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Homiletics: Studies on Free Texts from the Old Testament

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HOMILETICS

Studies on Free Texts from the Old Testament

FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

1 SAMUEL 7:7-13

The Text and Its Central Thought.—The events of Ch.7 are a grand and happy conclusion of another dark period in the history of Israel. The Israelites had been humiliated at the hands of the Philistines. The period of humiliation began with their defeat at Ebenezer, where the wicked sons of Eli were slain and the Ark was taken by the enemy. Eli died of shock, falling from his chair and breaking his neck. The interesting account of how the Ark, a "hot" trophy, was transported from place to place until it remained in Kirjathjearim. During this time Samuel was engaged in conducting a moral, spiritual reformation in Israel (Ch.7:3-6). The climactic result of this reformation, the defeat of the Philistines through the prayer of Samuel comes in the text. Ch.7 covers approximately 25 to 30 years of Samuel's career. The message of v.3 was "the theme and burden of continued exhortation" during those years. "It took time for the effect to appear, but eventually results came." The Philistines' decision to crash the solemn convocation of God's people (v.7a) reminds us of Ps.2:2. The natural reaction of the Israelites (v.7b) shows that they were still small of faith. Cf. Deut.1:17 and Matt. 10:28. The Israelites' spirit of unceasing prayer (v.8) is to be commended. To it Scripture exhorts us (Ps.50:15; Luke 18:1; 1 Thess. 5:17). In v.9a we have a good example of the spirit of consecration in prayer. "The meaning of the whole burnt offering was that which was the original idea of all sacrifice, the offering of the sacrifice of himself, soul and body, to God, the submission of his will to the will of the Lord." In v.9b we observe Samuel as an outstanding example for the pastor in his duty of intercessory prayer. Prayer is the dominating element in Samuel's career, for which he is also remembered in Ps.99:6 and Jer.16:1. As promised in Ps.2:5 and 1 Sam.2:10, so the Lord "discomfits" the enemy (v.10). Cf. also Judges 4 and David's psalm of thanksgiving (2 Sam.22:14,15). In the power of the Lord the Israelites gain courage (v.11). V.12 is a familiar text properly employed as a basis for exhorting God's people to erect fitting memorials to the Lord's help. Cf. Joshua 22:10; Ps. 124:8. V.13

describes the power of the Lord as the divine hand of favor upon His people and the divine hand of wrath against His enemies.—The central thought of the text can be neatly summarized in the words of James 5:16: "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much."

The Day and Its Theme.—The theme of the day's worship is "Thank God for Every Deliverance." In the Gradual we exalt the propriety of performing the vow of thanksgiving and praise for the Lord's loving-kindness and faithfulness. In the Gospel, Luke 17:11-19, the emphasis is upon the grateful leper. Certainly the text fits in well with this theme and particularly with the theme of *Parish Activities*: "Power Through Prayer."

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—While prayer as an individual activity must constantly be stressed, yet we must also emphasize the importance of congregational prayer and the importance of the prayers offered by pastors on behalf of the flock. The text gives us a wonderful opportunity to set forth both the qualifications and the effectiveness of proper prayer.

Sins to Be Diagnosed and Remedied.—The works of the flesh (cf. the Epistle [Gal. 5:16-24]) destroy effective prayer. "Ye have not because ye ask not. Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss" (James 4:2,3). The lack of thanksgiving; the lack of "Ebenezers" in recognition of God's answering the prayers of the church; the lack of a spirit of dependence upon God's power to save to the utmost.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—Faith in the promise of answered prayer is given to the penitent believer by the Gospel. The Gospel incites him to a more fervent spirit of prayer, including both intercession and thanksgiving.

Illustrations.—Choose from a host of stock illustrations, but choose with care. The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church. Peter's deliverance in answer to the church's prayer. The text itself is highly illustrative, dramatic. Many Labor Day speeches will stress power of organized labor. The power of the church is not in organization but in the Lord.

