

Chapter Two

Effect of His Audience on His Preaching

The ministry of Jesus was not limited to the village audiences. It might have been expected that the thirty years of the quiet life at Nazareth would have made Jesus a rural preacher. His message came with the wideness of a divine revelation to the world, his character fulfilled the requirement of the Preacher-Savior, and his audiences comported in dignity and extent with his holy vocation. He addressed the small rural gatherings as freely as the congested outflow of the towns and cities, while groups and individuals received the same care that was given to the multitudes. The method of his preaching was largely influenced by his audience.

I. The Audience Chamber

1. Temple and synagogues.—Preaching naturally connects with the place of worship. Jesus did not become a resident preacher for any city, court, synagogue, or temple. He visited many communities preaching the gospel of the kingdom. The Temple at Jerusalem would specially appeal to him as a pious Hebrew. The Temple was intended for worship through sacrifices, and did not contain an assembly hall for public addresses, but Jesus mingled with the crowds especially in the court of the Gentiles. Hither would come the Gentile proselyte with his desire to laud his newly embraced religion, the various religious leaders with their zeal to guard the interests of Judaism, the pious Hebrew with his consecration to the worship of the God of his fathers, the lonely woman with her prayer for strength for daily endurance, the Pharisee with his ostentatious alms and prayers, and the penitent publican with his cry for forgiveness. Such a variety of characters would give to the Temple great attraction as a place of preaching. Sacred memories would gather around the place, because God's favors upon individual worshipers and the nation had been here indicated.

The Gospels furnish three general references to the custom of Jesus to use the Temple for preaching: "And he was teaching daily in the Temple. But the chief priests and the scribes and the principal men of the people sought to destroy him: and they could not find what they might do; for the people all hung upon him, listening." His attraction for the crowds in the Temple is further indicated: "And every day he was teaching in the Temple; and every night he went out, and lodged in the mount that is called Olivet. And all the people came early in the morning to him in the Temple, to hear him." This part of the Temple ministry was during the Passion Week. Jesus rebuked his captors for their failure to arrest him during his synagogue or Temple ministry for fear of the people. The nighttime and the seclusion of Gethsemane were better suited to their nefarious plan.

Four passages preserve the substance of the short fragmentary sayings delivered in the Temple. With severe scorn for the desecrators of the sanctuary, Jesus drove out the money-changers upon two occasions; while sitting over against the treasury and watching the stream of worshipers, he commended the small but

complete offering of the widow; his prophecy of the overthrow of the Temple was spoken while his disciples were exhibiting the beautiful buildings of the Temple. It will be observed as noteworthy that in all these references and fragmentary sayings the form and the material of his preaching have bearing upon the Temple itself. The place and the preaching harmonized.

The seven Temple discourses of Jesus gathered imagery and meaning from the sacred place of historic worship. The Feast discussion treats of topics connected with the Temple, for Moses and the Law were being interpreted by Jesus differently from the current method. In contrast to the prevailing religious bondage and darkness, increased by the contemporary teachers, Jesus declared that in himself could be found freedom and light for the world. Walking in Solomon's Porch during the Feast of Dedication, held in winter, Jesus declared his Messiahship and aroused the hatred of the religious leaders. These three discourses are peculiar to John. The four Synoptical discourses contain the challenged authority of Jesus, the three Jewish questions, the unanswerable question of Jesus, and the justly severe denunciation of the Pharisees.

Jesus did not perform any miracle in the Temple and delivered only one parable there, that of the Pharisee and the Publican. The parable of the Good Samaritan refers to the officers of the Temple.

Since the Temple focused the entire attention of worship of the sacrificial sort to itself, Jesus could not afford to neglect the opportunity thus presented, while his larger work for all men carried him beyond the Temple precincts. Other parts of the land must share in the favor granted to Jerusalem.

The synagogue was the logical place for the inception of Christian preaching. After the Exile the number of synagogues had rapidly increased, every Jewish community having one or more. The rabbis boasted that Jerusalem at one time contained more than 400 synagogues. The brow of the prominent hill in the city, or some other convenient place, was selected for the site, while the architecture varied according to the taste and ability of the builder, either an individual or the community. The building was rectangular and opened toward the south. The roof was supported by columns, so arranged as to form aisles in which the people might sit upon small mats, or stand. Near the entrance was the ark containing the carefully wrapped copies of the Scriptures and shielded by a richly decorated curtain; immediately in front of this were the seats for the elders and other prominent members who sat with backs to the ark and faces to the congregation. The reading-desk would be near the entrance or in a very large synagogue near the center; the woman's gallery was at the north end of the room.

