It is prayer that imparts reality to our sermons. It makes God real to us – His holiness, His power, His love. It makes sin real to us. It makes heaven and hell real to us. It makes eternity real to us. Such reality transforms mere lectures, talks, and Bible studies into living and life-changing sermons. This cannot be learned from books, manufactured or imitated.

The godly preacher will tell you that one of the worst feelings in the world is to stand up to preach in the knowledge that you have hardly prayed about the sermon; that you have spent too long on preparing the sermon and not enough on preparing yourself. Few things drain the power from a sermon as much as prayerless preparation and delivery.

Preachers should cultivate the practice of not only praying before and after preaching, but during it. After every main point, or perhaps even after every sub-point, the preacher should briefly pause and silently pray for God to bless what has just been said and to guide in what is yet to be said. If you use notes then why not insert the word “PRAY” between each point in order to remind you. It will soon become an unconscious and unprompted habit.

III. PERSONALITY

“Be yourself.” Sounds simple. But, it’s a real struggle. Acting is so easy – and common. It is common for young preachers to act older than their years. It is common for old preachers to act like teenagers. It is common for many preachers to act like a preacher they admire.

However, it is part of the preacher’s task to be what God has made them to be. Yes, improve talents. Yes, grow in knowledge. Yes, learn from others. Be the best “you” you can be. But, “Be yourself.”

Don’t rebel against how God has made you and gifted you. God has fitted you and suited you for a particular time, place, and people. To try and be like someone or something else will only hinder your ministry. It is hard for people to accept your words are sincere if they detect that you are not sincere. If you are going to imitate anyone, imitate the Master who, as Clifford Pond said, “Did natural things spiritually and spiritual things naturally.”

The older writers on homiletics argued that preaching should be your natural form of speaking – only somewhat amplified. Shun all affectation and artificiality. Let your voice be natural. Let your gestures be natural. Let your personality, with all its faults, be the vehicle of transporting the words of life to never-dying souls.

IV. POSTURE

One of the verses which the preacher should always keep before him is, “We are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Cor.5:20).

On the one hand we are not ambassadors for earthly monarchs, with all the aloofness and detachment that implies. We are ambassadors of Christ, the one who ate and drank with publicans and sinners. Arrogance and pride do not fit abassadors of the Servant-King

On the other hand we are ambassadors, which implies a responsibility to represent our King accurately, and to communicate the serious message we have been given with dignity, sobriety, solemnity, and fearlessness. We are not in the pulpit to have a casual, hands-in-pocket chat with some friends. Our clothing, posture, demeanour, and expression all preach their own sermon and carry their own message into the hearts of our hearers.

Every tone, and look, and gesture, from the moment he enters the pulpit until he leaves it, the structure of every sentence in his sermon, should reveal a soul in which levity, self-seeking and vanity are annihilated by the absorbing sense of divine things.²

V. PRONUNCIATION

The preacher has a number of God-given voice tools in his vocal toolbox:

1. Volume

There is no point in preaching if we do not speak so as to be heard. The voice should be loud enough to be heard by all throughout the whole sermon. Volume should flow naturally from the subject material and its impact on our own hearts. It should not be manufactured.

2. Diction

Many people mistakenly think that volume is the most important factor in making ourselves heard. It's not. It's diction – the clarity with which words are spoken. People will hear even the whispers of someone who clearly separates and articulates all the consonants and syllables of his words without slurring, mumbling, or omission. Equally, without diction, the loudest voice in the world will be just a noise to the hearers.

3. Tone

Tone refers not so much to the volume of the note but the pitch of it. The voice has a wide range of tones from low bass notes to high alto notes. In our everyday speech our tone varies with mood and circumstance. This natural variety should be carried into the pulpit in order to avoid unnatural monotony. Normally, sermons begin with a low tone/pitch and usually heightens as the sermon progresses to application.

4. Emphasis

When we talk to people, we naturally emphasise what we most want our hearer to listen to. We do this by an increase in volume, diction, or tone for a word or two. This natural “tool” for making one word or phrase stand out from the rest is an important and much underused vocal asset.

5. Pace

Another “tool” is pace. Regular and appropriate variations in pace make listening easier. Care should be taken not to speak like a train – and also not to speak like a tortoise.

Wise insertion of pauses allow the truth to sink in and influence the heart before moving on to the next point. Sermons without pauses are like the flat stones which are skimmed across the surface of the water. They make shallow and temporary impressions on the surface as they skate along. Pauses allow the pebbles of truth to sink down and stay down.

