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Homiletics: Outlines on Synodical Conference Gospels

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HOMILETICS

Outlines on Synodical Conference Gospels

NINTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

JOHN 5:39-47

The ideal is always most apt to become an idol. The moral man becomes the subtle substitute for the righteous man; the sublime Jesus takes the place of the divine Son of God; and so the Holy Bible can take the place of the living God. The paradox is that we are most tempted to use the holy things of God as "gods," which keep us from a true worship of Him. In the Jews described in the text we have an example of a people who loved the Scriptures, searched them, memorized them, yet failed to see Christ through them. There looms before us the Savior, who describes

GOD'S LIVING VOICE IN SCRIPTURE

I

Dangers Which Confront Us in Our Use of Scripture

A. Danger of viewing Scripture as end in itself

We can view Scripture in two ways: as end in itself or as means to an end. The Jews chose the first method. The Bible claims to be a revelation, God making Himself known to man. Jews reversed the process; they saw it primarily as a revelation of man, a description of what he was to do to ascend to God. This corrupted God's original intention, for central character in Bible is not man, but God. Result was an emphasis upon Israel: her magnificent past and coming glory. Ended in debasing superstition, narrow nationalism, the miraculous merging into the ridiculous.

B. Danger of separating Scripture from God Himself

This use of Scripture actually separates the words of God from Him and His love (v. 42). Thus authority is lost. Becomes a matter of ideals. Force is gone, for a book cannot punish or reward, cannot give life or save. When this happens to Jews or us, we cease

to proclaim a religion of salvation. Faith becomes historic; no believing in God as such. No firm assent by which we lay hold upon Him for life.

C. Results of these dangers

1. This cuts us off from God. We receive glory from one another (v. 44). Involves living in a one-story universe. In effect we cut off both heaven and hell. May deny this intellectually, but carry it out in fact. In this universe man becomes his own god. Master of own life. Everything is evaluated simply in terms of people apart from God. No need for God because people receive what they need from one another.

2. This results in condemnation. Accusation comes from Moses himself (v. 45). Jews looked upon him as lawgiver, giver of manna from heaven, as the savior who released them from the Egyptian bondage. Gradually he had been half deified. Rabbis taught that God counted him of as much value as all Israel. They believed the lower part of his body was human, the upper part divine. This very Moses condemned them. Moses gave manna from heaven, but here was Bread of Heaven. Moses performed outward miracles; here was One who effected an inner transformation. Very purpose of Law of Moses was to graphically portray human need for a Savior.

II

Hearing God's Living Voice in Scripture

A. His voice speaks in Scripture as a means to an end

"They are they which testify of Me" (v. 39). The "end" is the revelation of God. Not simply a series of propositions about God; but God Himself in action — speaking and listening, judging and saving! Scripture portrays the Gospel. See it as a drama and action centering in the Person of Christ. A lover does not reveal himself to the loved one by handing her a set of statements *about* himself. He wins trust and love by the story of his love, the drama of the past and of his present wooing. In Scripture, God is revealing what He has done and is doing to win us back to Himself.

B. His voice speaks to us in the present

The Jews were so preoccupied with the realization God *bad* spoken to their fathers in the past that they failed to hear Him

speaking through the Lord Jesus in the present. So He is speaking to us in the present. History is of limited interest. We live our lives of anxiety and tragedy, hope and failure, in the present. Sensing our deep need, we cry for "a very present help in trouble." If the Bible is only the story of God's dealing with other people or the chronicle of our ancestors' attempt to find God, then we leave it to scholars. We desire assured truth; we want to hear God as He speaks to us now.

C. His voice speaks the message of Christ

God's message is that of the total Gospel. Scripture does not profess to be a textbook of doctrines or chapters in the history of religion. Nor is it just a hero story, a "log cabin to White House" story, as with Lincoln. It might appear so: born in a stable, reared in a carpenter's cottage, rising to new heights of love for His fellow men, finally dying on the Cross to demonstrate that love, beckoning us from the heights to discipleship. Rather the reverse: a "White House to log cabin" story. The great King becomes man. He descends to the depths of the Cross. This Cross becomes both the manifestation of the depth of divine love and the means by which God revitalizes our spiritual lives. It is this story of help and deliverance that He speaks to us.

