

## Chapter Four

### The Themes of His Preaching

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The themes of Jesus' preaching were dignified in character, harmonious with his mission of salvation, indicative of his outlook upon life, and suggestive of his homiletical methods. Through them he expressed personality and style.

#### I. The Selection of His Themes

1. Message through occasion.—The spontaneity of immediate selection attached to the themes of Jesus. He was full of surprises, his audiences not having previous knowledge of his topics for discourses. How long before delivery had Jesus chosen his themes? The timeliness of application was apparent in all cases, yet it may be observed how certain occasions gave form and material to his speech. His rapid thought, consequent to such a stirring ministry, did not slip into shallow, immature, and contradictory utterances.

Jesus brought to each occasion its proper importance. His message and personality were always behind the incident, which could never usurp the place of his message. He kept the fadeless consciousness that only through the revelation of the truth in himself could men reach the enduring life. He could neither forget nor deny the main purpose of his ministry.

The disciples deserved rebuke for their contention for precedence in the kingdom, but the greater aim of the Preacher was to emphasize the lesson of humility in *service*, the real measure of greatness under the new religion. The quiet gift of the poor widow might have been naturally overlooked, but Jesus desired to symbolize through her act the true benevolence, making *ability* rather than amounts the test of value. The field of ripening grain lost its usual message of prosperity in the larger type of the world's harvest of sinners. When his impatient and unbelieving brethren would have him leave the crowds, eager to hear his words and to receive healing for the afflicted, Jesus declared the far limits of his family circle to include "whosoever shall do the will of my Father who is in heaven."

Jesus was not, however, entirely dependent upon the occasion to determine the form and matter of his discourses. He directed events toward suitable times for preaching. The occasion was but the accessory of his ministry, his will ever being dominant to make effective his life-plans. He was the master of the opportunity. He did not unduly stress the occasion, nor did he speak simply to meet the popular demands upon him. The Preacher was the *exponent* (constituent portion, integral, part and parcel) of the Savior. Since his great heart was stirred by his message, that men so vitally needed, he sought the fitting times to preach to men, turning everything to good account, as one who:

"Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons

in stones, and good in everything." -- Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

2. Progressive appreciation.—Jesus expected men to have a progressive appreciation of his words. They could not at first attain to the heights of his truth. The mind and heart must be trained through contact with Jesus *himself* in order to secure this appreciation in largeness. The Christly character would be the condition of complete knowledge of the Christly message. Time, service, and fellowship with Jesus would bring progress to those who would enter the fullness of his teachings. Even the Twelve, who were granted the closest contact with Jesus and who should continue his work, did not at first fully comprehend the preaching of Jesus in its broadest outlines. The rebuke of the Risen Master to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus was justly applicable to the others as to these: "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken."

Jesus had promised the enlightening of the Holy Spirit in order to lead his followers into this larger appreciation of his gospel: "But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you." (Editor's note: They were to experience Christ more so perhaps than to understand or memorize that every word he spoke.)

The apostolic history attests the wisdom of this plan. Jesus preached upon themes that could be understood only after much meditation and fellowship with the truth. The message was great and the mind unfolds in touch with it. Growth in grace and knowledge was the privilege of his immediate audiences, and the Christian centuries have given men a clearer insight into the preaching of this peerless Preacher.

## II. The Chief Words of His Themes

1. The kingdom of God.—Jesus came as the Jewish Messiah, the Anointed, the Christ. His most frequent expression was "kingdom of heaven," or "kingdom of God," or "kingdom," all terms synonymous. The expression occurs in the Gospels 78 times and represents about 30 occasions distributed through all periods of his ministry. There is not any record of his use of it after his resurrection.

By the kingdom of God Jesus meant the Messianic reign in the heart and life of the believer. Likeness to the kingdoms of the world was lacking in matters of social prestige, preferment through favoritism, and territorial boundaries. It should be the sovereignty of God, exercised through the Messiah, and limited to the spiritual forces. Whatever externals of land, property, or power might come into relationship with this kingdom would be considered as correlative benefits and not as constituent elements.

Half of Jesus' recorded parables deal with the nature, principles, growth and consummation of the kingdom. The Synoptics give the record of this term with but two exceptions; the Fourth Gospel prefers the term eternal life.

2. The Son of man.—Throughout his ministry, Jesus referred to himself as the Son of man. His first recorded use of it was in his conversation with Nathanael near the

first of his ministry; his last use of it was during his Jewish trial before the Sanhedrin after daylight. Fifty-two references, representing about thirty occasions, remain in the Gospels. Jesus named himself the Son of man because he entered into the full human nature, sharing the inheritance of culture, bearing the burdens of sorrow, knowing the power of the common temptations, humiliating himself into the form of a servant, enduring certain limitations of the flesh, and really incarnating God; but behind this participation in the full life of the race were the forces of the divine character, enabling him to conquer adverse tendencies and environments and proving himself the Sinless One.