6. Variety

Variety, simply refers to the wise and judicious combination of these “tools”. When building a house, the joiner does not always use the hammer. He picks up different tools for

² R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 268.

different tasks. So, when preaching a sermon, the preacher should wisely vary the use of his vocal tools, moving from loud to quiet, from fast to slow, from didactic to emotional, etc.

Take your model here from Nature. She does not thunder all the year; she gives us sunshine, gentle breezes, a sky checkered with lights and shades, the stiffening gale, and sometimes the rending storm. So no hearer can endure a tempest of rhetoric throughout the discourse.³

VI. PASSION

Professor John Murray once said, "To me, preaching without passion, is not preaching at all." This is because we cannot expect people to be moved and affected by truths which do not seem to move ourselves. If we don't put our hearts into our sermons we will never put our sermons in our hearer's hearts. Aim then to be deeply affected by the truths you proclaim. Gardiner Spring said of the preacher:

He must feel his subject. It is as marvellous as it is mournful, that the weighty and thrilling truths of God's Word lose so much of their force from the little interest the preacher himself feels in his theme....No preacher can sustain the attention of a people unless he feels his subject; nor can he long sustain it, unless he feels it deeply. If he would make others solemn, he himself must be solemn; he must have fellowship with the truths he utters. He must preach as though he were in sight of the cross, and heard the groans of the Mighty Sufferer of Calvary; as though the judgment were set, and the books opened; as though the sentence were just about to be passed which decided the destinies of men; as though he had been looking into the pit of despair; as well as drawing aside the veil, and taking a view of the unutterable glory.⁴

This is not an argument for artificial emotion. Our emphasis throughout this lecture is on delivering sermons in a "natural" way. When a house is on fire the passer-by does not spend any time thinking about how best to say the words "Fire, fire!" The vocal sentiments and accompanying gestures will come spontaneously and automatically. So it should be with the preacher. If he feels the power of divine truth as he ought, his arms, body, and voice will fit the words without conscious effort.

Preaching is not the work of the lungs, or the mimicry of gesture, or the impulse of uncontrollable feeling; but the spiritual energy of a heart constrained by the love of Christ, and devoted to the care of those immortal souls for whom Christ died.⁵

Preaching should be with affectionate earnestness and tenderness. The appearance of coldness and indifference in the preacher to the awful and interesting truths of God's Word must have a most unhappy effect on the minds of the hearers...A man pleading for the life of another must not appear as one discoursing on an indifferent subject.⁶

VII. PEOPLE

That brings us on to "people". The preacher has one eye looking towards God, and another looking towards His congregation. He looks to God and asks "What wilt thou have

³ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 320.

⁴ Gardiner Spring, *The Power of the Pulpit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986), 131-132.

⁵ C Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 320.

⁶ A Alexander, quoted in *Princeton and Preaching* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 190.

me to say?" But he also looks at his people and asks, "Are you listening to and understanding what God has given me to say?" As in ordinary conversation, we must maintain maximum eye-contact with our listeners if we want to convince people that we are talking to them. Eye-contact also helps the preacher to maintain sensitivity to the age, education, spiritual condition and responsiveness of the congregation. In connection with this, Martin Lloyd Jones said:

Another element to which I attach importance is that the preacher while speaking should in a sense be deriving something from his congregation. There are those present in the congregation who are spiritually-minded people, and filled with the Spirit, and they make their contribution to the occasion. There is always an element of exchange in true preaching.⁷

Thorough preparation and familiarity with the sermon material will free the preacher to engage emphatically with the hearers. The more familiar we are with the road, the more we will be able to take in the surroundings. Charles Bridges wrote:

The sight of his people in the presence of God - their very countenances - their attention or listlessness - their feeding interest or apparent dislike - suggests many points of animated address, which did not occur in the study; excites many visible impressions, which awakens corresponding sympathy and interest in his congregation.⁸

We must speak the truth in love (Eph.4:15). Fenelon said: "I would have every Minister of the Gospel address his audience with the zeal of a friend, with the generous energy of a father, and with the exuberant affection of a mother."

VIII. PLAINNESS

Love for our hearers will motivate us to shun complexity, technical terms, and intricacy, and to speak in a plain, straightforward and simple manner, the pre-requisites to being understood. "So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? for ye shall speak into the air" (1 Cor.14:9).

Be ruthless in pruning your sermons. If you can use a smaller word, do so. If you can use a shorter and less complex sentence, do so. If you want to strike a blow you don't pick up a branch covered in leaves but a stripped down club.

He needs carefully to reject any and every word that does not convey the precise meaning he would express. Indeed, rejection is the chief work in clothing the thoughts of a highly disciplined mind.⁹

The prophets anticipated and the apostles followed our Lord's plain and straightforward style. The Old Testament used "tent" Hebrew and the New Testament "market-place" Greek.

