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The Practical Application in the Sermon.

The practical application of the text is one of the most important features of the Christian sermon. In fact, it constitutes its distinctive characteristic, that element which distinguishes the sermon from all other religious discourses. This is what Spurgeon had in mind when he said: "Where the application begins, the sermon begins." Strictly speaking, a sermon that is devoid of applications is no sermon at all; for the preacher's duty extends far beyond the mere teaching of the truths contained in the text; it includes the conscientious application of these truths to the heart of the hearer. Old Valerius Herberger revealed a deep insight into the matter when he wrote: "A good preacher is recognized by the applications he makes."

Unfortunately it is this very feature of the sermon that usually fares worst in the average pulpit. All too often the direct, well-defined application of divine truth to present-day problems and conditions is either omitted entirely, or it is carried out in a stereotyped, superficial, and ineffective manner, and thus justice is done neither to the text nor to the congregation. The result is that much of our preaching is definitely out of relation to the demands of the age, that it never really comes to grips with the major problems of our people, and that for these very reasons it often fails to touch the hearts and mold the conduct of those who hear it.

But how shall we account for the triteness and feebleness of the general run of applications? The answer is not hard to find. For the average preacher nothing is more difficult than to develop the practical side of his sermon adequately without sacrificing its textual character, and to do this in such a manner as to project his applications into the very conscience and heart of the hearer.

In view of this fact it may not be out of place to review *a few of the principles governing the invention and use of practical applications.*

1.

The first requirement for a good, practical application is *that it have its origin in the text.*

Many seem to regard the application as a mere appendage to the body of the sermon or as a sort of ornamentation suggested by the ingenuity of the preacher or the experiences of the congregation. Accordingly, their applications are not lifted from the text, but are imposed upon it from without. This method, however, is bound to lead to disaster; for it not only destroys the unity of the sermon, but—and this is by far the worse—it also divorces the actual message of the sermon from the original, inspired message of the text.

It cannot be emphasized too strongly that every application must

proceed from the text of the sermon; for what, in its very essence, is an application? It is nothing more and nothing less than the focusing of the truth of the text, in a concrete and practical manner, upon present-day persons, problems, and conditions. Note what Dr. M. Reu says on this point: "The truth contained in the text is to be set forth in its value for the present and laid in all its naturalness, without violence, upon men's hearts, so that the application will grow by an inner necessity out of the text and will be nothing else than the organic unfolding of the text." (*Homiletics*, p. 362.) Since this is an essential requirement, it is obvious that the selection of applications dare not be postponed till the outline of the sermon has been completed, but that, on the contrary, their invention must be given a prominent place in the preacher's meditation on the text.

2.

But how is a preacher to arrive at his practical applications if they are to grow out of the text? It stands to reason that there can be no iron-clad method which must, or even can, be followed by all. In details every man must proceed according to his own mental make-up, his gifts, and his experience. Nevertheless, certain things ought to be done, and that very conscientiously, if the sermon is to be at once textual and practical.

First of all, *the text must of course be subjected to a thorough exegetical study.* In this the preacher naturally proceeds according to the grammatico-historical method of Scripture exposition in order to establish accurately what the meaning and the purpose of the text were at the time it was written. That this phase of sermon preparation is of the utmost importance need not be emphasized here; for it is self-evident that no man should venture to preach upon a word of Scripture which he does not thoroughly understand. Moreover, another article in this issue of our journal discusses this matter in detail.

But one thing that must be stressed in connection with the question before us is the fact that *a mere exegetical study of the text will not suffice* in the preparation of a sermon. After all, there is a vast difference between the exegetical and the homiletical study of a text. The homiletical study presupposes the exegetical; in fact, it is utterly dependent upon it; but the homiletical study, operating with the materials obtained by a thoroughgoing exegesis, advances farther: it proceeds to prepare these materials so that they may be used successfully for the edification of the congregation. "There will always be a difference," says Kleinert, "between the exposition, which, in the interest of historical knowledge, seeks to understand and explain the text in its chronological setting, and the application, by which the inner life which has taken form in the text is placed into

the thick of the present situation in order that it may recreate itself in new forms with the aid of the materials offered by the same." (*Homiletics*, p. 50.)

