

## Chapter Twenty-five

### The Norm-value of His Preaching

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Jesus is the creator of the Christian pulpit. Through his own custom and his influence upon the apostolic preaching the pulpit was firmly established as the specialty of Christianity and has come to be regarded as an essential of religious service and worship. The principles that gave power to the preaching of Jesus may be translated into the ministry of every pulpit, but with the recognition of certain elements that belong exclusively to Jesus. His preaching has a norm-value for the ministry of today. It was the perfect standard, approach to whose excellence would give worth to other ministries. A complete survey of this norm-value of Jesus' preaching would lead to a re-examination of the subjects of the previous chapters in order to trace the possible resemblances between his and other preaching. The preference, however, here is to indicate a few basal comparisons by which this standard may be observed.

#### I. In Relation to the Message

1. Its origin.—The message of Jesus had its origin in the purpose of God. "The word which you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me"—John 14:24. His message was received from God. Back of his own masterly conception and presentation of the truth Jesus recognized the finality for the origin and authority of truth to be in the Father. Questions about the Trinity need not disturb our inquiry, for the humiliated Son expressed himself as in certain subordination to the Father. Originality in Jesus' thought did not go behind this divine source. Jesus felt no conscious restraint and limitation from this nature of his message as from God. He had joy in honoring God as the first thinker of his message.

The norm-value of Jesus' preaching gives this first principle. The ministry must accept the message as it comes from God. Herein lies the distinction between the pulpit and the platform. The platform may lay claim to individual vagaries, errors, or truths, having no standard of judgment but its own approval and the favor it meets from the public; it deals in its own creations. But the pulpit by its very nature and ground for being has its limits fixed by the message that it declares to have been committed to it from God and the Bible. The substitution of personal preferences of truth may not be permitted. The attitude of John the Baptist must be typical. His self-characterization was: "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness." The preacher must be content to be only a voice, interpretative with correct accent of the message, authoritative with the assurance of the truth, and divinely inspired. The author of his message is God.

2. Its embodiment.—Jesus was the incarnation of his truth. His own life and experience had first embodied his word to his followers. His demand for a righteousness that should exceed the Pharisaical externalism had found expression in his own spiritual relations with God and men, the resultant life being so pure and irreproachable that his enemies were compelled to suborn witnesses to testify

against him. His tender illustration of the Good Samaritan came from his own personal ministries to the sick and the poor. His theology might well be considered as his spiritual biography.

The preacher of every age may find here an abiding norm-value. Religion and life are coordinate terms, the preacher being the exponent of both. Only as the preacher becomes the incarnation of his message will he be able to bring his ministry to its full fruition. The glad day of such popular demands upon the preacher has come only after sad historical failures from such a standard. It was once true that the lecherous hands of some priest and preacher could administer, unquestioned, the sacred symbols of religion, but such a day has gone, except in places where the truth has been fettered and men are in slavery to a corrupt priesthood. Enlightened communities demand personal piety in their ministers. The influence of the example and the teaching of the Peerless Preacher has been felt.

This general demand for ministerial uprightness has even gone so far as to erect a different ethical standard for the preacher from that for the layman. The preacher feels compelled to incarnate his message in his own life. The most effective sermon to the congregation is the one that has been preached to the minister and has become a part of his own experience. This norm-value of Jesus' preaching will never be disregarded by a sincere ministry. It will develop depth of convictions and freedom from religious cant. The preacher needs to linger with his message until the twain become one flesh.

3. Faithfulness.—In his Farewell Prayer Jesus touched upon his own faithfulness to his message: "Now they know that all things whatsoever you have given me are from you: for the words which you gave me I have given unto them." He did not violate his trust of divine revelations.

