

Chapter Twenty

The Individualism of His Preaching

Individualism was a dominant trait of the preaching of Jesus. This element may best be studied in his conversations and personal interviews. The ministry of conversation is as effective as that to the congregation, though methods and aims differ. Jesus was a great conversationalist, matchless in ease and grace, interesting in his monologues and in his replies to questions from a single *auditor* (a listener).

I. The Persons Approached in His Individualism

1. All sorts and conditions.—Jesus was a *cosmopolite* (one who is at home in every place; a citizen of the world) in his contact with men and an individualist in his application of truth to them. His mission of salvation for a world precluded any favoritism to a few selected for wealth or position in life. He met face to face all sorts and conditions of men, in order that he might declare to them the universality of his grace and the individualism of its personal appropriation and benefits. His conversations gathered together a varied personnel.

The Synoptics record an instructive series of interviews between Jesus and certain people. These may be listed thus: Simon Peter (four times), a demoniac, a leper, a paralytic, Matthew, the man with the withered hand, the centurion of great faith, the widow of Nain and her dead son, Simon the Pharisee, the sinful woman who anointed his feet, Jairus and his dead daughter, the woman with the issue for twelve years, the heathen but faithful Syrophœnician mother, a deaf demoniac, a blind man at Bethsaida, a father and his demoniac son. John the Beloved Apostle and Son of Thunder, three unknown but inquiring men, a lawyer, Martha, the woman with the eighteen-year infirmity, a rich ruler who had kept the law but could not attain the one essential, the renegade penitent Zacchæus. These 28 persons were addressed on 24 occasions and in 31 conversations.

The Gospel of John is preeminently the Gospel of the Conversations, since it gives more largely than the others the individualism of Jesus as expressed in his interviews. These cases in John may be listed thus: Nathanael the guileless, the gentle Mary who treasured in her mother heart the memory of the words of and about her divine Son (twice), the perplexed scholar Nicodemus, the sinful but appreciative woman of Samaria, a nobleman of Capernaum, an impotent man at the Pool of Bethesda, Philip, a blind man, Martha, Mary John, Peter (four times), the high priest, an officer, Pilate, Mary Magdalene, Thomas, the last two being after Jesus' resurrection. These 24 conversations were held with 17 people.

These narratives may be combined. The conversations were often brief monologues of Jesus and some were directions for his miracles. Six disciples, eleven women, two blind men, a cripple, a paralytic, a leper, a rich man, a member of the Sanhedrin, a social outcast, two dead people, the learned and the ignorant, the professed saint and the libertine make a variety of conditions that it would be

difficult to surpass for homiletical purposes. Jesus singled out Peter eight times; surely the days of darkness for this impulsive disciple must have been made brighter by the memory of such notice from his Master. After his resurrection Jesus spoke individually to Mary Magdalene, Thomas, and Peter.

2. Subordinate figures.—These conversations grouped all persons into subordinate positions in order to give the chief place to Jesus. And yet these people retain their intense individuality and interest to us, the Gospels making the records so artistically that no figureheads are made. These men and women appear to us with their hearts filled with passions and hopes. Jesus could employ the monologue without becoming tiresome. When he invited interchange of thought in conversation, he did not retire to the second place in attention. As a conversationalist Jesus drew such interest as to dominate the course of thought, and yet men were glad to hang upon his words without thought of their own subordination. He was the chief.

II. The Methods of His Individualism

1. Use of the casual.—These conversations were spiritual clinics in which Jesus dealt with the individual soul. Jesus used the casual incident and occasion for his homiletical aims. He did not postpone his message of the higher method of worship to the appointed hour of the synagogue service; his voice was accustomed to the echo of the hills; the roadside became as convenient for preaching as the dining-room or the reception hall; a chance meeting by the curb of a well brought its opportunity; the housetop was enough of an auditorium for him and an inquirer. He knew the worth of the passing moment, whose conditions might not return so favorably. Some of the persons who shared the benefits of these conversations might not have had another opportunity for an interview with Jesus. It was now or never. The Preacher saw the destiny of each single moment. He was too great to let the time slip.

2. The call of need.—Jesus responded to the call of need with physical and mental healing, but he did not forget that “the Son of man came to seek and to save that which was lost.” He could graciously restore sight to the blind, and add the direction for the greater blessing: “Behold, you are made whole: sin no more, should a worse thing happen to you.”