D. His voice speaks that we may have faith and life

God's goal in this is to give us life, v. 40. This means breathing again the breath of life into our animal creation; it describes the self-communication of God. The response of His work in us: I believe *in Him*. Most Christians labor under the impression that creeds begin: "I believe *that*. . ." Note the great difference. To believe *in* you implies an act of commitment, of allegiance or trust. The first is a statement of fact; the second, of faith. The first is objective; the second affects my life. We continue then to actually use Scripture in our lives, for through it God Himself speaks His message of hope in Jesus Christ that we might have His life.

St. Louis, Mo.

DAVID S. SCHULLER

TENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

MATT. 21:12-22

To cause a fig tree to wither from its roots was a strange way to teach a much-needed lesson. God often uses strange ways. Isaiah spoke of the divine judgment: "Jehovah . . . will be wroth . . . ; that He may do His work, His strange work, and bring to pass His act, His strange act" (Is. 28:21).

No warrant for criticizing our Lord's destroying of a tree for the purpose of teaching any more than objecting to cutting a Christmas tree, or dissecting a flower for botany study.

This was a powerful object lesson. Yes, there might have been something unusual about the tree. It was leafed out too fully for the season. It was precocious, having a full crop of leaves but no fruit. Thus it provided a perfect illustration of what our Lord wanted to teach. To understand our Lord's strange act we must consider that He was in the last week of His life on earth. He was hurt to the quick by the people whom He wanted especially to help. "He came unto His own, and his own received Him not" (John 1:11). On every side He found rejection. He wept His heart out because of the nation that had become a harlot. The nation had said finally: "We will not have this man reign over us." The nation had rejected Him, and there was nothing left to do. He had to reject the nation. He had been patient long enough. He had warned people not to sign their own eternal death warrant by preferring darkness to light. Now a step further: "The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." It was His solemn, final, awful warning.

Every warning fell on resentful hearts. The nation's sin was black against the white of His loving and repeated warnings. The Temple had become "a den of robbers." All kinds of vice were sheltered by religion. The priesthood was corrupt to the core. The people followed the leaders. There was ritual without repentance, fervor without faith, zeal without knowledge, sacrifice without sincerity, there was a willful and vicious "worship" of God without the least interest in pleasing God. The perversion was so great that even light was darkness.

THE LESSON OF THE WITHERED FIG TREE

I

Fruitlessness Must Be Destroyed

Our Lord was not giving His disciples the secret for destroying fig trees, but the secret for so living that they should not themselves be destroyed. In His final coming to the nation the Lord found faith missing. He found leaves without fruit.

Life is God given, and always for the purpose of fruit bearing. Only a fruit-bearing life can be a God-pleasing life. There is a radical revolt against the good and gracious purpose of God when His investment in the tree of humanity produces nothing but leaves. See Psalm 80. Isaiah 5 records Jehovah's plaintive cry: "He looked that it should bring forth grapes, and it brought forth wild grapes." The highly favored nation had failed to produce the fruit which was the natural outcome of the life which God had created and sustained. "I will tell you what I will do to My vineyard: I will take away the hedge thereof, and it shall be eaten up; and break down the wall thereof, and it shall be trodden down." If fruit is not forthcoming, the instrument provided for the bearing of fruit must be destroyed. By their refusal to receive Him, by the absence of fruit, the necessity was created for the destruction of the instrument. The Lord has only wrath when we willfully tamper with a divine process. God's final purpose in sending Christ to save us is to tear us out of Satan's hands and give us power to bear fruit. "We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10; John 15:8).

