

Chapter Twenty-one

The Dramatic Element of His Preaching

The drama has specialized certain forms and principles that give interest and effect to public address. The classic drama had helped to form the ideals and methods of oratory. The preaching of Jesus benefitted by the principles rather than the forms of the drama. Impassioned discourse, intended for definite ends beyond instruction, must follow certain dramatic fundamentals. The homiletics of Jesus exhibited these.

I. Dramatic Force of Humor and Irony

1. Oratorical commonplaces.—The masters of public address have known the use of humor and irony, which easily pass the one into the other and require a common treatment. Keen and incisive, the laugh often proves more effective in debate than argument. Reasons may be answered, but humor and irony win the battle. These are oratorical commonplaces, historical citation not being needed. It may, however, require some specifications to admit their use in Jesus' preaching.

The student of Jesus' ministry is impressed with his soberness and earnestness, which may be attributed to his serious vocation of Saviorhood. And yet one does not find in his preaching somberness and repulsive shadows. Jesus could connect himself with men in their sufferings and sorrows, deserving the title of Man of Sorrows, and yet retain a wholesome outlook upon life which kept him from becoming socially unattractive. His grace of personality and address relieved his intensely impassioned message and delivery from all suspicion of melancholia and moroseness. Touches of humor occur here and there beneath his seriousness, and irony slips in as a weapon in polemics. Jesus the orator could not afford to miss the advantage of these two elements of the drama, mean and occasions being thereby fitly served.

2. Gift of imagination.—Humor and irony are gifts of the imagination. They cannot be used except by those who can see the unseen and who have the power of making new situations from old images. The unimaginative man cannot appreciate the ludicrous, and thus misses the chance to profit from irony. The mind of Jesus was highly imaginative, his power of transferring himself in thought into new conditions being very great. He could see the relations of things, he could appreciate the humorous, he was a master of irony. His homiletics reflected this oratorical method.

3. Homely figures.—Effective humor and irony are based upon the use of homely figures, familiar and striking. The laugh and the rebuke of irony cannot be secured through indefinite, farfetched and strange imagery. The pictures of everyday occurrence may serve the purpose of the caricaturist who works with discourses as well as the one who uses pen and brush. The preaching of Jesus elevated these homely pictures of the street, farm, and home into a high homiletical service. His humor and irony were within the appreciation of the man of ordinary ability. The

common sight was that of the blind leading the blind in spiritual matters, though it would have seemed dangerous and incongruous in actual life.

4. Repartee.—Repartee increases the power of humor and irony. Jesus was able to turn an occasion of embarrassment into one of profit to his cause. One example will suffice. The Pharisees conspired with their enemies, the Herodians, to entrap Jesus in his speech, and came with their question about the lawfulness of tribute to Cæsar, each party holding an opposite position. They thought that he must be impaled upon one horn of the dilemma. But Jesus was a master of repartee. He required them to exhibit a coin and declare whose image it bore. "They say unto him," Cæsar's. Then said he unto them, Render therefore unto Cæsar the things that are Cæsar's; and unto God the things that are God's." They marveled but could not answer him. The humor and irony of the defeat of evil fell upon them. The serious repartee had underneath its humorous aspect. (Editor's note: since not all coins in use in Israel had the portrait of Cæsar, that the Pharisee produced this particular type as his contribution to this conversation is truly remarkable!)

5. Specimens of humor and irony.—Let the imagination put into concrete form the man with the great beam in his eye who seeks to discover the speck in his friend's eye. His generation would receive neither John the Baptist nor Jesus, the ascetic nor the friend of all men: "We piped unto you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn," the current refusal to enter either the dance or the mourning was rebuked in this subtle irony.

Few pictures have been more striking in ironical humor than that of the "blind guides, that strain out the gnat and swallow the camel." How the proud Pharisees must have inwardly raged at Jesus' presumption in drawing such a stinging comparison! His hearers appreciated the imagery and enjoyed the discomfiture of the proud leaders.

One day Jesus entered into a Pharisee's home for dinner; the host marveled that his distinguished guest should eat without a bath or at least with unwashed hands. Jesus perceived his course of thought and drew his picture: "Now you the Pharisees cleanse the outside of the cup and of the platter; but your inward part is full of extortion and wickedness."