Outline

The Church Turns on God's Power Through Prayer

- I. When the Church prays
 - A. In the spirit of repentance (vv. 4, 6)
 - B. Especially in time of trouble (v. 7)

- C. Without ceasing (v. 8)
 - D. In faith and confidence in the redeeming mercy of God (v. 8b)
 - E. In the spirit of consecration (v. 9)
 - F. With thanksgiving (v. 12)
- II. God answers with His power
- A. He rules nature in the church's interest (v. 10)
 - B. He gives the church courage (v. 11)
 - C. He gives the church peace (v. 13)
 - D. The enemies are under His wrath (v. 13)

Apply Heb. 4:16 to the hearers as members of the local congregation and as members of the communion of saints. Cf. especially the Collect for the day.

Milwaukee, Wis.

VALENTINE MACK

FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

MICAH 7:18-20

The Text and Its Central Thought.—The prophet Micah identifies himself with fallen, foolish Israel. The man of God always has a godly concern for others. He feels for the people. Like Daniel (Dan. 9: 3-19) Micah confesses the sinfulness of the nation and steps into the gap to intercede for the people. God has made intercession a part of the prophetic office. "If they be prophets, and if the Word of the Lord be with them, let them now make intercession to the Lord" (Jer. 27:18).—Our faith in God and the resultant peace of heart and mind never exempt us from a positive program of ministering to the needs of our fellow men. The Gospel of relaxation and ease may sound good, but it has a hollow ring. It is foreign to the spirit of Calvary. There can never be real peace of heart and mind apart from dedication to the spirit which led to the cross, love for lost humanity. It is said of the early Christians that they had "an inner serenity and peace which nothing in the world could shake, and yet a productive passion and concern for mankind which made their program a constant strategy and attack." Two focal accents in the Christian life are peace of mind through Christ and thereafter a Christlike concern for others. Someone called it: "The serenity of a great peace and the concern of a great love."—Micah has a spirit of loving, lifting, helping. His passage in 4:15 is magnificent. Above and beyond

the present darkness there is the glowing and beckoning glory of the new world and even now the foretaste thereof.

The Day and Its Theme.—*Parish Activities* suggests: "Prayer and Christian Education." September is Christian Education Month in many churches. This gives occasion to speak of the concern of God's children for the nation, for humanity, for youth, for children. This concern always shows itself chiefly in helping people to a solution of their primary problem. Man's primary need is always to receive and possess what God longs most to give, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. All the blessings that make life strong and true, that give it a foretaste of the coming glory, flow out of the power of Christian faith, by which we are linked to our gracious and forgiving God.

Sin to Be Diagnosed and Remedied.—The text takes on great meaning and motivation only when seen against the total background of man's desperate need. The days were really dark with sin, and Micah described them forthrightly (7:2-6).

There is life and salvation only where there is forgiveness of sin. Need of forgiveness is as constant as our sin, and our sin is as constant as our breath. Every one of us must complain with St. Paul: "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." Nothing good ever comes out of flesh drives. They always bring sorrow, unhappiness, pain. There is a stark and terrifying reality in St. Paul's assertion: "Obedience to the flesh drives means death" (Phillips). Flesh drives are still with us. This is the Christian's bitter complaint and chief concern. "Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" Flesh drives are rebellion against God, hurt us and others deeply, and will be with us and in us until we die.

If the minister is truly concerned to help people, he will be on guard against the danger of talking about sin just to set up the pattern for anticipated Gospel. Martin Luther saw the problem clearly: "The benefit of Christ's suffering depends almost entirely upon man coming to a true knowledge of himself, becoming terror stricken and slain; otherwise the sufferings of Christ become of no benefit to him. . . . As Christ was horribly stricken in body and soul for our sin, so we must also like him be stricken in our conscience by our sin . . . whoever perceives himself to be so hard and sterile that he is not terror stricken by Christ's suffering . . . should fear and tremble. . . . Be it realized in life or in hell; you must at the time of death, if not sooner, fall into terror and tremble." The wrath of God is real, desperately real, and every man must feel it. Blessed they who feel it now, allow

God to rebuke them, condemn them, slay them. If we should judge ourselves as unworthy, lost, condemned sinners, we should never be judged in the great Day of Judgment.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—To show man's total loss in sin and his complete redemption in Christ. To show what kind of God we have, a God who hates and yet loves, a God of wrath and mercy, one who is against sin and for the penitent sinner.

