

PREACHING CHRIST
LECTURE 2
SELECTION: SELECTING A TEXT

INTRODUCTION

“What will I preach on?” This is the question which challenges, vexes, and even haunts many preachers every day of their lives. Some preachers answer the question by preaching on social issues, or on politics, or on psychology. However, for the evangelical preacher, this is not an option and the question is more limited. For him the question is, “What portion of Scripture will I preach on?”

This more limited question directs us in the general direction of the Scriptures, and in the specific direction of a “text” of Scripture, upon which the sermon will be based. The necessity of addressing this question is derived from the nature of the preacher’s task, which is to preach the whole counsel of God. Being unable to do this all at once in one sermon, he must divide his sermons into separate addresses on separate portions of God’s Word. Hence the question, “What portion of Scripture or ‘text’ will I preach on?”

I. WHAT IS A TEXT?

1. Definition of “Text”

The word ‘text’ is from the Latin *textum* which means woven. This suggests, firstly, that your sermon ‘text’ is woven into the whole fabric of the Scriptures, and therefore must not be torn out of its connections and relations with the rest of Scripture. Secondly, it indicates that your ‘text’ must be woven into the whole fabric of the sermon.

Application

Your ‘text’ must be taken from Scripture, be shown in its relation to the rest of Scripture, and be the substance of your sermon.

2. Defining a “Text”

How much Scripture constitutes a ‘text.’ Can a text be one word or one phrase? Must it be one whole verse. May it extend to many verses? The best way to answer this is to consider the three main kinds of ‘texts.’

a. Classic texts

These texts are phrases, sentences, or a verse which contain the cardinal truths of redemption: original sin, new birth, justification, the deity of Christ, etc. R L Dabney said: “Single sentences setting forth transcendent truths like these, may well receive the exclusive treatment of a whole sermon. However, significantly, he also added: “A sermon on such a text...is in the best sense **expository**, for it explains whole tracts of the Scripture.”¹

Example: “The soul that sinneth, it shall die” (Ezek.18:20). A sermon on such a text will explain what sin is, what death is, and how they are connected. It will show the connection with Ezekiel’s previous line of argument, and also its relation to the doctrines of sin and death in other parts of Scripture.

¹ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 77

b. Conclusion texts

These may consist of simply one phrase or one sentence, which gives the moral of a whole parable, or the summary of the whole passage. However, the preacher must expound the connected passage which leads up to the 'conclusion.'

Example: "And I say unto you, Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness; that, when ye fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations" (Lk.16:9). This is a summary of the parable in verses 1-8 and any sermon should explain both the parable and the summary.

Regarding both 'classic' and 'conclusion' texts it should be made clear that such texts should not be used as a mere motto to introduce the sermon. Nor should the preacher normally select his subject, then seek a text for it. "The sermon should not dictate the choice of a text, but the text should determine the whole character of the sermon."²

c. Consecutive texts

This refers to the systematic explanation of a number of verses, one after the other. It may be a short passage or it may be long. Its length will be determined by a number of factors – the genre of the literature (historical narrative, doctrine, poetry, etc.), the density of the material (doctrinal, devotional, etc.), the variety of subjects (where a new subject is introduced or a new argument is begun), the length of time available for the sermon, etc. While preachers may choose a portion of Scripture for consecutive exposition from different books each week, it is also a common practice to work systematically through one chapter or one book over a number of weeks.

Example: Genesis 6:1-10 would be a suitable portion for consecutive exposition. It's beginning and ending are clearly marked. It begins with a horrendous description of the state of the earth in the days of Noah, and God's displeasure. It ends with the holy description of Noah walking with God, and God's delight in him.

Application

In summary, then, your 'text' should be a portion of Scripture which is explained in relation to its context. Care should be taken to define the limits of the 'text', explain the 'text,' and show its relations to its context and the rest of Scripture. All preaching should be expository in substance, whether classic, conclusion, or consecutive in style.

II. WHY CHOOSE A TEXT?

Let us now consider the advantages of choosing a 'text' of Scripture, as defined above, as the basis for exposition in a sermon.