This norm-value becomes a rebuke to a ministry that would depart from the entrusted message. The stewardship of truth is not less worthy and binding than that of wealth. "Let a man so account of us, as of ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God. Here, moreover, it is required in stewards that a man be found faithful"—I Corinthians 4:1-2. Deep and earnest study, original thought and interpretation of the sources of the message, and patient investigation of all the relations of truth to human life are not debarred by this demand for faithfulness. The revelation in the Bible will afford even the most ambitious student the material for thought; he need not long for new worlds to discover.

The Bible gives finality to the form of the preacher's message; if he cannot so accept his commission and its limits, he must seek elsewhere than the pulpit for his profession. The Christian pulpit has no other object than to declare and to enforce the truth as contained in the Bible. Sufficient latitude of investigation and application may be found by the most brilliant scholar. But the preacher must be faithful to his message. He must understand its meaning and seek to impress men with the importance of this message. No mental reservations may be permitted. God speaks and the preacher must listen and repeat the message.

4. Expression.—Jesus selected the best method for the expression of his message. He knew the right word for each occasion. His supreme place among preachers will remain unquestioned. His message did not suffer from its form.

This norm-value invites the preacher to his best efforts to give proper form to his message. Delivery may make or mar his success. Jesus may well be imitated in those rhetorical forms that bring clearness and force, grace and acceptance for his truth. The preacher must strive for the best method for each statement of his vision of truth.

How to get the best acceptance for his message should not be lightly considered by him upon whom has fallen the commission to speak for God. Truth is divine in origin and imperative, but human in interpretation and expression. Invective, interrogation, simile, metaphor, illustration, parable, persuasion, argument, denunciation will all enter the speech of the earnest preacher, moved from conviction of his cause and led by the Spirit of truth. The entire range of impassioned oratory may be traveled by him who seeks for the best method to reproduce his message in the lives of his listeners. Transformed life is his aim, to which all forces of speech may contribute.

This would not be regarded as an appeal for rhetorical pyrotechnics in the pulpit. The personality of the preacher will determine the method of speech, but no preacher has the right to permit idiosyncrasies to impair the effect of his message; the personal side must be lost in his vocation as the divine messenger.

## II. In Relation to the Audience

1. Opportunity.—The records do not suggest that Jesus suffered from remorse for lost opportunities. His success in giving each moment full value brings to the preacher its norm-value.

The preacher should cultivate the art of insight into each occasion that may permit the truth to be lodged in some life. The future remains closed to the preacher; he cannot tell what possibilities may reside in an insignificant moment and privilege. It may be a future missionary or minister who will be the single visible result of some special season of effort. Jesus did not slight these obscure moments. The preacher should learn that the spectacular occasion is not necessarily the most fruitful in permanent results. Jesus also knew what to do with his audience. When should the preacher appeal, denounce, argue, or comfort? Happy should he be who can read the meaning of each oratorical sign. Jesus becomes the guide to the preacher who would linger with him and observe his methods.

2. Insight.—Jesus' insight into character was perfect. He never made a mistake in his estimate of the worth of an individual. No man had need to instruct him in the way toward the inner life. The secret thoughts, the evil intentions, and the unuttered discontent passed through his vision to the utter wonder and confusion of his enemies and the crowds. His comprehension of his audiences extended to their personality, their passions and their needs.

The successors of Jesus can hope only to imitate not to duplicate his insight into men. Each minister should seek to know as intimately as possible the mental and spiritual condition of his audiences in order that he may the more intelligently apply the truth. An audience should be more than a mass of upturned faces.

The preacher must adopt a different method from that of his Master to acquaint himself with the needs and abilities of his people, since he may not look directly into the processes of thought. He must study men in their individual relations as he mingles with them, appreciating their ambitions, sharing their sorrows, and increasing their joys. The knowledge of human nature in its essentials will help the preacher to speak successfully to an unknown audience, but the best work will be done as he may be able to individualize the truth to men and women to whom he is united in bonds of love and sympathy.

