

Chapter Fifteen

The Simplicity of His Preaching

Jesus rebuked the ambition of his disciples for precedence in the promised kingdom, using a little child for an object lesson. He might as truly have thus illustrated his own simplicity. The spontaneity, freshness, directness, and plainness of the child's method were his. The style of Jesus' preaching was free from over-adornment and ornateness, from complex construction and obscure thoughts. He did not attempt to secure a reputation for learning through a mystical, intangible, and unintelligible message. His purpose had to do with the eternal destinies of people. He could not afford to be entirely misunderstood. Yet he must address himself largely to people whose power of thought was restricted to the plans of the home, the farm, or the store. They were not scholars with time to unfold the truth delivered in an involved style. So great was this Preacher, so simple was his manner, so like the sunshine was his truth, that the common people claimed him as their own.

I. Simplicity and the Message

1. Clearness.—The preacher must have clear conceptions of his message if he would attain his object through simplicity. Personal haziness and obscurity of thought will impress themselves upon the style. The message must be definite and clear in the mind of the messenger, for he can hardly hope that his audience will give a clearer form to his thought than he can.

Jesus was confident of his message. The contents of the gospel of the kingdom, which he came to preach, were definitely known to him at the beginning of his ministry. Blind gropings, misleading doubts, recastings of statement, revisions of teaching, attempts to correct errors of judgment, and inappropriate remarks are not recorded in the Gospels as descriptive of his preaching. Whether one may think that Jesus learned from experience and altered his opinions thereby, or that his entire thought-life was shaped from the opening of his public ministry—there being growth in presented truth but not in his consciousness of truth—one must read in the Gospels the story of Jesus' absolute confidence in his own preaching. He knew the what, the why, and the when of a divinely appointed ministry. Undimmed by sin, unhindered by accident, his vision of truth never lacked the right perspective. His was the sight of four dimensions.

2. Universality.—Jesus spoke to the universal mind and heart. He selected individual cases to evoke representative attitudes and emotions. With direct woes and censures he enraged the Pharisees, while he invited the renegade publican, Zacchæus, into fellowship and service and spoke the glad forgiveness to the penitent woman of sin. Such typical opportunities for truth gave him the right to speak with simplicity and directness. These persons could claim specialties only in their direct contact with the Preacher, for he spoke to their spiritual successors of every age.

This fundamental and universal aspect of his message, in which the man of small ability could respond to his call for experienced truth and the man of many talents could find no limits to his genius, had immediate effect upon the form of the message, giving it to a simplicity that would reach the woman of shame and the man of greed.

Nations distinguish themselves through form, feature, and dress. The Jew is recognized upon the street of Cairo, Egypt, as easily as in Cairo, Illinois, USA; the Turk, the Englishman, or the American could hide neither dress nor voice. Jesus clothed his message in the garments of the world, in which the main trait must be simplicity. The speech of the world must be extremely simple. The universality of a common human nature, long the accepted statement of fact, needs to be supplemented by Jesus' emphasis on the universality of a common redemption and destiny dependent upon individual choice of grace. This Preacher could be simple in speech because he dealt with the basic forces of life and character. Men everywhere could understand him in his chief appeals to right conduct.

II. Simplicity and the Presentation

1. The sketchbook.—Jesus made the world of fact to become the translation of the world of factors. Perfectly familiar to him were the forces of spiritual finalities. Destiny was not a matter of national territory or history, but a matter of individual worth. Jesus made a new sketchbook of the soul from the old one of nature and custom. The pictures of common life would set forth the glory of the inner world of truth and religion, and people would not soon forget the form of the teaching.

A random citation may be given of the pictures in the Sermon on the Mount to show this method of simplicity: salt, light, city, candle and bushel, adversary, customs of Pharisees and hypocrites, treasures, birds, lilies, roads, and wolves. These figures of speech would be well known to his audiences, and Jesus could not afford to present his message in such manner as to miss entirely the appreciation of the people, though they might appropriate but small portions of his sweeping thoughts. The life that now silently forces men to obey certain fundamental laws could fulfil a contributory place in the destiny for the world that is to be. Pictured reality more easily becomes forceful mentality and spirituality. The mind of the child and the man can share the common joy of objectified truth.

2. Immediate results.—Jesus planned immediate results for his preaching. His kingdom should not be limited to apocalyptic blessings; it should be a present reality; the fleck of leaven should begin its immediate task of transformation. A message that might be intended for leisure and scholarly research might be presented in *recondite* (obscure) form, meditation, debates between the learned, and continuity of thought being requisite to its understanding; but Jesus was moved by the imperative of instant danger to give lost men their only and sufficient direction for safety. His task precluded learned speech that might be misunderstood; men needed the light and the life of a new motive and dynamic.

The passion for salvation made the words of Jesus lowly in form and pregnant with hope for his own generation. The penitent appeal of one struggling, despairing

soul was more to him than the scholarly adulation of the entire rabbinical world. The success of his preaching attests the value of simplicity as an element of style. Men and women of small ability found enough in his preaching to fit their needs and impel them into his discipleship, while a few of the nobler sort gave dignity to the ministry of the Nazarene.

