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Making the Sermon Interesting

"Dull as a sermon!" This proverbial saying sets a very low appraisal upon the sermon. Let us not disregard it, for proverbial sayings are based upon observation and experience covering a longer period of time. Many a sermon is dull, arouses no interest in the hearer, does not grip the heart, is not effective. But the sermon need not be dull; it should not be. Since the purpose of the sermon is to supply the highest need of man, it can be made the most interesting of all forms of speech.

We must, however, admit that the modern conditions under which we are living have made it increasingly difficult to make the sermon interesting. As a result of universal and higher education, an abundance of reading-matter of all kinds, the radio, etc., greater demands are made by the hearers upon the sermon, considered even as a mere literary production. The speed at which we are living and the general unrest and restiveness in the world make it difficult to get and hold the attention for a longer period. The time when people not only were willing to listen to a sermon extending to an hour or longer, but even demanded it, is past. The great attractiveness of modern life, with its many and varied temptations to evil and to placing a wrong value on transitory things, makes it more difficult to make people appreciate and concentrate on things spiritual. It will not do to say, These things ought not to be; the preacher, as a good psychologist, must take these facts into consideration if he would arouse sustained interest in his preaching; for a sermon which fails to interest the hearer, that is, *fails to engage and hold his attention*, cannot serve its purpose, it had better not be preached. This is such an obvious fact that it needs no further elucidation. What should, therefore, concern the preacher, is how to make the sermon interesting. In our discussion we shall have to give attention to the *preacher*, the *content of sermon*, the *presentation of the subject-matter*, and the *delivery*.

I

I believe that the preacher who has a will to make his sermons interesting can do so. *But he himself must first of all be interested in his preaching.* He must have a firm and sincere conviction of the truth, an ardent desire to impart it to others, and a mind to work.

The Christian preacher must know the truth as God has revealed it in His written Word, and he must first apply it to himself. To the elders of Ephesus, Paul said, "Take heed unto yourselves," Acts 20:28. We preachers are just as human as the great Apostle Paul; but it was he who said, "I, therefore, so

run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air; but I keep under my body and bring it into subjection, lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway," 1 Cor. 9:26, 27. We should not be like the builders of Noah's ark, who built to save others but lost their own lives in the Flood. The preacher who is deeply impressed with the need of his own salvation will seek to interest others who also are in need of this salvation and must perish without it. The preacher who himself (together with his family) leads a life pleasing to the Lord and enjoys the blessings thereof will be eager that others should also enjoy this blessing. After Paul had himself been brought to Christ and realized what a blessing it is to be a child of God, he was eager to have his fellow-Jews also share this blessing, saying, "I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart; for I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh," Rom. 9:1-3. Likewise of Moses we read: "And it came to pass on the morrow that Moses said unto the people, Ye have sinned a great sin; and now I will go up unto the Lord; peradventure I shall make an atonement for your sin. And Moses returned unto the Lord and said, Oh, this people have sinned a great sin and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin —; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy Book which Thou hast written," Ex. 32:30-32. What a sincere and deep love for the salvation of their fellow-sinners is expressed in these very remarkable words spoken by Paul and Moses!

The attitude of the preacher to his sermon work goes a far way in determining whether or not his sermon will interest his hearers. The preacher must be conscious of his great responsibility when in the pulpit. Said Paul to the elders of Ephesus: "Take heed . . . to all the flock over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers to feed the Church of God, which He hath purchased with His own blood," Acts 20:28. The preacher's heart must be filled not only with the love of Christ but also with a love for the souls whom Christ purchased with His own blood. The preacher must not only *speak* God's message to the people but *deliver* it. Content, structure, and delivery of the sermon will largely depend upon the preacher's own interest in his subject, in the spiritual welfare of his hearers, and in his own consciousness of responsibility to the Lord. Only he will speak convincingly who speaks from conviction and from an ardent desire that others share his conviction. Even such a secular orator as Quintilian said:

"Maxima pars eloquentiae constat animo." Goethe, in his *Faust*, has well said:

Wenn ihr's nicht fuehlt, ihr werdet's nicht erjagen.
 Wenn es nicht aus der Seele dringt
 Und mit urkraeftigem Behagen
 Die Herzen aller Hoerer zwingt.
 Sitzt ihr nur immer! Leimt zusammen,
 Braut ein Ragout von anderer Schmaus
 Und blast die kuemmerlichen Flammen
 Aus euren Aschenhaeufchen 'raus.
 Bewunderung von Kindern und Affen,
 Wenn euch danach der Gaumen steht;
 Doch werdet ihr nie Herz zu Herzen schaffen,
 Wenn es euch nicht von Herzen geht.

