



THE SERMON

It is a most privileged calling to be a preacher; one that comes with significant challenges. Not the least of these is to preach well. Even when we do, not all folk think so! That is because there are many different views around as to what makes a good sermon. What matters most, however, is not what we think, but what God thinks. He has chosen the means of our nourishment, and like a good parent he feeds us with what is good for us, but not necessarily with that which we crave.

I. THE GOAL OF THE SERMON

The sermon is the pinnacle of public worship, that chief time in the service when God addresses us. He does so, not, initially, to speak to our needs, but to show us His glory. This is necessary not only because we are human and cannot see or comprehend a lot of God, but also because we are fallen, and will not see Him. By nature we would rather look at ourselves.

God's glory, though, is not without practical implications. It is only as we glimpse it that we see in its light both our needs and the way they are met in Christ. It is for this reason that good sermons focus, first and foremost, on God. Sometimes we detect in a passage God's glory from the old covenant history of his dealings with his people; at other times from his new covenant dealings with us. Above all, we see his glory in his grace, his mercy and his faithfulness in Christ, but we also see his glory in his fatherly chastenings.

II. THE CONTENT OF THE SERMON

It is the expository method of preaching which enables us best to hear from God. This is because it focuses on the interpretation and application of the Scriptures. Setting each text or passage in its context, the preacher is better able to understand what is in the passage at hand and to make applications naturally arising from it. Whereas the legitimate meaning of

the passage lays the foundation in faithful preaching for application clearly rooted in the passage, application that can be clearly seen to arise from the passage lends the sermon significant authority. This is so vital when pressing on our hearers the need for change in their lives.

Illustrations and humor may be useful along the road from text to application, so long as they do not take on a life of their own. They are the servants not the masters of the sermon. They only work when they flow naturally from the preacher's material and personality and should never be crude or irreverent. The goal throughout, we recall, is the airing not of our own thoughts or opinions, but of the voice of God. Hence the reformer Heinrich Bullinger's bold claim that the "preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God" (The Second Helvetic Confession, 1566).

While expository preaching may be topical, preaching which forsakes the exposition of a verse, passage, or book for the sake of its chosen theme becomes what we call "topical preaching." By contrast with expository preaching, topical preaching relies on the accumulation of isolated texts from around the Scriptures—texts often abstracted from their original context. The degree of sensitivity by the topical preacher to the context he cites will determine how accurately God is heard to speak through the topical sermon. Furthermore, a diet of topical preaching will, after a while, transfer the thrust of the sermon from God and his glory to man and his felt needs. This does not mean to say that there is no place for topical preaching, but it does remind us not to allow our needs to overshadow God's glory and the exaltation of Christ. Such wonderful themes minister to our needs but they do not bow down to them..

III. THE APPLICATION OF THE SERMON

Sometimes the application of the passage will take the form of an exhortation, whether to praise, to pray, or to witness. Typically, the application works out some practical principles or tips from the heart of the passage under review. Yet, since the preacher is faced by housewives, fathers, managers, farmers, nurses, the retired, young adults, and school



The Sermon
Tim J. R. Trumper
www.fromhisfullness.com

children, he cannot customize the application for every domestic scenario represented. The preacher is, then, reliant on congregants listening well to the sermon and interacting with it mentally and spiritually so as to apply its principles to the specifics of his or her personal situation. Where this occurs, the preacher not only ministers to the people but the people minister to him, ensuring that his labor is not in vain in the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58).

IV. THE DELIVERY OF THE SERMON

The sermon ought not to be dull. Preachers speak of the best news available to humankind— that God in Christ has visited us, forgiven us, and accepted us! A sermon, then, should be delivered energetically and passionately, but not in a shrill tone. While it will seek to embrace the whole congregation, faithful preachers will not compromise content for entertainment. Nor will we patronize the congregation by preaching at a level that is beneath them. We preach in such a way that all may glean something from the sermon, but this does not preclude the sermon from stretching minds. Indeed, over the course of time, we may justifiably expect the faithful ministry of the Word to expand the understanding of our hearers and to enlarge their capacity for worship. Indeed, a faithful minister of the Word will model such growth, for it is as he is trained in the Word that he trains his hearers.

Preaching would be very daunting were it not for the success God has promised us (Isaiah 55:11). This promise does not alleviate ministers of the responsibility of crafting the best sermons we can, nor does it free congregants of the duty of praying for those who minister to them and of coming to worship with prepared hearts ready to hear from God. A great sermon, it is worth noting, requires both the preacher and the people to be full of God's Spirit.

In reflecting on the sermon, then, we ask ourselves what contribution we make to the richness of worship each Lord's Day, for congregants as well as preachers are participants in worship. We forget that to our detriment and to the detriment of our perception of God's glory shining from what the hymnist calls Scripture's "gilded page."