Opportunities for Gospel.—God longs most to forgive us. "The Lord, the Lord God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6,7). He wants us to seek forgiveness of sins only in His grace and mercy. "I, even I, am He that blotteth out thy transgressions for Mine own sake" (Is. 43:25). In other words: "I will blot thy transgressions out of My book not because of any work on your part, not because of any offering coming from you, not because of any worthiness dwelling in you, but only for My own reasons, for the sake of My own honor, that you may know Me as a merciful and gracious God, have full confidence in Me, love Me deeply, trust Me implicitly." Throughout the whole Bible and in the entire history of God's people, from the beginning of the church to its end, there is not a single penitent sinner who has found forgiveness of sins save in the grace of God revealed in the Savior Jesus Christ. Anyone who seeks forgiveness elsewhere is a despiser of God, for in the stead of God's honor he asserts his own; in the place of God's merit he establishes his own. Such a person robs God of His honor by refusing to let God do for him what He longs to do, to forgive fully through the merit and mercy of the Savior.

Illustration.—During the French Revolution it was said to a peasant: "We will have all your steeples pulled down that you may no longer have any object to remind you of God and your religious superstition." "But," replied the peasant, "you will still leave us the stars." The world is dark; many lights have gone out. Sin, bringing darkness and death, is everywhere. But one faithful star still shines, the star of God's Gospel, the one remaining hope and light in the world. So long as we have it, life can never be without comfort, hope, triumph, power.

Outline

The Fellowship of the Concerned

I. We are concerned about others

A. The spirit of Micah is the Christian spirit

- B. He had tasted God's concern for him
- C. We, too, have tasted God's concern for us

- II. We know every man's real need
 - A. To see God's wrath upon sin
 - B. To receive God's forgiving grace

- III. We will express our concern
 - A. By having the spirit of Micah
 - 1. The spirit of intercession
 - 2. The spirit of confidence and hope
 - B. We will teach and preach sin and grace

Los Angeles, Calif.

CARL W. BERNER

SIXTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

2 CHRONICLES 7:12-16

The Text and Its Central Thought.—The language of the text presents no particular difficulties. A parallel account is found in 1 Kings 9:1ff. A comparison will show that the Chronicler has followed an independent tradition in vv. 12b-15.—God's promise in our text closely parallels the terms and conditions set down in Solomon's dedicatory prayer in the preceding chapter (7:26-28, 37, 39; on v. 15 see 6:40). The Hebrews as a whole clung to the notion that God's care for them as His special people implied a measure of indulgent leniency. Now that the temple was completed, they might be tempted all the more to feel that they had Jahweh permanently trapped as a willing or unwilling Ally to their every undertaking. V. 13f., therefore, contains the scarcely veiled warning that God is still Master and that His presence can be felt in judgment as well as in mercy. The dominant note in the text, however, is one of assurance. God's personal concern for His children and His availability in response to their prayers could hardly be more intimately expressed than in vv. 15, 16. *The powerful Lord, personally present and bearing our prayer as Savior and Friend*—that is the central thought of the text. It only remains to remark that the "name" of God in v. 16 is God Himself as He gives Himself to men in His revelation, pre-eminently in His self-revelation in Christ (John 12:28; 17:12, 26).

The Day and Its Theme.—The theme is "God's Grace and Word

Is Our Help." The relevance of our text is obvious. "Power Through Prayer" suggests the theme of *Parish Activities*; prayer can and does change things when God's people come repentant and believing, suggests our text.