How, then, is the preacher to proceed in the homiletical treatment of his text? And what can he do to discover applications that are faithful to the text, on the one hand, and timely, practical, and helpful, on the other?

The best thing that a preacher can do after he has found the specific message of his text is to *apply it to his own soul first of all*, and that prayerfully and honestly. "*Applica te ad textum; applica textum ad te.*" (*Bengel.*) Right here many sermons go on the rocks; for, as Achelis says, "the sermon will be deprived of its chief requisite, of its witness-bearing character, if the preacher does not first preach to himself the Word which he will preach to his congregation. . . . Thereby [by the application of the message of the text to the preacher himself] the unity of the preacher with his message is effected and in no less a degree the unity of the preacher with his congregation; for both are now subject to the same Lord and the same Word. The sinner speaks to sinners; he that has received grace to those to whom the same grace is offered and given; he who has been comforted by the Father of mercies and God of all comfort is able to comfort his congregation with the comfort wherewith he himself is comforted of God." (*Practical Theology*, II, 265.) That this is absolutely necessary, not only in view of the witness-bearing character of the sermon, but also for the sake of profound, searching, heart-touching practical applications, ought to be evident to every one. A preacher should always pray: "Open Thou my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of Thy Law," before he ventures to speak the words: "O Lord, open Thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth Thy praise," Ps. 119, 18; 51, 15.

Ian Maclaren enforces this important duty upon himself and his fellow-preachers in the following impressive paragraph: "And now this idea [the divine truth contained in the text] must be removed from the light where reason and imagination have their sphere and be hidden away in the dark chambers of the soul. This is not to be an intellectual proposition to be asserted and proved or a fancy to be tracked out and exhibited. This is a spiritual truth to be commended to faith, a living principle to be enforced on conscience. It must therefore be first imprinted on the preacher's soul till it has become a part of his own being, before he can really understand or declare it. One reason why many masterly sermons fail is that they have never had the benefit of this process. . . . They do not make way and lay hold of the hearers because they have never conquered the speaker." (*The Cure of Souls*, p. 23.)

In the invention of his applications *the preacher must, however, also give due consideration to the character and needs of his congregation*; for it is the congregation, both individually and as a body, for which these applications are intended. In order to do this intelligently, a preacher must understand the age in which he lives, the human heart in general, and especially his own congregation into the midst of which the Lord has placed him as a spiritual shepherd.

The preacher must understand the age in which he lives, with all its important movements, its latent tendencies and perplexing cross-currents, its particular problems, and the manifold dangers with which it confronts his people. How can a man preach a "timely" sermon if he does not understand the times? Especially now, when the rank and file of our church-members are being brought into intimate contact with the world in its most sinister and pernicious forms through the agency of the radio, the popular magazine, the novel, and the motion-picture, it is necessary that those who would act as spiritual guides and apply the Word of God to the needs of the people should themselves know what is going on in the world and that they should render themselves competent to interpret these facts and events in the light of the Scriptures. We heartily agree with a recent writer who says: "Much preaching to-day leaves the hearer cold, and the question is, Why? Mainly because many preachers have no real vision and therefore no real understanding of the times. They are still living in the past." (McComb, *Preaching in Theory and Practise*, p. 5.) But no preacher will learn to understand the times if he remains secluded in his study or if his vision and experience are hemmed in by the narrow boundaries of his parish. Therefore, as Schuster puts it, "*Heraus aus der Studierstube! Hinein ins Leben!*" We preachers may well ponder the discreet remark made by Schweitzer in this connection: "It is not a mark of excellency, but a decided shortcoming, if the times are not reflected in the preacher's personality, if the character of the age either does not influence it at all or passes through it as through a vacuum." (*Homiletics*, p. 274.) Even Luther says: "*Ein Prediger muss die Welt kennengelernt haben.*" (St. L. Ed., XXII, 673.)