II

Faith Is the Principle of Fruitfulness

The Lord Himself gave the interpretation of His strange act. They wondered at His power to destroy. His answer came: "Have faith in God." He gave them the secret of making destruction unnecessary. He continued, "If ye have faith and doubt not, ye shall not only do this which is done to the fig tree, but also," etc. (v. 21). When faith perishes, then the possibility of fruitfulness passes away. If the disciples were not also to perish, this was to be their supreme search and concern: "Have faith in God." Fruit

was not found in the nation because life had departed from it; life had departed from it because faith in God had departed.

Jesus charged them to pray. Prayer is the breath of faith. The central secret of life is faith in God. As a miser seeks for gold, so we ought to seek for faith. Our lack of faith constitutes a grievous sin. When we limit God's power, make Him small and helpless in our thinking, never go to Him with important problems, strike out on an independent path, He is grieved and finally enraged.

A good question for us today: "If the Son of God were to come today, would He find us faithful in fruit-bearing, in stewardship?" Remember, no faith no fruit, no fruit no faith. Unless we are responsive to the life God has implanted within us, unless we are responsive to His Word, to His chastening, to His warning, we also shall wither from the roots.

Los Angeles, Calif.

CARL WALTER BERNER

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

JOHN 9:1-7

Many fears fill the minds of a young couple awaiting a baby. Human body so complex a thousand things can go wrong. Thus their prayer, "Just so it is healthy and whole!" To the wonder of birth itself add this wonder, that by God's grace the normal thing is a perfect baby!

Yet there are exceptions, as in the text. No science of men can prevent a tragedy such as this—a man born blind. Then, and in other tragedies of life (give examples from current news), we ask "Why?"—not in curiosity, but in anguish. Here lies the problem of evil. Let us find the solution in Jesus,

THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD

I

The Solutions Men Offer to the Problem of Evil

A. Philosophy can reach no satisfactory answer

1. Some shrug off the question. "That's life!" "Take the rain with the sunshine." "We all have to go sometime." No comfort but to "grin and bear it."

2. Some bring God into the picture. . . .

a) "God is careless and indifferent." But God cannot err, He is perfect.

b) "God *wants* the evil. He enjoys seeing men suffer." But how can a perfect God desire imperfection?

3. Some are satisfied with natural causes. Birth injury, genes, mother had measles, etc. This again leaves God out. Yet the human body, even with such imperfection, demands the mind of a Creator.

B. The disciples come a little closer to the answer, but they also fail

1. Their question indicates they realize that evil originates in the sin of man — our mutiny against God. Greatest evil is not what happens *to* us, but the evil *in* us.

2. But they err in thinking every particularly great evil must be the punishment of some proportionately great sin.

a) This often happens. Direct punishment of criminal; sins punished in the flesh of the transgressor; poetic justice; conscience with its fear of discovery.

b) Yet the problem: "Who did sin, this man or his parents?"

II

The Answer of Jesus, the Light of the World

A. He corrects the false impression of the disciples

1. Their view of suffering, shared by the Jews generally, is spiritually dangerous.

a) Thus they would classify sins as "little" and "great." A prime encouragement to Pharisaical self-righteousness. God makes no such classification.

b) Thus they see the outward manifestation of sin only and not the total perversion and depravity of the heart. We complain of our sufferings, yet how lightly God afflicts us compared with the punishment we really deserve! A 200-pound father, who could readily kill his 30-pound child, only spans him lightly. No "hell on earth," for only in death and hell will God reveal the full fury of wrath.

2. To Jesus the blindness of this man serves a blessed purpose, "that the works of God should be made manifest in him." Through chastisement God reveals Himself. The suffering serves not His vengeance, but His love (Job 5:17; Psalm 39, especially v. 11; Heb. 12:5-11).

a) If we ask, "Why cannot God reveal Himself in blessings?" the answer is: He does so abundantly, but we pay no attention.

b) Only when God humbles our pride and takes away our strength are we ready to listen or to seek Him.

c) Yet even here faith is needed. Unbelief sees only the punishment, hates it, complains and rebels. Faith sees God, dealing with man in wonderful patience and love.