In *Truth Applied* Jay Adams relates how Luther initially used churchy academic jargon when he preached to nuns in a convent chapel. But, when he became Pastor of the town church at Wittenberg, he realised that he had to work at making himself understood. He used children for his standard of intelligibility: "I preach to little Hans and Elisabeth." If they could understand, others could too. He refused to play up to the educated in his

⁷ D M Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 84.

⁸ C Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 286.

⁹ W G T Shedd, *Homiletics & Pastoral Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 206.

congregation. “When I preach here at Wittenberg, I descend to the lowest level. I do not look at the doctors or masters, of whom about forty are present, but at the hundred or thousand young people. To them I preach...If the others do not want to listen – the door is open.”¹⁰

May it be said of us as it was of eventually said of Luther, “It was impossible to misunderstand him.”

IX. PAPER

Our earlier emphasis on maintaining maximum eye-contact brings us on to sermon notes. One of the greatest barriers to communication is paper – the paper in the pulpit which contains the preacher’s sermon. Often the preacher’s eyes are more on this than on their congregation. Al Martin commented on this:

The issue is not how much written composition is done in the study or how much written material is brought into the pulpit. The issue is how much dependence upon and preoccupation with written material is manifested in the act of preaching. To state the matter another way, the issue is how much mental and physical attachment is there to one's paper. At the end of the day we are not so much concerned with issues of paper and print, but with the issues of eyes and brains.¹¹

Listen to these strong words from Dabney:

Reading a manuscript to the people can never, with any justice, be termed preaching.... In the delivery of the sermon there can be no exception in favor of the mere reader. How can he whose eyes are fixed upon the paper before him, who performs the mechanical task of reciting the very words inscribed upon it, have the inflections, the emphasis, the look, the gesture, the flexibility, the fire, or oratorical actions? Mere reading, then, should be sternly banished from the pulpit, except in those rare cases in which the didactic purpose supersedes the rhetorical, and exact verbal accuracy is more essential than eloquence.¹²

Shedd argued that young preachers should from the very beginning of their ministries preach at least one extemporaneous sermon every week. By this he did not mean preaching without study or preparation – quite the opposite. Extemporaneous sermons require more preparation in many ways. What he meant was reducing your sermon to a one-page of skeleton outline, and becoming so familiar with it, that referring to it during the act of preaching is minimised. Then, throughout your ministry, try to reduce the size of the skeleton, and dependence on it, more and more. Let the ideas be pre-arranged but leave exact expression of them to the moment of preaching.

Shedd gives these requirements for extemporaneous preaching:

1. A heart glowing and beating with evangelical affections
2. A methodical intellect – to organise the sermon material into a clear and logical structure
3. The power of amplification – or the ability to expand upon a theme
4. A precise and accurate mode of expression
5. Patient and persevering practice

¹⁰ Ewald M. Plais, ed., *What Luther Says*, 3 Vols (St Louis: Concordia, 1959), 3:1118-19.

¹¹ A Martin, *Pastoral Theology Outline/Pastor's Conference* (1996), 11-12.

¹² R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 328-9.

To these we might add, prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit for each and all of these requirements.

X. PRESENCE

So much of what we have covered so far will fall into its own place if we cultivate a consciousness of preaching in the presence of God. This consciousness pervaded the Apostle Paul's preaching: "For we are not as many, which corrupt the word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, **in the sight of God speak we** in Christ (2 Cor.2:17). **We speak before God** in Christ: but *we do* all things, dearly beloved, for your edifying (2 Cor.12:19).

The best ambassador is the man who best knows the One who has sent him. Indeed, the ambassador who preaches in the knowledge that the Sender is present and with him, cannot but rise to the occasion. The best place, then, to learn how to communicate God's Word is in God's presence. He is the greatest communicator, and time spent with him will make you a more effective ambassador for him.

This consciousness will deal a hammer blow to all theatrics, hypocrisy, etc. It will cultivate dignity and seriousness. We are the ministers of a great king, and are entrusted with an important embassy.

The most pernicious and debasing evil of all is, a converting our sacred office into a medium for setting forth our own excellence – prostituting the glories of the cross for the indulgence of our own pride, drawing a veil over the glories of our adorable Master and committing a robbery against him, even in the professed business to exalt him. This is to lose sight of the great end of the Ministry—commending ourselves, instead of our Master, to the regard of our people...Our business is to make men think, not of our eloquence, but of their own souls; to attend, not to our fine language, but to their own everlasting interest. Our duty is...not to stroke the ear, but to strike the heart.¹³

"Lo, I am with you" is both a comfort and a challenge. God is listening, watching, and taking notes. And, one day, He will call to account.

¹³ C Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1983), 330.