

Chapter Nineteen

The Universals of His Preaching

Jesus was a *cosmopolite* (one who is at home in every place; a citizen of the world) in his preaching. The spread of Christianity in later centuries received the impetus toward the ends of the world through the spirit of its founder. Though he limited himself in person to the narrow country of Palestine, he did not bind himself in a provincialism of ideas. His preaching was formed upon certain great bases of thought and sympathy. His universals declare his right to be considered as a Preacher to the world.

I. The Universal of Contact

1. A Preacher to men.—Jesus preached to men and women. He left the rabbinical schools and methods to the rabbis with their limited numbers of pupils. His place was among the jostling and sinning multitudes. It was without effort on his part for him to secure an audience at any time. He was frequently forced to slip away from the eager crowds to secure times for meditation and prayer. At least in his ability to gain attention Jesus was a popular Preacher. His reception was not always cordial, but his preaching never failed of a hearing. His journeys into the various parts of the country were intended to bring more people into touch with his ministry. The value to his homiletics from this universal could hardly be overstressed.

2. The favoritism of need.—Saint and sinner mingled freely in the audiences of this Preacher with whom there were no favorites except those of need. The sarcastic slur of his enemies has really passed into an *encomium* (a speech or piece of writing expressing praise. Note: but perhaps here, a developed phrase that has caught on and is often repeated): "How is it that he eats and drinks with publicans and sinners?" There were no hearts of compassion for these classes, undesirable and unreached by the religious leaders. "And when Jesus heard it, he said unto them, 'They that are whole have no need of a physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners.'" The imprisoned and disturbed John the Baptist was assured of the correctness of his judgment that the Nazarene was the Messiah when he received the report that the great Preacher had made a specialty of the poor and distressed people, for whom no other teacher had ever cared or offered help.

While these defectives were gladly welcomed into the full privileges of his audiences and his kingdom, they were not the only people who came to hear Jesus. The extremes of social conditions met in his congregations. Nicodemus was learned and influential; the centurion of Capernaum was probably rich and powerful; Zacchæus combined riches and sins; the rich ruler was a model of legalistic righteousness and morality and had but one fault. Jesus spoke to a cosmopolitan audience. The chief priests and scribes were not sincere and teachable, but they were eager and critical listeners.

This favoritism of need regarded the state of character as well as external and bodily needs. The condition of contact with Jesus was the individual's recognition of dependence upon him. He did not prefer the poor simply because of their poverty or because poverty and ignorance are virtues; the rich man could come to him with the same confession of guilt and desire for purity and find in him a royal reception, and yet he did not bow to the golden scepter. Each man must enter the same door of humility and trust.

Jesus did not share the current exaltation of wealth as a token of the divine blessing, nor did he unduly dignify poverty. Each person must have an individual consciousness of right relations with God, and this fellowship could be mediated only through the Son, who required contact with himself from the professed saint and the notorious outcast.

His preaching leveled all barriers and false standards, reducing men to the common ground. The soul must be bared for his eye. He gave to Zacchæus the same cordial attention that had been granted to the poor blind beggar whom he had healed upon the edge of Zacchæus' city. While they might help in appreciation of the preaching from the individual's angle of vision, social, racial, educational and religious attainments and distinctions could not influence his preferment or contact. His preaching was intended for all, regardless of human lines of worth. His universals and his individualism complete his personal contact with men.

II. The Universal of Discipleship

1. Jew and Gentile.—The surprise of Nicodemus was natural. The doctrine of the second birth was startling in its newness. Jesus was willing to grant discipleship to anyone who would appropriate the new birth. Judaism had become narrow, bigoted, nationalistic, and selfish. Discipleship with Jesus would produce a religion universal in its invitations, humble in its graces, and unselfish in its purpose. The arrogant sons of Abraham resented this demand for a new birth as the condition for entrance into the Messianic kingdom.

Jesus was not disturbed or deflected from his plans by their wrath. He broadcast his invitations to discipleship, accidents of birth and landed rights being neither necessary helps nor hindrances to entrance. The twice-born of any land might come to him. The penitent heart could utter its desire in any tongue. Jew and Gentile should no longer be warring factors in religion. There should henceforth be neither. The future contrast would be between the non-Christian and the Christian, wherever might be the home or whatever the speech. The World's Rest Call is universal in grace: "Come unto me, all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

Jesus touched the Gentile world briefly in his ministry, but sufficiently to exhibit his attitude toward national lines. The Syrophœnician mother, the centurion of Capernaum, and the embassy of the Greeks bring individuals into his notice. His treatment of these and his system of religion, according to the prophetic forecasts, admit of nothing but a view of his universalism of discipleship.