Entitled fully to be called the Great Physician, Jesus did not confine his duty to cures. Miracles might be the accompaniments of his work, but could not be his chief task. The Christian centuries have imitated this benevolent work for the physical needs of men, while the fundamental has remained in the soul’s need of life. The hungry must often be fed before the truth may find a hearing. The history of charities is inseparably linked with that of Christianity. Jesus talked with the mental and physical sufferer and bestowed ease of heart as well as of body.

Thirteen times in these cases of individualism Jesus answered the call of need. Demoniacal possession, leprosy, paralysis, fever, blindness—all these fled at the

command of Jesus. The call was made by the afflicted person, by an interested loved one, and by the silent misery of the unfortunate. The inner call of the soul was stronger in the ear of Jesus. To the woman of Samaria he showed the well of individual eternal life; to the sinful woman who anointed his feet he declared forgiveness of sins. He gave the same sympathetic regard to the hopeless condition of all classes, the teacher of religion, the outcast sinner, the renegade publican, and the dog of the foreigner appealing alike to his mercy.

3. An individualized Gospel.—Great crowds attended the preaching of Jesus. The multitudes were willing to follow him all the day, forgetful of hunger and weariness; Jesus showed that he was not only an eloquent preacher but also a helper in their distress, a lad's few loaves and fish being turned into food for the many thousands. The crush of the crowds was often so great that Jesus could not secure rest and food. He could have had a constant audience.

His ministry, however, was not entirely to the cast congregations. He individualized his gospel, thinking that the single believer was worthy of reaching. No former religious leader had made a specialty of the individual, who was lost amid the enmassed wretchedness of men. This Preacher declared that salvation was not primarily racial, tribal, paternal, financial, or social, but that each person must enter singly into fellowship with God. Careful of popular favor, eager for great followings, despising the single atom of humanity, other religious leaders had worked and failed. Jesus made the individual heart the boundary of his kingdom, which should be the personal sovereignty of God in human life and conscience. Herein lay part of the secret of the endless success of Jesus.

The gospel of Jesus was universal in privilege and individual in appropriation. He spoke to men, not to humanity in the aggregate. He made each man feel that the fulness of life was intended for himself, as though he were alone in God's wide world. Historical departures from this method of personal regeneration have resulted in externalism and formalism.

4. The dramatic moment.—The poet has expressed this dramatic moment thus, and Jesus recognized its value and exhibited it in his homiletics:

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which taken at the flood leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries."—Shakespeare, *Julius Cæsar*

There are times when the soul seems specially sensitized toward the reception of religious impulses, at which time suggestions find response that otherwise would fall on leaden ears. In the two instances of long discourse Jesus followed this dramatic and critical moment to great advantage.

With Nicodemus this moment appeared when Jesus stirred his conscience by the story of the new birth, which should have been familiar to the teacher in Israel: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and don't understand these things?" Religious pride in his profession was here at stake and aroused. In the interview with the

Samaritan woman the moment came when Jesus revealed to her his knowledge of her evil life: "He who you now have is not your husband." The appeal to conscience here came through denunciation of personal sins. The immediate evangelization of the village of Sychar attests the success of his method in the woman's case, while it is generally believed that Nicodemus became a real and helpful though silent follower of Jesus.

This dramatic moment is often called the psychological moment. Other examples might be cited to show that Jesus was the master of this insight into the right conditions for the truth to be applied individually. Even the teacher of small observation can recall times of good or unfortunate handling of this time. The decision day in the Sunday-school, the revival, and the mourner's bench testify to the religious recognition of this moment, and Spurgeon has expressed it: "Where the application begins, there the sermon begins."

5. Typical inquirers.—A glance may be given to three clinics in salvation.

Nicodemus, saint and teacher of religion, marveled that Jesus should declare the necessity for a new birth and was chagrined that Jesus should criticize him for his ignorance. It is at this point in the interview that we see into the process of the scholarly inquirer's mind. This truth that seized his heart occurs in the record between verses 10-15, the remainder of the conversation (on to verse 21) explaining the mission and reception of Jesus. He knew that the scholar must be reached through his pride of learning and profession.