The service included the prescribed prayers, the recital of the creed, the reading from the Law and the Prophets, the address of the preacher, or teacher, who sat during the delivery; the address might be followed by questions or remarks from the congregation. The chief ruler of the synagogue might invite any prominent visitor or member to conduct the parts of the service for the reading and the address.

The congregation met regularly on the Sabbath for the more elaborate services and on Monday and Thursday for teaching and the less formal services, and also on feast days with appropriate forms of service. The primary purpose in this system of worship was instruction; the Temple stood for the idea of sacrifice.

Jesus found in these synagogues the place, the audience, and certain forms of worship to which he might give direction as the initial forces in Christian preaching. The synagogue would have continued to develop along the principles of Judaism, remaining a Jewish institution, if Jesus had not used it for the larger plan of preaching.

Jesus' synagogue ministry must have been extensive. The Gospels, however, contain but four general references to it; three fragmentary sayings, and three discourses delivered in synagogues. "Synagogue" is a transliteration of the Greek word for "assembly." "And he taught in their synagogues, being glorified of all." His preaching in these synagogues was popular though instructive. He submitted to the current forms of service but added a new spirit and meaning. With their gentle sympathy for the distressed and their severe criticism for Pharisaism, his addresses here brought a joy to the common people which paralleled the hatred of the leaders.

2. Homes of the people.—Jesus entered into the full life of men, being touched with the feeling of their infirmities, enduring the common temptations in order that he might respond to every call of need. This fellowship could not fail to lead him into the homes of the people. Regardless of social position, financial ability, or even personal purity, Jesus accepted invitations to the homes of all classes, sharing the hospitality with such graciousness and courtesy as to prevent the host from being overawed by his wonderful guest. Jesus could spend only his spare moments in the deserts and mountains for recreation and prayer. His place was among people.



His Table Talks, delivered often in the presence of spectators, whose intrusion was admitted by the free life of the Orientals, were sparkling gems of beauty and thought. These Talks are recorded in three fragmentary sayings and five discourses. He gives direction for the miracle at Cana; at the home of Levi he gives the illustration of the physician and patient; in the house of Simon the leper at Bethany he bespeaks the abiding memorial for Mary for her anointing. In the home of Simon the leper he discourses upon fasting; at the home of another Simon

he presents the doctrine of forgiveness; he utters woes against the Pharisees at the table of a Pharisee; with his disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem he institutes the memorial Supper with appropriate discourse.

The Reception Hall was equally suitable for preaching, since all sorts of people might thus have access to him without the formalities of invitation. Visitors would easily seek him, his presence being known serving to draw the crowds. He was never too weary to speak to them. Five fragmentary sayings and four discourses come to us from his ministry in the Reception Hall. He speaks briefly, but effectively, to the Syrophœnician mother for the cure of her daughter; the paralytic in Capernaum hears the words of forgiveness as for healing; Peter is sent to the sea for the coin with which to pay the tax for the Temple; Martha receives her rebuke for too much anxiety about trifles, and Mary is commended for her teachable heart. He refutes the calumny of the Jews and declares their blasphemy against the Holy Spirit; he rebukes the popular craving for signs; lessons of humility and forgiveness come naturally upon the question of precedence in the kingdom of God; in the home of Zacchæus he delivers his last home parable, that of the Pounds.

3. God's open air.—The preaching of Jesus was most largely delivered in the open air. The multitudes were always eager to catch his words and constantly flocked to him. Jesus had an audience at his will. He used the open air for his audience chamber. He could give his best ministry upon the dusty road, where pilgrims forgot their weariness as they listened to him; by the seaside, where nature could murmur her undertone of approval to his wisdom; and upon the mountain slopes, where the hearer might compare the strength of the preacher to that of the God of the hills, whose glory rejoiced the Psalmist. Our list includes his open-air ministry under thirty-seven fragmentary sayings and thirty-eight discourses.

"Through the world the foot-path way he trod,
Drawing the air of heaven in every breath;
And in the evening sacrifice of death
Beneath the open sky he gave his soul to God.
Him will I trust and for my Master take;
Him will I follow; and for his dear sake,
God of the open air,
To Thee I make my prayer."--Henry van Dyke, *God of the Open Air*

II. The Characteristics Found in His Audience

1. Apathy.—The audiences of Jesus easily classify according to their attitude toward him and his preaching. Apathy would fitly describe a large part of his audiences. The ordinary mind may be moved out of its monotony by a special occasion or a tumult, but it does not grasp many new facts and problems. From each community Jesus drew to his audience the rich and the poor, the Jew and the Gentile, the strong and the diseased, all moved by the same strong motive to be near this Preacher and worker of miracles; but many of these must have been hindered by their dull mental processes from comprehending his rapid spiritual thinking. They had exhausted their ability in beholding the externals of his ministry.

