

Chapter Twenty-two

The Variety of His Preaching

Variety conditions interest. Nature with her myriad colors and forms never tires the watcher. Monotony follows quickly upon the repetition of even the beautiful. The preaching of Jesus was of continuous interest because it had variety. He avoided the use of the same path to every heart. He could vary his methods. The same fundamental purpose was ever in his mind, but he employed many methods.

I. Variety of Occasions

1. Time.—Jesus did not have a fixed hour for preaching. From early morning until the shadows of the evening were long, and sometimes even after nightfall, he held the people in his presence. Some days were continuous in healing and preaching, while others were but partly thus employed, an occasional rest being secured for the Preacher. The multitudes were fed at eventide, the impulsive Peter was rescued from his failure at walking the waves during the darkness of the night, the sick and the afflicted were brought to him at sunset, the heat and the dust of the road did not prevent his acts of mercy and his words of grace. He hallowed each hour of the day with his ministry. The seasons of the year did not divide his work. He did not confine his career to any particular seasons. Throughout the entire year he kept at work. Whatever may have been the length of his public ministry, Jesus was intensely active during the whole period. He preached from the beginning of his public life down to its end.

2. Place.—Jesus did not remain long at any one place, all parts of Palestine profiting by his preaching. He did not intend in his own ministry to evangelize the whole populace of his country, but rather to give a representative hearing to various parts, his journeys accomplishing this plan. People in all sections were enabled to have contact with him. He gave to Capernaum the privilege of the longest stay and greatest work, for he made this the center of operations for some time. Random mention might be made of other places in which Jesus preached, showing this variety of place—Jerusalem, Jerico, Samaria, Judea, Galilee, Perea, Decapolis, Gadara, Cæsarea Philippi, Sychar, Nazareth, Nain, Cana, and Bethany.

3. Audience.—Rich and poor, learned and ignorant, Jew and Gentile, Pharisee and Sadducee, the self-righteous and the public outcast, all mingled freely in the audiences of Jesus. He spoke to all degrees of culture and all social classes. They gathered to hear him, being prompted by all kinds of motives—desire for physical healing, curiosity to hear him and to see his wonders, sharp and bitter criticism, and eager hope to receive the direction toward eternal life. His audiences naturally varied according to the laws of time, place, and opportunity, his itinerant ministry intensifying this element of variety. While many people doubtless followed him for different distances, his audiences were very largely first listeners. Leaders among the Jews followed him in order to stir up popular hatred and prejudice.

This variety of new conditions and unknown people called for immense reserve power of heart and mind in order to meet the needs of each new moment. A permanent audience would not demand quite as much from the preacher in the way of nervous energy to maintain interest by correct judgment of the mental and spiritual ability and need of the congregation. Jesus gave the most appropriate message to this variety of crowds. His insight into the life-centers of men gave him this power to fit each occasion with its own message.

One might wish to know just how many different people heard the preaching of Jesus during his ministry, but curiosity will remain unsatisfied. His congregations varied in numbers, culture, attitude toward himself, and spiritual appreciation of his truths. Men, women, boys, girls, the aged and helpless babes composed the vast audiences that came to him. A greater variety would hardly assemble in another's ministry.

4. Occasion.—Special emphasis came to Jesus' preaching from the occasions. Whether a synagogue sermon, a conversation upon a housetop or by the curb of a well, a dinner rebuke, a wayside call to righteousness, or a series of seaside parables, his preaching shunned the formality of the set address whose limits had previously been fixed. The spontaneity and freedom of each occasion also passed into his sermons. No two occasions were entirely similar, the variety of life attaching thereto.

II. Variety of Purpose

1. Evangelistic.—The homiletical purpose of Jesus included the evangelistic aim. The story of redemption must be told. No other person could undertake the task of bringing men into the acceptance of the kingdom of God. Personal evangelism should be his method for the transferred mission of his followers, and he himself adopted it as his method. His life-work should lead him to declare the gospel to men. From the angelic announcement of the coming of the Savior, as the humble shepherds kept their flocks beneath the Judean stars, to the Seven Words upon the Cross, this demand of evangelism determined the plans and the methods of the life of Jesus.

This idea of personal consecration to the individual needs of men for salvation, not only mediated but also preached by him, underlay the ministry of Jesus, varied in time, purpose, methods, conditions, and audiences. Jesus was an evangelist of his own evangel.

2. Polemical.—Sin and selfishness arrayed their representatives against the lowly Nazarene. The leaders, proud of their external piety and bitter in their refusal to be criticized by the new Preacher, put themselves against Jesus with the determination to thwart his plans and to kill him at the opportune time. Jesus felt compelled to fulfill his mission even though at the risk of the enmity of the powers in authority. His intimate knowledge of men allowed him to present an overmastering polemic. He could not have gone peaceably on his plan of evangelism, for his foes were constantly attempting to entrap him in mistakes of statement or act.

3. Didactic.—Evangelism looked toward the salvation of men through right relations to God as mediated through the Son; polemics defended his right to be the evangelist and to contest his claims in the face of his critics; didactics determined the revelation of the truths that should form the fundamentals of the new religion and the new kingdom of heaven. The general public must be partially instructed and disciples specially trained in the truth.