But the preacher must also understand the human heart in general; he must know what lurks in the bosom of the average man. This, however, cannot be learned from books or by way of quiet meditation. Following the example of the Master, the earnest preacher of the Gospel will associate regularly, intimately, and sympathetically with all sorts and conditions of men. But a mere association with human beings, either professionally or socially or in a business way, will not suffice. The preacher must try to get a glimpse of their hearts, to discover their difficulties, to determine their aspirations and yearnings. In short, he must learn to put

himself into their position and to ask himself: If this were my spiritual plight, what could this particular sermon text do for me? And how would the message have to be framed to incite me to a favorable reaction?

The third requirement is that the preacher understand his own congregation, those persons whom God has given into his care and to whom he is to preach the Word of Life week after week. This brings us to the important matter of our pastoral work, *Seelsorge*, the cure of souls, which has rightly been called "the richest source of materials for our meditation." (Schuster, *The Preparation and Delivery of the Sermon*, p. 117.) Concerning this sphere of the preacher's activity and its relation to the practical content of his sermons, Lyman says in his *Preaching in the New Age*: "Never relinquish pastoral visitation. . . . Pastoral visitation keeps the minister human; it puts a certain human, sympathetic quality into his preaching which is indispensable. Only conduct such visitation not carelessly, but nobly, tactfully, homiletically, so to speak." (P. 115.) And another writer offers the following wise and sympathetic counsel: "If a man lacks originality in invention and brilliant oratorical gifts, then let him be all the more faithful and zealous in this department of his pastoral work. Ere long he shall perceive in his meditations the blessing which the Lord lays upon genuine pastoral love." (Schuster, *The Preparation and Delivery of the Sermon*, p. 117.) To which Christlieb adds: "The more faithful our pastoral work, the more abundant the material for our sermons."

It is apparent that this type of meditation requires time. Even a gifted man cannot shake it out of his sleeve. Accordingly, it is advisable for the preacher to begin early in the week, yes, if possible to have several sermons in preparation weeks before they are to be used in the pulpit. This is what Alexander Maclaren called the process of incubation. It gives the sermon an opportunity to grow, and this is of importance particularly for its practical applications.

3.

The next requirement for a good practical sermon is *the formulation of a specific practical theme*. The writer realizes that many excellent practical sermons are being preached upon themes that are anything but practical; but at the same time it is evident that most of the sermons which lack all practical value would have been more practical, to say the least, if the preacher had at the outset concentrated the applications he intended to make in a definite statement in the theme. Every sermon must have a well-defined practical objective. If this objective is incorporated into the theme of the sermon, the theme will not only captivate the attention of the hearer at once, but will also point out to the preacher the line of direction

which his applications must follow in order to realize the specific purpose for which he is preaching this particular sermon. Experience teaches that preachers who choose wide, vague, and theoretical themes, sometimes mere doctrinal titles or historical superscriptions, are in danger of rambling far and wide in their applications, and although their sermons may be very interesting and instructive, they frequently fail to make a definite impression upon their hearers. In view of this fact the preacher will do well to follow the advice given by Harry Emerson Fosdick: "Start with a live issue, a real problem, personal or social, perplexing to the mind or disturbing to the conscience of the people; face that problem fairly, deal with it honestly, and throw such light upon it from the Spirit [and, we add, from the Word] of Christ that the people will go out able to think more clearly and live more nobly because of that sermon's illumination. That is real preaching; and not only has such preaching not been outgrown, but there are few things that modern folk are hungrier for than that." (From his foreword to McComb's *Preaching in Theory and Practice*, p. XI.)

4.