3. Phraseology.—The choice of words guarantees or debars simplicity of style. Certain words convey the impression of heaviness, ornateness, involution, or simplicity. Jesus did not make adornment of style a primary factor in his choice of words. Their beauty is incidental to the greatness of his mission and his message. His spiritual depths might not be appreciated by his audience, but such dullness was due to heart rather than head. His exalted truths did not meet full acceptance, because the people preferred their own debased ideals of the Messiah and his kingdom. Words and phrases were familiar, though filled with new contents and broader applications. Jesus declared that submission to God's will should be the condition of understanding the message which came from God through himself. Jesus spoke the language of the common people, both Greek and Aramaic doubtless being current and well known. *Perspicuity* (expressing things clearly) was thus fundamental to his simplicity.

III. Simplicity and the Congregation

1. Simple folk.—The Palestine of Jesus' day contained a peasantry of simple tastes and pursuits. The storm and stress of modern civilization had not arisen. Life held its troubles, ambitions, trades, professions, hopes, and joys, but these were all less complicated and *imperious* (domineering) than those of the Occident of today and even the Orient has now lost something of its millennial placidity and lethargy. General culture was not very widely prevalent or sought. The rabbinical learning claimed the attention of students. The people were simple-hearted and free from multiplied wants.

Jesus did not hold himself aloof from these simple folk, but sought them that he might give them his best thought in modes of expression that would afford them a growing comprehension. He poured out his supreme revelation of himself and his truth to these children of narrow horizon. The learned and the ignorant need the same truth but in different forms.

Having chosen a ministry to simple people, conscious that the heart can be moved only through intelligent acceptance of truth, Jesus adapted his message to the mental ability of his audiences, at least in sufficient measure to secure some response, while serving for later enlargement of understanding. These simple people appealed to Jesus, for they were as defenseless as straying sheep without the shepherd. He spoke to them in the language of their own simplicity, but packed his words with new meaning, which many later generations should unfold and apply.

2. An oral Gospel.—Jesus did not write his book of theology or ethics, nor even suggest the need of an authentic report of his words by his companions. He delivered his message to constantly changing audiences without further preparation for permanency than the memory of his apostles. Our present Gospels were

written after the death of the Preacher. This oral form of preaching made simplicity an essential characteristic of Jesus' style. Reference to a written statement of his preaching would have enabled Jesus to cast his message in more learned form, hence he sought the best ends by his method of oral forms. Not the reader even of ordinary talents, but the casual listener of poor ability, were in mind in his ministry. An oral gospel should mean a simple statement.

A further indication of the demand for simplicity in an oral gospel is found in Jesus' expectation that his disciples would remember his words. He committed his truth to the lives and memories of his followers, convinced that they would grow into a larger appreciation of his ministry and assuring them of the enlightening and illustrative presence and leadership of the Holy Spirit, who should specially empower the *nascent* (just coming into existence and beginning to develop) church. Simplicity would aid the memory while it need not hinder the depth of revelation. The simple beauty of the lily appears in varying degrees to the sense of the ploughman, the scientist, and the poet.

IV. Simplicity and the Preacher's Life

1. The simple life.—The modern advocates of the simple life could have found their chief representative in the case of the Man of Galilee. His personal wants were few, and these found ready supply in the gentle ministries of the women who saw and worshiped his divinity.

His program of royalty did not call for display and splendor, since his kingdom would transcend the limits and glory of earth's pawn-like monarchies. His dress and habits did not exalt him above his simple fishermen friends, with whom he delighted to associate. With conscious dignity of the right to receive attentions he accepted social invitations, preferring the hosts whom the community described and shunned as publicans and sinners; he did not consider it a social error to take his rough fisher apostles to these functions, nor did he seem at all embarrassed that he could not return the courtesy, for his plans forbade a home-life, save possibly for a brief time in Capernaum. Untrammelled by engagements, free and cordial in his friendships, condemning religious cant and sham, Jesus lived a simple life. Simplicity and lethargy in his case did not synchronize.

2. The simple ambition.—It need not appear incongruous to use the word ambition to designate the impulse of this Peerless Preacher. His life was committed to an inflexible purpose. He felt the ethical imperative toward Saviorhood. To reach this goal he must become the Evangelist of his own evangel. He must bear to men the story of God's possible redemption for sinful men, and confirm God's love in an incarnation of love and forgiveness which only the self-directed course to the Cross and the self-surrender for the task of *expiation* (atonement) for sins could satisfy.

His desire was not to be quoted by posterity as a man of letters, a philosopher, or an earthly king. His sufficient memorial should be found in the age-long pilgrimage of the soul to the Cross which he saw in his path. His ambition for Saviorhood took precedence over every other motive, confirming his sorrows and sufferings as preparatory, simplifying his forms of address that some poor sinner might see the

coming redemption, and centering all efforts upon this consummation of the ages of revelation and divine methods of salvation.

3. The crystal soul.—Jesus had the crystal soul. All things came to him without the shadows of doubt, sin, and defeat. His soul, undefiled with selfishness and victorious over the tempter, looked upon the world with unmixed desires and aspirations. His motives were clean, his purposes just, his deeds merciful, his works gentle, and his sacrifice absolute. His simplicity was that of a limpid soul, crystal in its unshaded experiences, brotherly in its regard for the oppressed, and divine in its ability to help. The fountain of eternal life could not issue in a murky stream. The simplicity of truth and love attaches to his words and deeds.

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