First of all, this is the Scriptural practice in both the Old Testament (Neh.6:6-8) and the New Testament (Lk.4:16-19; Acts 2:14-36).

Secondly, it gives the Scriptures their rightful honoured place. It explicitly affirms that the Scriptures are the only rule to direct us how to glorify and enjoy God. It declares the Scriptures to be our only rule of faith and practice.

² R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 94.

Thirdly, it gives a sacredness of tone to the sermon and imparts divine authority to the preacher's words. Dabney said: "The whole authority of his addresses to the conscience depends upon the correspondence between his explanations and inferences and the infallible word."³

Fourthly, it keeps the preacher from wandering away from the Scriptures, so ensuring that they are explained in public and, therefore, that God is revealed to the public.

Fifthly, text-based sermons are more likely to have structure and unity, and therefore are more easily remembered by both the preacher and the hearers.

Sixthly, the wide variety of 'texts' in the Scriptures is more likely to produce variety in exposition and therefore excite continued interest.

Application

If you want sermons which conform to the Scriptural example, that honour the Scriptures, that are authoritative, that reveal God, that are 'memorable,' and that excite interest, then preach expository sermons, sermons which explain texts of Scripture.

III. HOW TO CHOOSE A TEXT

Having established what is a 'text' and highlighted the advantages of preaching from a 'text' we shall now propose helps to choosing a 'text.' This is perhaps the most important task in any preacher's life.

W G T Shedd said: "The greatest possible labour and care should be expended upon the choice of a text...As in secular oratory, the selection of a subject is either vital or fatal to the whole performance. So in sacred oratory, the success of the preacher depends entirely upon the fitness of his choice of a text...Labour at this point saves labour at all after points."⁴

C H Spurgeon said: "I hope we all make it a matter of very earnest and serious consideration, every week, what shall be the subjects upon which we shall address our people on the Sabbath morning and evening; for, although all Scripture is good and profitable, yet it is not all equally appropriate for every occasion."⁵

We shall consider the source of texts, and the substance of texts.

1. The source of texts

a. Read the Bible

The preacher should be reading his Bible to edify his own soul. In the ordinary course of this reading he will come across suitable sermons texts which grip him, move him, and interest him.

³ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 75.

⁴ W G T Shedd, *Homiletics & Pastoral Theology*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 153

⁵ C H Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965), 81.

b. Read good books

As time for reading is limited, make sure you are reading the books which will produce the most sermons. By that I do not mean books of sermons. I mean books which will refer to Scripture, explain Scripture, and highlight Scripture in a way which may form the basis of a sermon.

c. Listen to your people

In the course of pastoral visitation subjects will arise which will stimulate the mind and suggest texts for sermons.

d. Read the newspaper

I do not intend to suggest here that newspaper headlines become our texts. However, newspapers will highlight trends in thought, in religion, in lifestyle and in morals which the pastor's mind will need to be alert to in order to address in the pulpit.

e. Observe providence

Momentous events like war, earthquakes, disease, tragedies impact upon our people and will often provide a topical introduction to a sermon on God's providence and our response to it.

f. Listen to God

It may seem strange to put this after these other sources, as the sources just mentioned are all ways in which we listen to God. However, what we are referring to here specifically is the necessity of the preacher to remain sensitive to the voice of God in his own soul. God, who searches all spirits will at times directly impress a text upon the spirit of the preacher. The preacher may not know the reason for this, but should respond to it, trusting that God has seen a need, invisible perhaps to everyone else, and knows the text to address it.

J W Alexander wrote: "The right text is the one which comes of itself during reading and meditation: which accompanies you in walks, goes to bed with you, and rises with you. On such texts, thoughts swarm, like bees upon a branch."⁶

Charles Spurgeon takes us further than simply listening to God. He urges that we cry to God for the text: "When your text comes in answer to prayer, it will be all the dearer to you; it will come with a divine savour and unction altogether unknown to the formal orator."⁷

Application

If you read your Bible, keep your mind refreshed with good books, visit people, stay abreast of current affairs, observe providence, and remain sensitive to God's voice, your problem will not be a lack of 'texts' but an embarrassment of riches. In order to preserve these riches in store for future use, you should keep handy a notebook in which to write 'texts' sourced in these ways, together with 'skeletons' of sermons or thoughts already formed.