Sin to Be Diagnosed.—Our greatest sin often is our unwillingness to accept in all of its implications the fully personal nature of God which this text so powerfully portrays. We just cannot believe that God has eyes that are open to our needs, ears that are intent to our prayer, a heart that is beating—here—now! And so we have let prayer, especially petitionary and intercessory prayer, become a "problem." Most recent books on prayer approach prayer as a problem. Can prayer change things? Does the prayer of the righteous avail? Not unless God is both the completely powerful Lord and the completely personal Friend who here reveals himself. Finespun arguments, giving the rationale of petitionary prayer, will, of course, avail nothing. Preach the text. Let it speak. Our God is not a philosophical Abstraction, or a dimly felt First Cause behind nature's laws, or a helpless Observer, or an absentee Landlord. He is the personal God who loves us and who, in loving us, gives us Himself in powerful and saving presence.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—Christ is the answer to our inability to get God in focus. The availability of God in Solomon's temple is a dim and distant symbol of His gracious presence in Immanuel, God-with-us.

Illustrations.—The Gospel for the day contains the significant comment: "God hath visited His people." Just so. In Solomon's temple then; in Christ now! — V. 13 f., with its affront to modern man's idolatrous respect for Natural Law, recalls Chesterton's remark: "The sun does not rise by Natural Law. It rises because God says, 'Get up, and do it again!'" There was a man apparently who saw no "problem" in petitionary prayer.—Or there is Luther, who had got beyond the problem of prayer to the practice of prayer and the experience of its power. "No one believes" he says, "how strong and mighty prayer is and how much it can do except he whom experience has taught and who has tried it. It has raised up in our time three persons who lay in danger of death, myself, my wife Katy, and Philip Melancthon in 1540 at Weimar." Almost naive? Maybe. But that is the faith expressed in the Epistle for the day, that God "is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think." (See also the Introit.)

Outline

Need it be stated that the "why," "where," and "when" divisions in the following outline, while providing handy pegs for the preacher's thoughts, need hardly be hammered into the hearer's head?

Is God Available?

- I. Why God can make Himself available
 - A. God is not
 - 1. A philosophical Abstraction
 - 2. An absentee Landlord or
 - 3. A helpless Observer of the human scene
 - B. But He is
 - 1. The personal
 - 2. And powerful
 - 3. And present Lord and Friend
- II. Where God has made himself available
 - A. In His self-giving through the Word
 - B. In His self-giving in Christ
 - C. In His self-giving to His worshiping and praying congregation
- III. When God makes Himself available to us
 - A. When we recognize and submit to His judgment
 - B. When we turn to Him in true repentance
 - C. When we trustingly claim His mercy in believing prayer

Seattle, Wash.

WALTER J. BARTLING

SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

RUTH 1:11-18

The Text and Its Central Thought.—Our text is a study in human relations. This particular section of the Book of Ruth deals with the turning point in the life of Naomi and her two daughters-in-law when the former determined to return to Bethlehem from the land of Moab. Orpah and Ruth must decide whether they will leave their homeland and go with Naomi or not. Naomi believes that the two should remain in their homeland. Unselfishly she encourages them to stay behind; she gives her reasons. Her plea reveals her as considerate and loving.

Orpah is swayed by the pleas and remains in Moab. But Ruth is determined to go with her mother-in-law and gives her reasons. In response to Ruth's moving statement, marked by love and constancy and faithfulness to the Lord, Naomi and Ruth go together to Bethlehem.

Only one phrase causes any difficulty, namely, the statement of Naomi: "and unto her gods." Whether we translate the Hebrew as plural or singular, since both are grammatically correct and possible, the difficulty remains. "Her gods (or god)" would refer to the god of the Moabites, Chemosh. Many declare that Naomi is not faithful to the Lord Jehovah in encouraging Ruth and Orpah to return to a false god. However, in contrast to this quality of Naomi appears the faithfulness of Ruth in vowing "thy God shall be my God." Ruth was determined to be a follower of the true God, gives that as her reason for her choice, and with her words encourages Naomi in that worship.