Unless the preacher has the necessary enthusiasm (*Begeisterung*), which is produced by love for his Savior, love for blood-bought souls, and love for his work, he will not be sufficiently interested in his sermons, and therefore his sermons will arouse no interest in others. He must preach as "a dying man to dying men."

The preacher must have "a mind to work." When the Jews rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, their enemies scoffed, saying: "What do these feeble Jews? . . . Will they revive the stones out of the heap of rubbish which are burned?" But the wall was built; for we are told: "The people had a mind to work," Neh. 4. Great things have been accomplished by men who went at their task with a grim and dogged determination. The path of least resistance is not the one that leads to success. "Preaching Made Easy" is not the proper title to give to a book which is to teach the art of preaching. The preacher who gives little time to the preparation of his sermons, who does not think his text through, who uses only ready-made material, who knows not the world in which he lives, who does not study the needs of his people, who does not try to improve as the years go by, who "does a job" rather than fulfilling an obligation and living up to a responsibility, such a preacher is not taking his sermon-work very seriously, he is not showing that he is much interested. How can he expect to interest others?

The right attitude of the preacher toward his own personal Christianity, toward the people whom he is called to serve, and toward the work which he is to do, cannot be given to any man by a course in homiletics but is a gift of the Holy Spirit in answer to sincere prayer. "Ask, and it shall be given you," Luke 11:9.

And being much concerned about the salvation of those whom the Lord has entrusted to him, the preacher will pray for them also, even as Epaphras, the pastor of the church at Colossae, of whom Paul says: "Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ, saluteth you, always laboring fervently for you in prayers

that ye may stand perfect and complete in all the will of God. For I bear him record that he hath a great zeal for you and them that are in Laodicea and them in Hierapolis," Col. 4:12, 13. Let us not undervalue the power of prayer for ourselves and for others. "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much," Jas. 5:16b.

Indeed, when a preacher is much concerned about his own salvation and takes his work of the ministry seriously, his attitude will be reflected in the content of his sermons, in the presentation of divine truth, and in the manner in which he speaks it.

II

Of course, when we are speaking of making the sermon interesting, we have not in mind a discourse which merely relates interesting facts, happenings, stories, and the like, which are irrelevant to the purpose of the Christian sermon. The Christian preacher's business is to preach the Word of God, Law and Gospel, for the spiritual enlightenment and edification of his hearers. All that is included in the sermon, be it taken from daily life, current or past history, literature, or any other source, must have a bearing upon the real purpose of the sermon and must not be told for its own sake. We are not speaking of interesting talks, lectures, speeches, but of interesting sermons.

Can preaching the Word of God be made interesting? It need not be *made* so; it is *interesting*. The Bible is the most interesting Book in the world! The Bible makes man realize his greatest need and supplies it. What greater news value could there be for sinful human beings than that of the incarnation of the Son of God and His substitutionary death and His triumphant resurrection and His sitting on the right hand of God? To questions which the most learned scientists have no satisfactory answer the Bible gives a definite answer, such as, What is God? Who is God? Who made this world? How does God operate in this world? The Bible is the most interesting story-book in the world, containing stories true to life and teaching much-needed lessons for man's temporal and eternal well-being. From various viewpoints the Bible is *the* most remarkable Book. That is the preacher's source material for his sermons. If his sermons are not interesting, he himself is at fault.

The preacher is at fault if he does not present what the spiritual needs of his hearers demand. We do not teach algebra to those who have not yet learned the four species of arithmetic. So we should not teach the more profound truths of the Bible to those who have not yet learned the a-b-c of the Christian religion. These, says the writer to the Hebrews, need milk and not strong

meat, Heb. 5:13, 14. But those who have advanced in spiritual knowledge should not be kept in the a-b-c class. Of course, *fundamental truths must be continually preached*; but this fact need not prevent the preacher from enlarging the Biblical knowledge of his hearers. People are interested to learn what they do not know.

Of course, we must again and again say that all men are by nature sinners, transgressors of God's Law. But why not be more specific, telling how sin came into the world, what sin is (many do not know), what wrong moral standards people are setting for themselves, that sin is the root evil of all evils in this world. We must again and again say that even Christians sin daily. But why not be more specific, telling of which sins Christians are guilty: selfishness, hatred, evil thinking and evil speaking, unforgiveness, unclean lusts and filthy talk, delight in worldly and sinful amusements, keeping company with the people of this world, avarice, wastefulness and extravagance, dishonesty and hypocrisy, lack of brotherly admonition, parental neglect of children, disobedience and disrespect of children to parents, disregard of the laws of our cities, states, and country; and especially, neglect of the Word of God by not attending the church services regularly and not reading the Bible in the home, neglect of prayer, not fearing, loving, and trusting in God above all things but fearing man rather than God, trusting in uncertain riches, loving the world and what is in the world, etc. All these things should be treated, not in a passing way, but they should be clearly developed on the basis of appropriate texts. That will make for interesting preaching.