Recall the three invited guests who declined the invitation upon such excuses as a purchased but untried field, oxen to be tested, and a wife who could not be left. His audience easily saw the humorous irony.

II. Dramatic Force of Tragedy

1. Observed tragedy.—The drama historically developed first comedy and then tragedy. Comedy in Jesus' preaching came rather in touches of humor and irony than as a distinct form. Tragedy presents the events wherein are prominent catastrophe, accident, sorrow, sad ending, and even death. (Editor's note: Jesus' comment as pertains Luke 13:4-5's account of a tower falling in Siloam and killing many has both the victims there *and* his present audience dying.) Its meaning has been somewhat broadened to permit its use for general events of a risky and

unfortunate character. In this latter sense the tragical element entered Jesus' preaching.

The raising to life of the son of the widow of Nain had in it the elements of a romantic tragedy. Jesus met the funeral procession accidentally, commanded its halt to the wonder of all concerned, touched the bier upon which lay the young man, and spoke the authoritative word that brought back from the unseen world the spirit of the dead. Rapidity of movement, unexpected wonders, mingling of the sad and the joyful, enter this scene to make it a tragedy whose material could furnish the poet with a theme for a great drama.

The companion tragedy may be seen in the raising of Lazarus from the tomb. The details are fuller here. The sickness of the brother, the earnest and distressful message to the far-distant Master, his deliberate reasonless delay, the death and burial of the beloved brother, the sad meeting between the sisters and the Master, the visit to the tomb, the watchful attendants, the weeping Master, the stone's removal, the loud command, the moment of supreme suspense among friends, who wonder if the spirit of Lazarus will hear and answer the summons from his spirit home, the moving form in the tomb, the living man—all these events present a tragedy in the reverse order that stirs the heart and imagination.

Another reverse tragedy may be cited in the case of the Gadarene demoniacs. The poor demented creatures, their home of tombs, their naked and scarred forms, the bitter cry against disturbance which meant their betterment, the cure, the loss of the swine, the wrath of the owners of the herd, the request for the departure of the great person who had done the deed—these made a drama that could never be forgotten by the witnesses and still has power to keep interest for the reader. The preaching of Jesus was connected with many incidents containing the dramatic elements of tragedy.

2. Personalized tragedy.—Into Jesus' personal relations and experiences this element of tragedy entered. The tragedy of rejection and attempted murder occurred upon Jesus' first visit to Nazareth, when his ministry had begun to attract attention. His application to himself of the prophetic passage angered the congregation, who led Jesus forth to the brow of the hill just outside the city; but they could not fulfil their purpose of casting him over, for some power beyond their control held them back. Jesus passed unhurt and unmolested through their midst.

The tragedy of the broken heart was enacted upon the hill overlooking Jerusalem. Jesus looked upon the city of the prophets and the favorite of God, and wept over its stubborn heart and impending doom, his pathetic apostrophe showing his heart of sorrow.

The tragedy of the heart's preparation for Saviorhood took place beneath the shades of Gethsemane's olive trees. The battle was waged between the forces of evil and the Son of man, and the victory entitled the victor to become the Savior of the tempted.

The betrayal, the Jewish and civil trials, the journey to the Place of the Skull, the crucifixion, were parts of a tragedy which has meant more than any other event for the hope of the world. Out of the gloom of this personalized tragedy came the hope of human redemption that each penitent soul might escape the tragedy of the damned. *The Ballad of the Trees*, by Sidney Lanier, has caught this dramatic insight:

“Out of the woods my Master went,
And he was well content;
Out of the woods my Master came,
Content with death and shame.
When death and shame would woo him last,
From under the trees they drew him last;
'Twas on a tree they slew him last,
When out of the woods he came.

III. Dramatic Force of Miracles

1. Natural dramas.—The miracles of Jesus by their very nature were dramatic events. His entire list of miracles, both healing and nature miracles, contained the extraordinary element of interest and excitement characteristic of the drama. In each case the dramatic climax was in the purpose of Jesus; he had some fixed result to accomplish. The drama has its rise of story and interest to a certain event or thought, all points being referable to this. The dramatic force of the miracles is easily recognized.

2. Dramatic accessories.—Though not intended primarily to create an audience, the miracles of Jesus did bring to him many people that might not otherwise have come within his reach. The miracles helped to determine the scene and actors in his dramatic preaching. They served as homiletical accessories. Through them Jesus was able to preach more effectively and dramatically.