Thus the central thought of the text is simply a lesson in good human relations. We have a good example of a family council.

The Day and Its Theme.—The suggested theme for the day: "The Humble Faith and Mutual Love of Christians," fits the text well. The concluding sentence of the Introit, the Collect, the opening sentence of the Gradual, and the Collect for the Epistle deal with facets of good human relations, such as the blessedness of faithfulness to the Lord, such as unity. The Epistle deals with Christian unity and its basis. The Gospel speaks of pretense and pride, enemies of good human relations.

Parish Activities, in suggesting the emphasis "Power Through Prayer: Prayer and Christian Education," reminds us that one of the purposes of Christian education is that we have improved human relations and that we should pray for such improvement.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—To help the hearers to grow in good relations with one another, both in the circle of the family and in all their dealings.

Sin Diagnosed and Remedied.—Selfishness in human relations, inconsiderateness, lack of Christian convictions regarding faith, failure to be loving and sympathetic—all of these sins afflict every family and every group.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—Ruth's choice: "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God," gives us an opportunity to point out the compelling reason for this choice, namely, that the

people of Israel had the promised Messiah and that Israel's God is the true God of salvation, with whom there is forgiveness and life.

Illustrations.—As soon as we apply the truths of the text, we have many modern-day illustrations. The Propers for the day suggest many illustrations. The Gospel, for example, condemns pretended piety, lovelessness and pride, destroyers of good human relations, and suggests examples.

Outline

Introduction: We admire the mutual love of Naomi and Ruth. We desire the harmony that existed between them and the blessings Ruth received. Contrariwise, we lament the bickering and the strife that often exists. Therefore

For Better Relations with One Another

I. Seek after the qualities

- A. Of Unselfishness. The need for this trait. The examples of Naomi and Ruth.
- B. Of Considerateness. Naomi was thoughtful and observant of the feelings of her daughters-in-law. No running roughshod over the desires and feelings of others.
- C. Of Constancy. Ruth is a great example of this quality that is needed in greater degree today.
- D. Of Love and Sympathy. The plea of Naomi (vv.11-13) reveals true love and sympathy. The vow of Ruth likewise.

II. Build on the foundation of the worship of the true God

- A. Be faithful ourselves in the worship of the Lord, who is our Maker and Redeemer, in whom there is life and salvation. He gives the ability to love one another.
- B. Encourage others to join with us in this worship. Ruth thus encouraged Naomi. (Here we may refer to the agencies of Christian education as means of accomplishing this goal.)

Springfield, Ill.

LEWIS C. NIEMOELLER

EIGHTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER TRINITY

ISAIAH 54:7-10

The Text and Its Central Thought.—This is one of the richest texts of the Bible with regard to the never-failing mercy of God. Not only does it give reassurance of mercy previously promised, but it also gives the answer to the many appearances that rise up as disproof of the mercy of God, the black clouds that make God's face to appear as the face of consuming wrath. Whatever it may be that does not appear in harmony with the mercy of God, it is at best for only a short moment, far outweighed by the greatness of the mercies with which God will again draw us to Himself. There is the little moment of wrath in which God hides His face for the correction of those whom He loves, but the mercy will again give evidence not of a comparably little but of an eternal kindness. Actually, God cannot be angry to cast off, because to Him it is all in the same class with the waters of the Flood: never again can anything of the kind rise up to destroy those with whom He has entered into covenant. Take the most permanent that we know, the mountains and the hills, great when we are born and just as great when we die: you might picture them if you will rising up out of their beds and their foundations and merrily dancing off in unfaithfulness to their basic purpose; but it is utterly beyond the comprehension of faith that God's kindness should ever be anything but kindness and the peace which is ours with Him through His own holy covenant can never be anything but peace, even the peace of God which passeth all understanding. Eternally unchanging are the rich mercies of our God.