Jesus found it a difficult task to awaken interest in his spiritual conceptions, which were far more worthy of attention than the miracles; the people preferred the physical benefits of his work. Dull of perception, debased in moral ideals, bound by externals and careful about the ceremonials of religion, the ordinary hearer could not rise to the lofty vision of Jesus. It required too much spiritual and mental power to distinguish between the current Messianic ideals and those presented by Jesus. The people were eager to accept the generosity of Jesus in his numerous cures, but to a great extent they remained apathetic toward his prime purpose and truths. Occasionally this habitual apathy would be broken, as some soul would come to freedom through contact with the deep principles of the new preaching. [Editor's note: even the disciples upon return from assignments of teaching in the various locales into which Jesus would come visit, upon reaching their rendezvous, showed their joy over having been able *to exorcize*, hardly a testimony to any preaching they'd done.]

The general excitement over the miracles of Jesus and over his remarkable personality must not be interpreted as a sign of a cordial and universal acceptance of Jesus. Both Jesus and his teachings remained in singular isolation beyond the hearts of the great masses. Lifelong indifference to the highest things of religion could not be dissipated easily.

2. Antipathy.—The preaching of Jesus met individual and class antagonism. The Sadducees are not often named in the Gospels, but it should be born in mind that the chief priests were of this sect. In the early part of his ministry, Jesus was not disturbed by the Sadducees, who seemed more inclined to ignore him, but later they united with the Pharisees in the demand for a heavenly sign; they also entered protest, along with the scribes and elders, against the authority of Jesus to cleanse the Temple. They began to plot his death. They sought to entrap him over the question of tribute to Cæsar and the problem of relationship in the case of the woman with seven successive husbands.

The Sadducees held to the Old Testament but departed from many of its teachings. They were filled with *antipathy* (strong feeling of dislike) toward the preaching of Jesus because of their three fundamental tenets: they denied the resurrection from the dead, a personal immortality, and a future retribution; they denied the existence of angels and spirits; they denied foreordination, holding to the Greek idea of absolute free choice. They were practically deists, who excluded God from any part in the operation of human affairs. While professing æsthetic agnosticism, they really practiced a gross materialism, which was more pronounced because they were found chiefly among the wealthy classes.

It could hardly have been otherwise than that Jesus should stir up antipathy among these people, for he declared his essential union with God, whose spiritual nature demanded a spiritual service; he denied that human life could be measured in terms of worldly values, the man being more than his requirement for food and raiment; he taught that the tomb is not the end of the man. This attitude of antipathy gave to the ministry of Jesus certain homiletical traits.

The Pharisees quickly discovered that Jesus would bring ruin to their long-

recognized leadership over the people. They took measures by which to crush him. He had never shown consideration for their wisdom and official position. As soon as Jesus began to attract the people, a special delegation of the Pharisees went from Jerusalem to Galilee to oppose his work. They induced the people of his native Nazareth to reject him and caused a reaction against him at Bethsaida and Capernaum. They dogged his footsteps almost through his entire ministry, and roused every possible antagonist. They opposed him because he did not keep the Law according to their ideas and because of his claims of relationship to God.

The Pharisee was a formalist in religion and a traditionalist in interpretation of the Scriptures; he esteemed the formal and external more highly than the spiritual conformity to the Law, and exalted the rabbinical opinions as more valuable and binding than the words of the Sacred Book even in points of clear variations.

Concerned with religious cant, careful of tithes, ostentatious in charity, ambitious for applause for goodness, conceited in a self-declared righteousness, disdainful of the sinner, and proud of public prayers, the Pharisee formed the most disturbing element in the audiences of Jesus. The material and the method of his ministry were influenced by them and their evil plans. His high demand for individual piety, based upon inner merit and contact with God, aroused these legalists, for they perceived that they measured up to his scathing illustration of the beautiful sepulcher, whose fair exterior but made more hideous the inner pollution.

The scribes, sometimes called lawyers and doctors of the Law, thought at first that they had found a great leader in Jesus, for his initial call to repentance met their approval, their desire calling for a stricter adherence to the Law; but they soon saw that Jesus' demand for repentance was more spiritual than they could accept. His methods of interpreting the Scriptures with an incisive, original opinion differed widely from their recital of older-aged comments of dead scholars. His spirituality did not harmonize with their formalism. The scribes were forced into antipathy to his preaching. They could not readily transfer to another their long-kept key of knowledge, even though their retention of it meant only increased burdens for the people.