B. Jesus gives us not only the explanation, but also the victory over every evil

1. In His own Person He is the active manifestation of God's love — "I must work. . . ." "I am the Light of the world."

2. Thus He has power over blindness (text) and over every affliction which is in this world because of sin. Thus He knows and loves you; He has power to deliver you from every evil. Or He can turn even suffering into a joy and a blessing which you gladly bear for His sake, by faith. See 2 Cor. 7:4; Rom. 5:3.

3. If He can take the curse from sin's consequences, He must also have the answer to the greatest evil, sin itself.

a) Thus the greatest work which He must work for God is to suffer and die.

b) By this sacrifice He presents you faultless before the Throne of Grace.

c) When sin is forgiven, then death, the greatest evil man knows, is also destroyed forever.

4. He is the *Light of the World*. His victory over all evil is most certainly yours.

Therefore trust God in all tribulation, glorify Him by letting Him fulfill the purpose of suffering in you. The victory is yours now. It shall be yours forever.

New Orleans, La.

PAUL G. BRETSCHER

TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

JOHN 9:24-41

We live in an enlightened age. In science we have moved forward to enjoy many more of the creations of God than previous generations. In education we speak of a well-informed age. In medicine also we are now able to save lives and preserve them in this world for a longer period of time than formerly. In the comforts of everyday living we have made great progress.

The frontiers of our knowledge are constantly being advanced through the light which God gives us. Heaven also is ours through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Our text today likewise leads us

FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT

I

The Physical Change in the Beggar

A. His first condition was blindness

He had been born blind. This was a terrible calamity, for all that he could do was to beg alms.

B. The miracle which Jesus wrought in the man

Jesus met him, and after making soft clay, He placed it on the eyes of the man and told him to wash in the Pool of Siloam.

C. The testimony of the man to this fact (Vv. 24-25)

He was called to give account. "Whereas I was blind, now I see" (v. 27). "I told you already" (vv. 32, 33). He testified that God had done it. (NOTE: The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. He can also through His almighty power bring forth light in bodily ailments or the problems of the world.)

II

The Refusal of Spiritual Change by the Pharisees

A. They lived in darkness

1. They were well educated in general learning. They also had much Scripture knowledge. They had excellent religious training and were the religious leaders of the people.

2. This education (mere knowledge) did not mean that they had the light. They boasted that they were clear-sighted, but the eyes of their soul were blind.

B. They continued in darkness

1. They were well acquainted with the miracle. It was an unquestioned fact. It was proved by the man himself, by his parents, by his neighbors.

2. They knew that only God could perform such a miracle (v.24). They conceded that this miracle, which eclipsed others, was done, but they tried to show that it was done through a sinner.

3. They deliberately remained in darkness. Unbelief tries to justify itself. None are so blind as those who will not see. There were hindrances of pride and irreligion (vv.28,41). They rejected the clearest evidence of Christ's divine mission on the ground of allegiance to Moses (v.28).

C. Christ wanted them also to be saved from spiritual darkness

1. The miracle was performed also for their benefit.

2. Jesus spoke to them (vv.39,40).

D. But they perished in darkness

"Therefore your sin remaineth" (v.41).

III

The Change in the Spiritual Condition of the Beggar

A. He had been in darkness of sin, for all men are born in sin (*original sin*)

This is not a pleasing thought to the world today. There is great unbelief of this.

B. He was called by Jesus (vv.35-37)

The miracles had served as a preparation. Miracles were done "that ye might believe."

C. He believed in Jesus (v.38)

"Lord, I believe."

D. He gave the fruits of faith, of living in light

He confessed his faith. He worshiped Jesus.

Conclusion. We leave him here at the feet of Jesus, even as it is our desire to be with Jesus. We are represented in this text. Pray God that we do not refuse the gracious call of Jesus and remain in darkness, but that we accept Him, confess Him, and show our faith through our worship and works. His glorious Gospel will not leave us as it found us. Pray God that it will always open our eyes.