IV. Dramatic Force of Parables

1. Literary.—Some of the parables of Jesus were cast in the dramatic story form. This was specially true of the following parables, detailed discussion of which is not required here: the Unmerciful Servant, the Good Samaritan, the Friend at Midnight, the Rich Fool, the Great Supper, the Lost Son, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Wicked Husbandmen, the Ten Virgins, and the Ten Talents. The dramatic element in these will appear at a glance. The story of each has its approach to a crisis of interest.

2. Homiletical.—Jesus used the parables with keen dramatic force in his denunciation of foes. The training of the Twelve was advanced through the dramatic setting of this parabolic method of instruction. The simple statement of the principle wins for it credence here.

V. Dramatic Force of Strategy

1. The moment of vitality.—In every story and event there is a moment of vitality which gives value to all its parts. Jesus understood this fact. He accurately estimated the soul's crises. He looked into the secrets of the heart and read aright

the stories of struggles and desires, each impulse and thought having proper consideration in his estimate of character. The moment of supreme interest and value never passed him by, his word always being timely. His conversations with Nicodemus and the Samaritan woman indicated his insight into the psychological moment.

Examples of such moment of vitality may be thus cited: the question in the great crowd as to the one that touched his garment, the trembling woman confessing her faith; the call of Matthew from his seat in his tax-office; the upward look to Zacchæus in the tree and the command to descend; the word to Judas during the supper; his glance toward the *recreant* (yielded, resigned to a verdict) Peter when the rooster crowed; his promise to the dying and penitent robber on the Cross. This moment when the soul is most sensible of formative forces entered into the masterful plans of Jesus. The strategic point in character did not escape him.

2. His polemics.—The controversies of Jesus show how well he could arrange the strategic element. His polemics were not subject to the direction of his antagonists; Jesus knew how to order events. He could evade the extreme zeal of friends, could pass serenely through an infuriated mob unhurt and calm, and could hold back his bitter foes until his death should become expedient.

3. The dominant plan.—The dominant plan for Jesus' life could not be altered. He kept to his life-plan. He was the general of the forces in the new kingdom. His message must be delivered and his mission fulfilled, neither favor nor opposition being effective to alter his course toward the goal of his own choice. Friend and foe must stand out of the way. Bitter jealousy, popular favor, unjust criticism, friendly enthusiasm, and defection of disciples could not prevent his course to the Cross. In this fact his dramatic genius exhibited itself. His was the best method of preparation for Saviorhood. Jesus came in the fulness of the times, and his strategic insight led him to give himself in sacrifice at the right time.

4. The *dénouement* (the final part of a play in which matters are explained or resolved; origin French from "unknot").—The Cross was the ultimate goal of Jesus. His preaching held out this purpose before the slow-witted disciples. He tried to prepare them for this event, but their hopes of a temporal kingdom made them blind to the greater kingdom which should be mediated through the sacrifice of its King. However, to the Preacher the shadows were real and visible. Calvary was the *dénouement* of his preaching. It would indeed be difficult to imagine a different end for him. Sent as the Son of God from heaven, ministrant to the needs of body and soul of his contemporaries, revelation and revealer of the Father, loving and self-sacrificing, Jesus felt the imperative of his holy vocation carrying him to the Cross.

He was not an unwilling captive. Dramatic in preaching, with word and deed fixing men's minds upon the supreme values of life, his life had its fitting climax, its worthy *dénouement*, amid the darkness and suffering of the Crucifixion. The ministry of truth, the service for others, the forgetfulness of self, the transference of life from himself to his followers through faith in himself—these and more are the prophecies of the end that came to him.

Glorious in its details of a marvelously perfect life, resplendent with the union of two worlds in his career, Jesus could have reasonably looked for no other end. He planned his dénouement, and had the courage to execute it. His end was the seal and confirmation of his life and preaching. The drama of the Son of man closed with dramatic fitness in the Place of the Skull that the life eternal might come to men.

The two subsequent dramatic moments add to his glory and mission. The drama of the Resurrection and the drama of the Ascension join with his life and death to assure the Preacher immortal honor and worship.

(End of Chapter Twenty-one – The Dramatic Element of His Preaching)