He mentioned himself under the dual disposition of Son of God and Son of man. Whatever theological and metaphysical difficulties men have found in efforts to explain this union of God and man did not *obtain* (occur) with Jesus. For Jesus the term Son of man was Messianic. He emphasized with this term his Messianic vocation, using it in connection with his suffering, death, resurrection, and second coming.

3. Eternal life.—The Gospel of John presents the idea of eternal life as the purpose of Jesus. The record and interpretation of Jesus' words were given this form. But it is the same thought in fundamentals that the Synoptics had given under the term kingdom. Jesus had come to accomplish a definite salvation for men, which could become personally effective only as the individual sinner came into fellowship with the King and bowed the will to the divine sovereignty; the result would mean enduring life.

4. Sin and righteousness.—In the wilderness of Judea one day the strange ascetic, clothed in camel's hair and nourished upon locusts and honey, John the Baptist, startled Jewry with the command, "Repent, you; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." The people crowded from city and village to hear him, whose only self-praise was that he was but a voice to declare the coming of the Messiah. His call to repentance rang out fearlessly and clearly. Saint and sinner found a new interest in life, though such interest might mean a reversal of life's plans.

Jesus caught up this call to repentance as the fundamental postulate of his ministry. More than any other prophet he could realize the nature and the penalty of sin, and hence the *need for repentance as the condition of a new life*. The individual will had followed its right of choice and had disobeyed the divine will, and therefore had become selfish, rebellious, depraved, sinful. Sin had brought the curse upon men, who were no longer in fellowship with God, but sinful and condemned. Jesus came to tell men that he would free them from the bondage of sin upon the condition of personal repentance and acceptance of his Lordship. The result would be a righteousness to the sinner which would be both imputed and imparted. This righteousness must become an experience and could not be identified with ceremonials. Pharisaism should become a thing of the past. "For I say unto you, that except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven."

5. His death and resurrection.—The disciples were slow to learn the place that the death and resurrection of Jesus should occupy in his Saviorhood. They drew back

from the shadows that fell across his chosen pathway; they sought to spare him suffering and shame; they preferred for him royal honor and power. Jesus sought to show them his coming death in its divine perspective. His timid and short-sighted disciples could not share his confidence that victory for human redemption and glory for himself lay beyond the Cross and the Tomb.

6. God The Father.—The doctrine of the Fatherhood of God was made central in the preaching of Jesus. Men had named God in their efforts at true worship under the titles of Jehovah, the Almighty, the Unseen, and even the Unknown, while the list of divinities discouraged attempts to number them. Man had reached lax fingers for the truth, trying to "seek God, if haply they might feel after him and find him" (—Acts 17:27; 9:8, 17-18). Creed and ceremonial had responded to this striving after God. The thought of God as Father had been dimly grasped by the Old Testament prophets, but its complete revelation through Jesus came almost as a new thought to religious circles.

This term of human ties was transformed by Jesus. The word father could never lose its value to men when Jesus had put into it the story of God's love for men. He taught men to say, "Abba, Father," when they had accepted the Lordship of the Son of God, for full confidence should be had in his assurance that "he that has seen me has seen the Father." The Fatherhood of God did not extend to all men without regard to character, but only to those who entered into fellowship with Jesus the Savior. The Fatherhood should be one of character not of creation. To his bitter critics Jesus declared their fatherhood in Satan. Likeness to spiritual ancestry is as real as that to physical and mental ancestry.

7. Minor themes.—In addition to these chief words of his themes, Jesus preached upon other important subjects which may be classed as minor themes because not so frequent and prominent. Jesus never lost the true relation of truths, his vision being discriminative and extended.

Mention may be made of certain topics (7) that also entered into his preaching: *fasting*, which should be the natural expression of the spiritual state rather than a stated ceremonial; *the Sabbath*, whose ministry to man should control its observance in worship and benevolences; *almsgiving*, which should be without pomp and desire for public approval; *mutual forgiveness*, which should indicate the condition of the heart that would accept the divine forgiveness; *humility*, which should express true greatness and attain reward through lowly service; *care for the poor*, which should be controlled by principles of equity and considerateness; *evangelization of the world*, which should be the personal and imperative concern of each believer in Jesus. His preaching reached all limits of human conduct. He suggested the guiding principle for life in its varied duties and responsibilities.