Buffalo, N. Y.

JOHN E. MEYER

THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

MARK 12:28-37

The RSV has its bitter foes and its enthusiastic advocates. While no Christian will give wholehearted approval to every word of the new revision, neither will he be blind to its merits.

We are concerned with every word of Scripture because every word is inspired by God. We condemn every mistranslation. Yet we do not wish to succumb to the error of the Sadducees and Pharisees. See Mark 12:18-23; Matt. 22:35. The great danger is that in all the controversy over the new version we forget the eternal purpose and prime message of the Bible. Our text treats one of the most important questions we can ask about the Bible: What is its central message? Its greatest commandment? Hence our theme

THE GREAT COMMANDMENT OF THE BIBLE — LOVE

I

It Teaches Us Our Relationship of Love to God (vv. 28-30)

All revelation centers in two poles: God and man, man and man. Essentially the leitmotiv of the Bible is love.

A. It teaches us who God is

Notice that Jesus includes this in "the first commandment of all." Before we can love and understand God, we must know Him.

1. He is One (v. 29; cp. Epistle Lesson, Gal. 3:20).
2. He is the Triune God (all Three Persons of the Trinity are in this text, vv. 29, 35, 36).
3. His attributes.

B. It teaches us that God meets man through His Son (John 1:18; 2 Cor. 5:19)

This pericope includes vv. 35-37 for this reason.

1. One God means also one way of salvation — through Christ (Epistle Lesson; Acts 4:12).

2. Jesus is the eternal Son of God (Ps. 110:1).

3. He is also true man, David's Son, the God-Man, our Savior.

4. Through the Son, God justifies us. Why He became man. Faith.

5. Through the Son, God teaches us as in our text, gives us the Holy Spirit.

6. All this truly shows how God loves us (1 John 4:7-11; 19-21).

C. It teaches us that through faith in Christ God is our Father and we are His children

"Our God," "Jehovah," is name used in Deut. 6:4. Baptism, Gal. 3:26, 27.

1. A new relationship to God is established. We love Him as our Father. The love of obedience.

2. Jehovah is undivided; so must our love be for Him (v. 30).

3. For Christians this is no longer a commandment, but the obedience of faith (Rom. 6:15).

4. From the viewpoint of both God and the Christian, love is the fulfilling of the Law (Rom. 13:10).

5. Because of the weakness of our flesh this commandment shows our great need of God's grace in Christ. (Paul's ἐν Χριστῷ.)
Illustration: Rich Young Man (Matt. 19:16-26).

Transition. After Jesus had silenced the Pharisees and the scribes, "no man after that durst ask Him any questions." But Jesus welcomes questions from a clean heart. You ask, "Does this apply to me?" Yes, both God's love for you and your love to Him. But don't forget the second part of this commandment of love.

II

The Bible Teaches Us Our Relationship of Love to Our Fellow Men (v.31)

A. It teaches us who our neighbor is

This is important for true love and fellowship.

1. The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:23-37, Gospel Lesson for the day).

2. Why our neighbor is in need of our love. The will of God. Needs in social living. (Many illustrations available.)

B. Also the source of this love is God

1. The power of faith (1 John 5:4).

2. The Word and the Sacraments.

C. What this means when spelled out in daily living

1. In the household of faith.

2. In the community.

3. In the home.

Conclusion. The legal expert who tried to trap Jesus had to admit the truth of Jesus' answer (σοφειῶς, "wisely," "prudently"). Illustration: Recently when the American Constitution was transferred into the National Archives Building in Washington, it was guarded closely by a company of soldiers. But following the Constitution is more important than the document itself. Also living the Word is more important than mouthing it. "More important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." In Christ live this central message of the Bible, and "thou art not far from the kingdom of God."

Springfield, Ill.

LORMAN M. PETERSEN