III. Variety of Form

1. Old forms heightened.—In his preaching Jesus heightened the values of old rhetorical forms. He employed the terms of rhetoric, but elevated them by his dignity of style, clearness of statement, intensity of passion, lucidity of thought, and the force of his ideas. Deserving the reproach that he had secured his knowledge of religious truth without the instruction of the rabbinical schools, Jesus conformed his speech to the common forms of all articulated and cultivated language. His metaphors and similes were formulated under the same laws which controlled other speakers, but his uniqueness gave to them a picturesqueness not found elsewhere. His pictures live and speak the words of life. He elevated his interrogatory from the position of a method of information to a powerful engine of polemics, sure in its mark and unanswerable. Quotations from the Scriptures were made with accurate insight into their original meaning, even though his regal authority would dare to alter their application and enlarge their force. *Apostrophe* (rhetoric: a passage that turns away from the subject to address an absent person or thing) never had greater pathos than in his use. Invectives were certain to bring disaster to the unfortunate object of his wrath. Other figures of rhetoric were raised to greater worth through his preaching.

2. Created specialties.—Two oratorical specialties were created by Jesus for his preaching. The parable and the miracle as homiletical commonplaces belong solely to him. Other teachers had made incidental use of the parable but not characteristically. The parable really belongs to Jesus as his specialty, since his employment of it was so wonderful and frequent. The miracle in its homiletical value for discourses was entirely his own. Prophets had worked miracles before his day, but no other had ever associated the miracle with the discourse. These two forms give his preaching a variety that cannot be imitated. By parable and miracle—by word-picture and by deed of grace—Jesus could so vary his ministry as to retain the constant interest of his audiences.

IV. Variety of Content

The themes of Jesus were not limited to a few threadbare truths. While he came to establish the kingdom of God and to declare its initial principles, and while he must prepare himself and his immediate followers for the tragedy of Calvary, a few truths regarding these purposes requiring repeated statement, Jesus emphasized truths that have application to all phases of life, for the religious life forms the fundamental problem of all human endeavors. His vision was concerned with the far-away home of the soul, but there were terrestrial duties that came before the heavenly joy might be realized. The kingdom of heaven had its obligations for men in social relations. Jesus was not a reformer with a panacea for human ills, social and personal; he was a Savior, whose vision of the world gave him authority and power over men.

The great variety of the content of Jesus' preaching would appear to anyone who would even glance at a bibliography of his life and teachings. From his preaching men have drawn support for doctrines about the kingdom of God, the church, the family, the social world, the future life, the ethical world. His ministry furnishes principles for all life.

This variety of content came to his preaching without his intention to forecast the absolute form for future thought. He preached the truth that was needed by his own generation, and later ages have discovered that he spoke for all times. In variety Jesus did not lose depth and clearness of vision. He had the masterful conception of truth in all relations. Shallowness could not have satisfied him.

V. Variety of Characteristics

Here it is pertinent merely to refer to the homiletical traits of Jesus' preaching as indicative of his variety. Jesus was symmetrical in his homiletics, not developing one element to the exclusion of others. He was tender and gracious toward those of a troubled and trustful heart, but this gentleness did not keep back his censure and denunciation of Pharisaism. The weary pilgrim toward perfection found in him a sympathetic friend, but the proud leaders, who sought their own glory, heard him with increasing hatred, for he was severe in his uncovering of their hypocrisy.

He spoke with authority, and men recognized the new tone in religion; the Lord of men made himself felt in the common heart of his fellow-men. His simplicity put truth within reach of the average intelligence. His originality opened new fountains of truth and life to people. Jesus was versatile yet forceful. Freedom of new truths and statements, monotony thereby being escaped, did not run into license. He repeated himself when it advanced his plans. His style varied with the needs of each occasion. Jesus had the cosmopolitan vision and method of truth. His was the many-sided ministry.

VI. Variety of Results

The preaching of Jesus had a varied result. The common people heard him gladly and brought their sick to him for healing. The sinner and the outcast found in him their friend and Savior. The scribes and Pharisees, whose glory diminished with the popularity of Jesus, turned bitter opposition toward him and sought to kill him. Conversions, discipleship, defection, worship, hatred, abuse, loving ministries, misunderstandings, appreciation—all these gave his preaching variety of results.

The crowds crushed him in their eagerness to be near to profit by his miracles and preaching, while his enemies stood on the outer rim of the audience to criticize and trap him. The secret conversation and possible discipleship of the learned Nicodemus had as counterparts the open avowal of fellowship and offer of restoration for wrongs of the renegade Zacchæus. The sorrow of the ruler who failed in the property test only accented the joy of the disciples who had left all to follow Jesus. The desire of the healed demoniac made more culpable the request of the Gadarenes. The traitor Judas kept company with "that disciple whom Jesus loved." The glory of the Entry of Triumph slipped into the bitterness of the cry, "Crucify!" The offered crown as king was made real in the Crown of Thorns. After

the brightness of the Transfiguration came the darkness of the Cross. His preaching produced many results.

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