Of course, we must again and again preach that we are saved not by our works but by the grace of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. But why not be more specific, telling what self-righteousness or salvation by character really means, what the grace of God is, who the Savior is in whom we are to believe, in what His redemptive work consisted, what the true nature of faith is, what the Bible says about weak and strong faith, what great promises it gives to faith, etc. We take too much for granted and too often speak in platitudes. That does not make for interesting sermons.

As a preacher studies his Bible and the needs of his people, he will find many subjects that deserve careful treatment, such as the inspiration, the authority, and the sufficiency of Scripture, the means of grace, the fundamental difference between the Christian religion and all false religions, prayer, good works, marriage, the Christian home-life, the dignity of labor, stewardship of time, talents, and money, the Christian's debt to a sinful world, confessionism, the angels, Antichrist, predestination, the day of Judgment, the wrong doctrine of the millennialists, heaven,

hell, etc., etc. All these subjects, explicitly treated, make for interesting sermons. They put variety into our preaching, and *varietas delectat*.

Speaking of the content of the sermon, one thing more must be stressed. If a preacher would preach interesting sermons, he must know his people, the conditions under which they live, their particular needs. He must know what is agitating the minds of his parishioners, what their peculiar troubles and trials and temptations are, what they read, with whom they associate, what their business connections and who their friends are, what their home-life is like, how they spend their leisure time, etc. *Pastoral visits to the home will reveal these things.*

III

But while the most important part of the sermon is its Scriptural content, the *presentation of the subject-matter* deserves careful attention if we would make our preaching interesting.

The purpose of the introduction is to lead up to the theme; in other words, to get and hold the attention of the audience. But how many introductions to sermons fail to do this! Some are so long that the hearers grow weary before the preacher ever arrives at his real sermon. Very many begin with such a commonplace statement that will arouse no one's interest. Why begin a Christmas sermon with the words "Today is Christmas"? For weeks and even months, people have been reminded of it and have been looking forward to it. Why not begin like this: "No room in the inn! Surely, this is not your greeting to the Christ-child, coming anew on this Christmas morn to bring the blessings of heaven to a sin-cursed world." Or: "'Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary.' Sunday after Sunday we recite these words in our Creed. I wonder whether, when repeating these words, we are always conscious of the fact that we are speaking of one of the greatest marvels in history."—The first sentence of the introduction should be striking, spoken slowly and impressively, at once arousing the attention of the hearers.

Telling words of Scripture often make a good opening sentence, as, "Owe no man anything but to love one another," Rom. 13:8. Or, "If ye live after the flesh, ye shall die," Rom. 8:13. If not done too often, a pertinent story makes a good introduction. Preaching on the text 1 Tim. 6:6-12, the Rev. E. W. Matzner, in a sermon book just off the press, uses this story as an introduction:

"Some years ago a man fell heir to an estate of several hundred thousand dollars and, to the great surprise of the general public, declined the legacy. There was much discussion of the matter at the time and also a great deal of criticism of the man's action.

He finally made a statement to this effect: 'I have always been able to earn a living sufficient for myself and my family, and that fact has to a large extent constituted my pride and my joy in life; I should feel rather useless if I were no longer required for that purpose. We have a comfortable home, all the real necessities of life, and a good many sensible luxuries besides. Our children are getting a good education, have a wholesome sense of responsibility, and already have plans made as to their occupation in life. We are happy just as we are and deem it unwise to jeopardize the present state of affairs just for the sake of a lot of money that would very likely not make us any happier and might bring us much grief.' I do not know whether or not the man was a Christian, but certainly his ideas regarding wealth go very well with the Christian's view of things. Our text for this morning suggests the subject "The Christian's Attitude toward Getting Rich."

I have given much space to the introduction because I believe that it is here where a preacher, as a rule, gains or loses his audience. But if by his introduction he has gotten the attention of his hearers, he must not disappoint them in his sermon proper. His theme must present the specific, not a mere general, thought of his text. His parts should be a division of the theme, the theme being divided according to its splitting point (*fundamentum dividendi*). Theme and parts should be expressed in plain, simple English, easily understood. As a rule, theme and parts should be announced after the introduction. People like to know what they may expect to hear; it will help to get their attention. Some preachers, who prefer to keep their audience in suspense, may find that by doing so they suspend attention.

The preacher who would have an interested audience ought to give much attention to his language. He should use good, simple, easily understood English, or whatever language he may be using. Especially the young preacher should carefully write his sermons. Very few young men are such masters of the language that they can speak well on the basis of an outline. Writing also helps to clarify thought in the preacher's own mind. Preaching over the heads of the people is not due to profundity of thought but to a lack of clear presentation. The fault also with many sermons is that they contain many words but little thought. "*Viel Geschrei und wenig Wolle!*"

In order to present a theme clearly and interestingly, there must be an orderly development, a logical progression of thought, with proper transitions.