### III. The Limits of His Themes

1. Horizon of experience.—The themes of Jesus touched the horizon of men's experience. Versatile in treatment, gracious in delivery, exhaustless in resources, this Preacher treated themes of universal interest. He reached the far-away possibilities of the heart. Certainly no one would claim that he uttered every

thought that men may have, but he did outline the principles that may guide men in *every relationship and duty*. He embraced in his preaching all classes, ages, and contingencies. One may feel his personal approval today as if one had stood in the company that listened to him on the beach of Galilee. His truths are deathless.

2. Subjects of supreme value.—Themes of supreme value engaged Jesus' time. Man's relation to two worlds, the one here and the other hereafter, was worthy of his discussion. For him the Psalm of Life was but the prelude to the Song of the Lamb. In his neglect of trivial topics he was in great contrast to the rabbis, who found great delight in determining the moral issue in eating an egg that had been laid on the Sabbath. These casuists had intellectual descendants in the schoolmen of a later century. Jesus was not reduced to trifles of thought; he had a message for men.

In his treatment of the everyday phases of life Jesus put his demand for spirituality. He touched upon the household affairs and told of how in the future one woman might be taken from the grinding mill and the other left; the silent forces of the leaven could set forth those expansive powers of the kingdom that would make for universal supremacy of the King. He could treat topics of the field without becoming rustic, or the problems of finance without becoming avaricious, or even the laws of the sanctuary without bigotry and persecution. His brief ministry was too short to tithe the anise and cummin *of thought* while there remained the weightier matters of vital interest to a lost world.



3. Topics primarily religious.—Religion was the chief concern of Jesus. He was the Preacher. He did not profess to be a philosopher, reformer, economist, or politician. He came to preach the gospel of the kingdom of God and through his own sacrifice to make this kingdom effective. His message naturally had bearing upon various aspects of life: social, civic, and moral; but these could not limit his purpose. Jesus recognized religion as the greatest factor in the progress of the world. He made religion the first thing: "Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness." For him all conduct should be based upon, inspired by, and valued by the religious attitude. Only the religious

man can have the full measure of experience.

#### IV. The Preacher and His Themes

1. The message imparted.—Jesus was the revelation of God under finite limitations. He affirmed that his message came from the Father: "He that loves me not keeps not my words; and the word which you hear is not mine, but the Father's who sent me." His Farewell Prayer contained the same confession. Yet Jesus was fully divine, and one must not let the fact of his imparted message impair this truth. He was "the Word" and "the Word was God," limited to the flesh, individualized in time and space, officially subordinated to the Trinity. Jesus' own statement is final; he came from the Father to preach and to die; the Father had sent him with the message and the commission. Jesus knew the value of his words.

2. The message Christo-centric.—The Preacher had a unique relation to his message. His preaching was Christo-centric. He was its center and power. He claimed chief place for honor and worship. His entire ministry must be referred to himself for its *rationale* (a set of reasons or a logical basis for a course of action or a belief). Without Jesus the Person the preaching of Jesus would have been valueless. In himself must be found the justification for his preaching. God must be introduced by Jesus. He set forth the outlines of the kingdom of God, but men could enter into its benefits only as they crowned this Preacher King over their hearts. He sketched certain ethical duties, but men could find joy in their discharge only as he might furnish the dynamic of love.

3. The message a reflection of experience.—The preaching of Jesus reflected his own experience. He lived his message prior to its delivery. God's voice rang through him. He could utter his withering invectives against Pharisaism because his own life was free from hypocrisy. He could lead men to accept God's will because his own life could anticipate its Gethsemane. His demand for brotherly love had first emphasis in his own gift of himself for the sinner, and "greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends." In his victory over temptations he could assure the tempted of every generation that he would enable them to secure a similar victory.

Jesus put himself into his preaching. His reward is found in the world's acceptance of his message. Reflected experience measures the worth of preaching.

#### V. The Homiletical Effect of His Themes

1. On the substance.—Themes partly determine the substance of preaching. This truism does not need more than a statement. Jesus remained true to his themes, giving logical treatment. He did not wander from his text.

2. On the form.—Jesus was fortunate in his selection of the forms of preaching. He could use the methods of exhortation, parables, interrogatory, and *didactics* (intended to teach or give moral instruction). His mastery of the details of homiletics was complete. He was always *felicitous* (well chosen or appropriate) in his choice of style. He might have chosen other forms, if he had come as a reformer or a scientist. But he was the Preacher, dealing with the soul's problems. He adopted the methods that would enable him to make the presence and love of

God real to men, to impress men with their responsibilities, and to suggest the glories of the future *solemnities* (rites, ceremonies).

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