The Day and Its Theme.—It would appear that the day had been named and chosen on the basis of this Old Testament text, so fully does it show forth the mercies of God. St. Paul in the Epistle insists on the very same thing that God here states with regard to Himself: He is faithful. Our cause is in His hands, the hands of Him who approached us in mercy and who can never change and be anything but merciful. The Gospel ties in very well if we look at Jesus' question as the fulfillment of what God had in mercy promised already in Eden, renewed to Abraham, and made even more explicit to David. It is that on which the whole covenant of peace rests: that Jesus is David's Son and David's Lord. God did not forget mercy but finally sent the Redeemer to fully effect what He had promised of old. It is good for us to be reminded of this never-failing mercy of God so forcibly that the certainty of it and the strong pleading of it find a voice in our sermons.

The Goal and Purpose of the Sermon.—Faith in the eternal and rich mercies of our God. The "small moment" and the "little wrath for a moment in which God hides His face" all too often become determinative as far as our attitudes toward God are concerned. It must be evident that everything must be interpreted in terms of God's rich and eternal mercies, which can be hidden momentarily but which can never fail.

Sin and Its Fruits to Be Diagnosed and Remedied.—Basic to all sin is unbelief, and this text gets right at the source of all sin. God can use no stronger language than He does in our text to assure us of His ongoing attitude toward us, and it was faith in that which prompted the great ones, like Paul, to insist that "all things work together for good to them that love God"; to write an Epistle from prison and have as its theme, "Rejoice, and again I say, rejoice." Even in those circumstances, it never tired him to write the same things to the Philippians. It is faith in the never-failing mercies of God that will finally bring us to overcome our unbelief and its petty complainings and distrustful questionings and to cry out with Job: "Though God slay me, yet will I trust in Him." We are always wrong whenever we judge in such a way that God's mercies are made suspect or void.

Opportunities for Explicit Gospel.—Sin rises up to show us the wrath of God; but even though we are sinners, we believe in God's mercies. God's wrath is His alien work and the backside of His face. The mercy is all-embracing, all-forgiving, all-surpassing, all-encompassing, all-conquering. Stand at the foot of the Cross of Jesus Christ, and in every drop of blood, every groan of agony, every moan of pain, every cry of God-forsakenness, hear the commentary on our text. Read the text there, and it needs no comment.

Illustrations and New Testament Parallels.—St. Paul, writing his Letter to the Philippians; St. Paul, praying thrice for the removal of his thorn and learning that God's grace is sufficient for him to the point to where he learned to glory in his infirmities; the man sick of the palsy being told to be of good cheer because his sins are forgiven him; the thief on the cross, God's face hidden from where he hung, but the mercies eternal in the assurance from Jesus that Paradise was his that very day.

Outline

Introductory thought: the most difficult art in the world is to believe in the mercy of God. It is beyond our human powers to perform and

must be done by God. That He does in our text today by His own assurances to us that He is

The God That Has Mercy Upon Us

- I. We always judge God to be the opposite of mercy
 - A. He appears to forsake us even as He did Israel in the Captivity.
 - B. He appears to hide His face from us so that even when we cry to Him in prayer, there seems to be no answer. Everything goes on as before our praying.
 - C. The waters rise up desperately high and threaten to destroy us: our own inadequacy in the face of our problems; people cracking up because they have no more than their own resources to call on; people going under because they try to swim and never realize that there is an ark of God there to save them.
 - D. Even the mountains seem to depart and the hills removed in our day: the old natural stabilities seem to have vanished, and man is truly desperate.
- II. Faith in God's promises opens our eyes to eternal mercy
 - A. It is the greatness of His mercy by which He gathers us.
 - B. It is His redemption in Christ that gives us the single clue to the interpretation of all His dealings (v.8).
 - C. It is a stronger covenant that has been made with us through the Cross than was ever made by the rainbow.
 - D. It is Christ (as in the Gospel) who finally challenges all our doubts: crucified, risen, ascended, to certify God's mercies forever.

Conclusion: The conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:24-27).

Minneapolis, Minn.

WILLIAM A. BUEGE