2. The world-field.—Since Jew and Gentile are terms of the past, the universal of service for the entire world would be but a corollary, even though Jesus had not spoken of it. Upon every disciple in Jewish or Gentile parts falls the commission to give a service of evangelization to the rest of the world. The Risen Lord summarized his preaching in its missionary intentions in two great imperatives: “You shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.” The point of departure would be Jerusalem only because this had been the center of the national life and religion. The initial point of service now must be the home of each disciple. “All authority has been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world.” Personal evangelism should be the method. The preaching of Jesus led to this apostolate of missionary conquest.

III. The Universal of Speech

1. General forms.—The preaching of Jesus conformed to the general forms of speech. The bases of articulated speech are universal. He did not create new figures and forms; he used those current in the Greek and Aramaic. The records of his ministry are intelligible.

2. Religious specialty.—Jesus spoke the language of the heart. Religion is the most universal and permanent trait of men. The accent of Jesus was primarily upon the religious life, the intellectual statements of truth being intended to direct the inception and activities of such a life. The learned and the ignorant, each giving his interpretation to life in words of his own mental ability, share the common religious experience and respond to the same stimuli. Jesus was sure of his universal access to men when he chose the religious life as the theme of his preaching.

IV. The Universal of His Message

1. Sin and salvation.—The first universal of his message was the double fact of sin and salvation. The universality of sin is a theological commonplace, which found strong emphasis in the ministry of Jesus and which later knowledge of the nations of the world has confirmed. “None is good save one, even God.” Sin had left its serpent’s trail upon all men; the wrath of God abode upon the world of sinners. Jesus heard the wail of the lost.

Confession of sin allowed the privilege of salvation. Sin and salvation in the words of Jesus were complementary. The prevalence of the former carried with it the possibility of the latter. The curse of sin could be replaced by the blessing of salvation. Jesus did not cast the shadows of the knowledge of sin without declaring the power of the light. He had come as the light of the world in whom there could be light and immortality of joy. The abounding sin might give place to the more abundant grace and salvation. Sinner and saint are prospective and retrospective terms, mutually descriptive. With the utmost authority and freedom Jesus declared the sinfulness of men, but he was equally certain that men could be saved through himself. No man had gone too far in sin to be beyond redemption.

This universal of the possibility of salvation, itself based upon the universal of sin, demands the correlative universal of the condition of salvation. Jesus' ministry caught up the slogan of the Forerunner, "Repent, (you)." The need for repentance must be as universal as the fact of sin and the possibility of salvation. Exceptions to this rule could not occur. Degrees and expressions of repentance would vary according to the temperament, age, history and sinful consciousness of the penitent, but the essential attitude of the life would be the same. To this doctrine of repentance were joined in Jesus' preaching the truths of conversion, the new life, and faith.

The universal of worship develops from the universals of sin and salvation. The Samaritan woman was surprised that Jesus should speak against the two centers of worship. "The hour comes when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father." Long and stated pilgrimages to sacred places of worship should not be required in the spiritual order of the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit would inspire true worship wherever the devout heart should turn toward God.

This universal of worship, in which neither temple nor priest would be instrumental, and shrines would be those of the heart, not of places, meant the fall of Jerusalem from the ancient seat of authority in religion and transferred interest from the center to the circumference. Judaism, the religion of forms and places, should give place to Christianity, the religion of spirit and universality. Privileges of prayer, praise, and service should be limited only by the heart's desire.

2. Brotherhood in character.—Jesus' preaching created the universal of a brotherhood in character. Into this brotherhood age, sex, color, social station, race, and nationality would not enter. All would be brethren of the common Father, with Jesus as Elder Brother. The brotherhood is one of character, of which the type and personal summary were found in Jesus Christ. The natural brotherhood of man through creation has been reinforced through the social brotherhood of man, which has been recognized as the gift of modern discoveries and world enterprises. The brotherhood of character, redeemed and Christlike, is far greater than these others. It is the goal of redemption and the consummation of the kingdom.

V. The Universal of Personality

1. The broad Preacher.—Back of the universals of his preaching was the universal of personality. The Preacher was more than his preaching and broader. Christology only glorifies homiletics. All the men might hope to be localized in Jesus, and only the fringes of his greatness were touched. He was the universal man in individual conditions. His personality was as broad as the universe.

2. The competent Savior.—The Preacher was also the Savior. This fact gave his preaching its universals. The heart of all men could be reached, for the incarnated Son came to tell the story of his own humiliation and sacrifice for men.

(End of Chapter Nineteen – The Universals of His Preaching)