⁶ J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 24.

⁷ C H Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965), 86

2. The substance of texts

a. Complete

As we have already noted, the length of a 'text' can be long or short, many verses or few verses. But, however long or short, the 'text' should be complete. It should not be a mere fragment of Scripture nor a piece of Scripture used as a 'motto.' The markers for where a 'text' begins and ends have already been discussed above.

b. Important

The 'text' must contain an important point. While every verse in Scripture is important, not all contain important truths. Many connect those which do. The Holy Spirit did not intend a sermon in every sentence of Scripture. We must therefore major on the majors.

c. Brief

The 'text' should be as brief as completeness and importance will allow. Short 'texts' are more easily remembered and allow emphatic repetition. Remember, you may give a summary of the whole, then intimate that you are limiting yourselves for that particular sermon to a particular part of the 'text,' preferably a particularly striking part.

d. Clear

The plainer the 'text' the better. If you have a choice of two 'texts' to teach the same truth then let the simple one be the preferred one and use it to cast light on the less clear. Obscure 'texts' require much explanation before they can profitably become a message from God. Shedd said: "The text is the key-note to the whole sermon. The more bold, the more undoubted and undisputed its tone, the better....It challenges attention and gets it. It startles and impresses by its direct and authoritative announcement of a great and solemn proposition. Nothing remains, then, but for the preacher to go out upon it with his whole weight, to unfold and apply its evident undoubted meaning, with all the moral confidence and all the serious earnestness of which he is capable."⁸

e. Natural

A sermon should not be forced into a 'text' but should be derived from it in a plain, natural, and obvious manner. Avoid oddity and eccentricity. The apostle argues for the "things that are good and profitable to men" and against "the things that are unprofitable and vain" (Tit.3:8,9.). He warns against curiosity or speculation (2 Tim.2:15, 16, 23). What you need is not novelty but freshness.

f. Varied

Make sure you are preaching a balanced diet of Scripture to your people by constantly reviewing your preaching calendar. If there has been too much emphasis on the Old Testament, or on the love of God, or on biography, or on doctrine, or on history, etc., then remedial action should be taken. You must preach the whole counsel of God. Only balanced preaching will leave the impression God intended with the mould of Scripture. Imbalanced preaching will distort the mould and consequently the impress on the hearers.

⁸ W G T Shedd, *Homiletics & Pastoral Theology*, (London: Banner of Truth, 1965), 153

g. Suitable

The selection of 'texts' will be influenced by the time of year (Harvest, Communion, War, etc.). Selection should also be influenced by the spiritual needs of the congregation: what sins are they falling into, what joys do they celebrate, what trials are they facing, etc. Spurgeon said we must pick the food suited to the hearers. "We dare not rush into the King's banquet hall with a confusion of provisions as though the entertainment were to be a vulgar scramble, but as well-mannered servitors we pause and ask the great Master of the feast, Lord what wouldst thou have us set upon they table this day."⁹

Application

When you select your 'text' ask yourself: "Is it complete, is it important, is it brief, is it clear, is it natural, is it varied, is it suitable?"

J W Alexander said the preacher's mind should be occupied with, "True rather than false...positive rather than negative...great rather than small...divine rather than human."¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Let me conclude this lecture on selecting your 'text' with the solemn words of R L Dabney: "I would impress you with a solemn awe of taking any liberties in expounding the word. I would have you feel that every meaning of the text, other than that which God expressly intended it to bear, is forbidden fruit to you, however plausible and attractive – fruit which you dare not touch on peril of a fearful sin."¹¹

⁹ C H Spurgeon, *Lectures to my Students* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1965), 82.

¹⁰ J W Alexander, *Thoughts on Preaching*, (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1988), 32.

¹¹ R L Dabney, *Lectures on Sacred Rhetoric* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 97.