3. Fellowship.—Jesus had fellowship with the social life of his audiences, entering into their homes, accepting their hospitality, and worshiping in their Temple and synagogues. Having entered into human life, he shared its temptations, felt its weariness, conquered its weaknesses, passed through its shadows, and enjoyed its delights, making himself the recognized friend of sinners. The preacher should follow the example of his Master. People do not appreciate being preached down to; they prefer the common ground of brotherhood and friendship. The air of patronage arouses antagonism. Such fellowship must be real.

4. Service through sacrifice.—The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life for men. He reserved to himself but small opportunity for rest and quiet. The insistent call to the ministry is to a similar self-forgetfulness. He that would be great here must become the servant of all. Self-protection may be the first law of nature, but self-sacrifice is the first law of religion and successful homiletics. The service through sacrifice must be given. Day and night the minister must be subject to the call for his service.

### III. In Relation to God

1. Authority.—God stood behind the preaching of Jesus. Men were startled by the new note of authority in religion as Jesus spoke with divine accents. The later ministry has had this authority delegated to it in virtue of the possession of truth. The preacher can but hope to have a partial inspiration, for his nature and environments hinder a complete leadership. But God delegates to his messenger a real authority as he speaks the truth. The preacher professes to give the thoughts of God as these have passed through his own personality for appreciation and for application to men. He therefore may be clothed with an assurance that could not belong to him simply as the speaker of his own discoveries. Whether for reproof, comfort, or guidance for duties, the preacher discloses the message from above if he fulfils his calling. He is God's representative. "Thus says the Lord" was the seal of ancient seer and should not be less the essential for the ministry of today.

2. Positive preaching.—The relation of Jesus to God brought him a positive message. Mists of doubt, fingering for the truth in the dark, uncertainties and questionings about favor and the future were not a part of Jesus' ministry. The norm-value of his preaching is here imperative upon the present ministry. Men are

to be reached and saved through the positive preaching of a virile message. Modern thought has written the interrogatory over many cherished beliefs and has sent many honest souls into frenzy and despair, but the demand now is for positive preaching. Men will yet listen to the preacher with a strong message. Certain truths have reached finality in basis and statement. The Bible contains the material for a positive preaching, in which assumptions must be displaced by revelations, guesses by definite knowledge.

3. Leadership of the Spirit.—The Holy Spirit was with Jesus in fulness of power and leadership. Jesus promised that he would commission the Spirit to guide his followers into all the truth. Those who claim this promise do not assert their personal holiness but their submission to the Spirit for truth and conduct. The preacher can feel assured that the word of God will accomplish its end when he can acknowledge and realize the personal leadership of the Spirit. He needs such help, for the roads of duty will fork, the clouds of disappointment will lower, the rough paths will lengthen, trusted friends will forsake, and false prosperity will deceive. Surely the messenger of God, author and revealer of truth, may claim that God is with him.

4. Gethsemane.—Jesus had his Gethsemane. The preacher must have his. The cup of suffering and sacrifice must be a double portion; servant and Master must drink together. Out of the experience to Jesus came the victory. "Not mine but yours." So will the preacher reach his soul's supreme moment when he can have this victory. He must enter the shade of the olive trees and return without the blush of shame and defeat.

#### IV. The Inimitable Preacher

Jesus will forever remain the Peerless Preacher. Many of his traits of grace and power may be reproduced by the preacher. But he will not lose his grandeur. He abides in his lonely greatness, unapproached and *inimitable* (unique, impossible to imitate). His preaching reveals to us the Son of God and Son of man, sympathetic toward men, original and self-sacrificing. He brought life and immortality to light and showed men how to tell the story of his own Cross. We may sit at his feet and study the way to reach the hearts of sinners. While we linger with him our hearts will burn within us and we shall be transformed into his own likeness. The Christian pulpit has not produced his equal in the art of giving the truth to men through oral discourse. **Jesus of Nazareth abides without a rival the World's Master Preacher.**

( End of Chapter Twenty-five  
and  
of the book *The Master Preacher* )

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