The use of illustrations (picturesque words and phrases, similes and metaphors, short stories) makes for interesting preaching. The human mind thinks in pictures. Sermons by

Guthrie (his three P's: proving, *painting*, persuading), MacLaren, and others, may be studied for the effective use of illustration. A few examples taken from MacLaren's sermon on Rom. 12:1 are herewith given: "In Paul's notion all the practical is to be built upon all the doctrinal. There are many men that say: 'Give us the morality of the New Testament; never mind about the theology.' But you cannot get the morality without the theology, unless you like to have rootless flowers and lamps without oil. . . . The most orthodox orthodoxy, divorced from practice, is like the dried flowers which botanists put between sheets of blotting-paper, with no perfume nor color nor growth nor life in them—the skeletons of dead beauty. . . . The diffused and wide-shining mercies which stream from the Father's heart are all, as it were, focused as through a burning-glass into one strong beam, which can kindle the greenest wood and melt the thick-ribbed ice. . . . There is one magnet strong enough to draw reluctant hearts and reluctant limbs, and that is Jesus lifted up on the cross. There is one fire powerful enough to burn the bonds of flesh and sense which hold men, and that is the fire which Jesus longed to kindle on earth. Other restraints from propriety, prudence, or even principle will reach their breaking point at a much lower strain than the silken bonds in which Christ's love leads the lion and the bear of our passions and appetites. They are useful and helpful in their places; but 'Gospel temperance,' a self-control based on Christian motives, is the really reliable breakwater against storms and passion and self-indulgence. You may try to coerce the corporeal nature by other bonds, they will be like the fetters upon the madman in the tombs. When the paroxysms come, he will rend them asunder as Samson did the withes."

A most important part of the sermon, making both for interest and effect, is the application of the text to the hearers. Two things make the preaching of doctrine dry preaching: presenting the doctrine in the dogmatical terms of the seminary classroom and failing to apply it. Doctrinal preaching is not only basic and therefore necessary but can be made very interesting if presented in the language of the Bible and if the hearer is shown what a particular doctrine means for his own spiritual life. The application of the text, be the text doctrinal, ethical, or historical, be it a parable or a miracle text, should not be missing in any sermon; for that, after all, is the real purpose of preaching: applying the Word of God to the spiritual need of the hearers. After a sermon has been heard, the hearer should not only be able to tell in a few words what the preacher has said, but he should have been spiritually edified. A preacher can put himself to a test if he will on Monday examine his catechumen class in reference to the Sunday sermon.

If the children have not gotten the *real* meaning of the text of the sermon, the preacher has failed to put its message across.

The conclusion should be either a summary of the entire sermon or of the last part; that depends upon the nature of the subject. Anyway, in the conclusion the climax should have been reached. It is that sermon's last chance with the hearers, it is the final impression made upon them.

IV

To put the message across, the preacher must give due attention also to the *delivery* of the sermon. A sermon may be ever so good in textual content, in its homiletic structure, in its language, in the use of illustration, and in application, *on the written manuscript*, but if the preacher fails to *deliver* the message to his hearers, it is all to no good purpose. A preacher should not be an elocutionist, he is not an actor on the stage; he need not be a great orator, displaying elaborate rhetoric; but he must be eloquent, must be *easily and agreeably understood*. Speaking in a good conversational tone and manner, distinctly, loudly, with animation and due modulation of the voice, not too rapidly and not too slowly, and observing the pause for emphasis and understanding, back of all of which must be the preacher's own conviction of the truth, his whole-hearted sincerity, a love for the Savior and His people: that is good delivery. The preacher should not stand in the pulpit as though he were a lifeless statue nor talk as if he were a mere phonograph, but speak as a living human being, the ambassador for Christ, praying in Christ's stead that sinners be reconciled to God, 2 Cor. 5:20, and beseeching Christians by the mercies of God to present their bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, Rom. 12:1.

It ought not be necessary to add that reading the sermon from a manuscript makes for uninteresting preaching. Interesting and effective preaching calls for *free delivery*. The preacher who is a slave to his manuscript is not fully the master of his subject and cannot put into action his whole body (facial expression, gestures) nor that interplay between the speaker and his audience which makes for a better understanding.

Finally, after all has been said, the preacher must keep in mind that that which can produce and strengthen justifying faith and true sanctification is *the Word of God* and that all that makes the sermon interesting is but a means to this end, the non-observance of which might hinder the Holy Spirit from operating in the hearts of men through *His Word*. JOHN H. C. FRITZ