This brings us to another requirement, closely related to the formulation of a practical theme, namely, to the fundamental principle that *all minor applications in the sermon must be subordinated to, and motivated by, the principal application, the practical objective, of the entire sermon.* There must be a unity of application, all applications converging upon a single point, the burning point of the sermon. The applications, says J. A. Broadus, "must not diverge in various directions and become like the untwisted cracker of a whip, but should have a common aim and make a combined impression." (*The Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, p. 246.) Accordingly, all applications suggested by details of the text must be eliminated from the sermon if they are not in line with the general application that dominates its message. Ludwig Hofacker, that strange young preacher of Germany, was a master in this respect. Describing his method of sermon-building, he wrote: "I strive to build my sermons in the shape of a wedge, that is, to drive a wedge into the consciences of my hearers. . . . My aim is to make a unified impression upon the hearer in every sermon."

5.

Another fact that dare not be ignored lest the unity and effectiveness of the sermon be destroyed is found in the requirement that *there must always be a close and intimate relationship in the sermon between the exposition and the application.* The two belong together, and the preacher who divorces them makes a serious mistake. Judging by the sermons of successful preachers, the best results are usually obtained by interweaving the two throughout the body of the ser-

mon or by having the application of a given text unit follow immediately upon its exposition. "In general," says Achelis, "the principle holds good for every sermon that the exposition and the application must thoroughly permeate one another." (*Prac. Theol.*, II, 163.) In this way not only a part of the sermon, perhaps only the conclusion, but the entire sermon will be practical.

6.

A preacher must, however, also bear in mind *the component parts of a complete application*. A practical application is not merely a perfunctory evangelical assurance or an exhortation or appeal. Such applications are threadbare and shallow. They fail to kindle interest in the heart of the hearer and for the most part constitute a fruitless expenditure of words. According to J. A. Broadus, whose excellent chapter on this point we follow in this paragraph, the larger application of the sermon is made up of three distinct parts.

The first is *the application of the textual truth in the strict sense of that term*. When making applications in this sense, the preacher shows "how the subject applies to the persons addressed, what practical instructions it offers to them, and what practical demands it makes upon them." (P. 246.)

But in most cases this will not suffice. As a rule, there must be also "*suggestions as to the best means and methods of performing the duty or duties enjoined in the sermon.*" (P. 248.) Many preachers are very insistent in telling their people *what* they must do in order to comply with the truth taught in the text, and that in preaching the Gospel as well as in preaching the Law; yet it never dawns upon them that it is just as necessary, especially in the case of inexperienced Christians, to tell them in detail *how* these duties may best be performed. The wise preacher, who is preeminently a pastor even in the pulpit, will always do this. He will get away from the abstract and speak in concrete terms, in the language of the people, showing them how they may, in spite of all their handicaps, reduce to practise what they have learned and thus be enriched by the divine truth which has found access to their souls.

The third element in the application is commonly called *persuasion*. This, says Broadus, "is not generally best accomplished by a mere appeal to the feelings, but by urging, in the first place, some motive or motives for acting, or determining to act, as we propose" upon the authority of the text. (P. 249.) Such worthy motives are the love of God and man, obedience, gratitude, the desire to be "like Him," the joys of Christian service, happiness in this life and in the life to come, and the like. But there should always, if at all possible, be an earnest appeal to the heart; for "out of the heart are the issues of life," Prov. 4, 23. Such appeals, however, dare not be studied,

artificial, insincere. In order to reach the heart of the hearer, the appeal must proceed out of the very depths of the preacher's heart. Hence the excellent advice of Broadus to his students: "We must cultivate our religious sensibilities, must keep our souls habitually in contact with the Gospel truth, and maintain by union of abundant prayer and self-denying activity that ardent love to God and that tender love to man which will give us, without an effort, true pathos and passion." (P. 254.)

7.

But one requirement for the successful application of divine truth to the heart of the hearer remains to be treated. To this De Pressense refers in the following well-chosen words: "I would not forget that above all these human methods of preaching, which we have no right to neglect, *we must wait upon God for the influence of His mighty Spirit*, without whose sovereign virtue our poor words will be but as the tinkling cymbal striking the air with empty sound." (*Hom. Rev.*, 3, 53.)

In other words, the real application of the text, the effective application, must be made by the Holy Spirit. And this is one of the reasons why every Christian sermon must be begun, continued, and ended in prayer.

E. J. FRIEDRICH.

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