The Herodians had placed their political hopes upon Herod, and were willing to form alliances with any religious party that might help them realize their ambitions. They were unable to distinguish between their small worldly kingdom, ready to crumble at the approach of an army and dependent upon the will of an autocrat, and the spiritual kingdom of heaven, to whose limits and powers there should be no horizon. Jesus could not be the friend of the Herodians.

3. Sympathy.—Jesus addressed a large class of defectives—the blind, the leper, the demoniac, the lame, the crippled—many of whom were drawn by the worthy desire to be healed. As Jesus looked into these haggard and diseased faces, upon which had fallen already the light and joy of hope, he felt that here could be found willing listeners. Gratitude for past cures would bring former defectives into this sympathetic circle.

The common people heard him gladly. No former renowned teacher had ever

considered these sons of toil as worthy hearers. The imprisoned John the Baptist, still great in his loneliness and fulfilled mission, rejoiced in the fact that Jesus returned the sign of his Messiahship in a gospel for the poor. Occupied with the tasks for daily bread, untutored in the schools of culture, the common people may not have had the largest capacity—mental and spiritual—to appreciate the preaching of Jesus, but they gave him a sympathetic hearing according to their talents. [Editor's note: to someone healed, the preaching, personhood, and action of Jesus' were merged in a personal, wonderful way!]

The disciples formed the best part of Jesus' audiences. Their number varied according to the period of his ministry. When Jesus began to preach the deeper truths of a strenuous discipleship and a spiritual righteousness, there occurred a defection of half-hearted followers, but many loyal friends stood by him to the end.

His most appreciative hearers were the Twelve, whose training for the evangelization of the world was especially dear to the Preacher. Often slow of understanding, held in bondage to the current Messianic hopes of a temporal kingdom, ambitious for preferment in the coming kingdom, they yet gave Jesus receptive and teachable minds and hearts, whose impressions of the truth would later find a quickening from the Holy Spirit. It must have been a real joy to the Preacher to speak to these men.

III. Jesus in Front of His Audience

1. Securing attention.—It was no trouble for Jesus to secure the attention of his audience. Apart from the general interest in him because of his record of deeds and words, Jesus knew how to make the particular occasion respond to his desire. A miracle, a parable, a sorrow, a murmur of discontent, a cool drink from a well, a question, a walk through a grain field, or an attempt to trap him in speech would serve to secure attention for an impassioned address. He was a master of the unexpected, occasional, passing opportunity that might lend itself to homiletical ends.

2. His delivery.—Jesus did not lower the dignity of his wonderful personality when he addressed an audience. His delivery kept in harmony with his character. He was serious, imperious, and impassioned. His style shunned levity of manner and trifling with great subjects, his humor and irony never transgressing the law of propriety. Burdened with his mission of salvation for the sinner, conscious that only through himself could men find the upward path to God, and impelled by zeal for his vocation, Jesus could not descend to unworthy subjects and methods, thus sharply contrasting his course with that of the rabbis. His voice, posture, gestures, and general bearing harmonized with the seriousness and value of his message. He preserved his dignity before his congregation, whether he spoke to one or to the multitude. He adopted the monologue, now the prevalent method of Christian preaching, but permitted and often encouraged questions and responses from his audience. His delivery was direct, forceful, attractive, personal and conversational.

3. Mastery of his audience.—The orator's ambition is to master his audience, moving them to tears, stirring them into frenzied action, creating new ideals and motives, and pleasing them with fancies. Jesus had perfect control over the

crowds that heard him. At his own discretion he would intensify his enemies' hatred, fearlessly denouncing their hypocrisy and wickedness, or draw his friends and beneficiaries closer to himself, unfolding to them his plans and blessing them with miracles. More than once their popular enthusiasm would have crowned him king, but his masterful mind avoided the crisis.

Several factors entered this mastery of an audience. His personality was authoritative; his insight into the thought processes and the character of men was minute and accurate; each discourse fitted the occasion of its delivery both as to method and material; he recognized and used the moment of supreme interest; he had a free access to the heart to bring sincere conviction or to arouse his foes to bitter rejection of the truth.

4. Effects of his discourse.—The discourses of Jesus accomplished his purposes for them. His foes found in them the materials for criticism, while his followers accepted them as the instruction for the life eternal. The current religious sects were not converted from their beliefs, for selfishness confirmed their opposition to Jesus—individuals only from these sects accepting him—but the common people gladly turned toward him, moved by his matchless oratory and message, for they groaned under the burdens of sorrow, disease, political and religious oppression, and extortion. Jesus preached the evangel of hope, brotherly kindness, good cheer, and eternal salvation. His ministry resulted in a community of redeemed souls and healed minds and bodies. Judged by the effects of the discourse, Jesus was and remains a preacher without a peer.

(End of Chapter Two – Effect of His Audience on His Preaching)