With the Samaritan woman of shame he needed to convict for sin, since she was a professed sinner. Her awakening must come from conscience. Jesus smote the weak place in the armor of her shame. She attempted to shift the question to a theological discussion along racial prejudices, she being a Samaritan and Jesus a Jew. He completed the conquest of her heart by the announcement of his Messiahship.

The Synoptics present the instructive incident of the rich ruler as a typical inquirer. Personally satisfied with his legalistic morality and religion, he thought to receive a cordial commendation from the great Preacher, at whom he hurled his interrogatory about entrance into eternal life. Jesus perceived in him many possibilities for future usefulness, for his was a life unsullied and unimpaired by riotous living. Jesus loved him at once and would have gladly received him into discipleship, but the test could not be met, the love of property outweighing that for the greater values of the kingdom. This failure to win the person indicates the soul's supreme right to decide destiny, and that every inquirer does not come to the decision that brings life.

III. The Theology of His Individualism

1. The unit of salvation.—The theology of Jesus' individualism was basal and directive for his treatment of men and women. In his thought the individual was the unit of salvation. His direct appeal to the conscience of each person and the postulates of his entire teaching declare for this unit. He came to become an individual Savior and to preach an individual evangel.

The Utopias of an ideal republic might seem possible to a Plato or a More, but the Nazarene knew that men would never submit to organized holiness except upon the prior condition of individual holiness. Social salvation is very desirable, but it can be realized only as each member of society shall incarnate the righteousness of the kingdom of heaven. A redeemed humanity will remain only the dream or the hope of the enthusiast for humanity. Jesus made real the republic of God to each individual believer in whose heart and life the forces of good became operative and dominant.

2. Familiar truths.—The bare catalogue of the themes of Jesus' conversations would present many familiar truths. He spoke concerning the new birth, the water of life, the forgiveness of personal sins, the Son of God, resurrection and life through himself, eternal life, Messiahship, his own death and resurrection. These are now religious truths almost axiomatic in their clearness and importance, but it should be remembered that Jesus was original in their delivery and that he did not reserve them for the vast audiences in famous synagogues or the Temple. The simple heart of one man or woman gave him suitable audience. Fresh from his own heart, these truths came into the individual life of select men and women, creating new ideals and hopes and forming new character and destiny. Out of Jesus' theology arose his plan and outlook upon individualism.

IV. The Portrait of Jesus in His Individualism

1. Approachableness.—The common life of men touched Jesus. He allowed people a free approach to himself. Desire and need for him conditioned his attention. The spiritual vision in its largest reach was his gift to men, and this could be transferred only as men saw that he passed beyond the narrow borders of professional pride and exclusiveness. He kept himself in the eye of the public. He even allowed physical contact, since he was often pressed in the crowds. His disciples sometimes resented this absolute liberty of approach and tried to keep back certain persons.

2. Knowledge of men.—Jesus had an unerring insight into character. The inner life of men was an open book to him, in which he could read the story of their frailties as of their noble thoughts.

3. Tenderness.—His treatment of individuals was tender and gracious. His rebukes might be needed, but he accomplished his aim with tact and kindness. He gave special consideration to women and children, on whom others had not looked in tenderness. Those whom others despised he blessed, even though he might transgress propriety in talking to a fallen woman.

4. Friendship for sinners.—His own friendship for the friendless was the answer of a heart of divine love responding to the unutterable loneliness and longings of the sinner. These conversations sketch the personal life of Jesus among his friends. He knew how to be a friend and thus win friendships. He could be the honored guest and relieve the host of an accident or difficulty. He gathered around him a company of friends who were ready to forsake all and follow him even to death, though they did not always fully understand him and his methods. He could so far

trust these friends as to commit to them the evangelization of the world in his name. These friends had each felt the inflow of a new force for life.

The religious leaders sought to harm Jesus and his reputation with the accusation that he associated with the publicans and sinners, the utmost degradation being reached in his eating with these social outcasts. This shadow upon the name of their Master might have disturbed his followers, but he gloried in the fact of such friendships. His mission had these primarily in view, since only the sick need medical care. He loved his sinner friends, and gave himself not only to them in the days of his ministry of word and deed, but also in the ministry of sacrifice. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." His individualism stressed such a friendship.

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