

## Chapter Six

### The Rhetorical Form of His Preaching

---

Jesus expressed himself with rhetorical force and beauty. (*Rhetorical* is understood to mean impressive, effective or persuasive speaking or writing; also, [of a question] asked for effect or to make a statement rather than to obtain an answer.) He spoke the current Greek *vernacular* (informal, ordinary speech) which had lost much of the elegance of classic Greek; and also the Aramaic, which was a corruption of the ancient Hebrew, and yet his recorded speech kept true to those basal laws of good speech found in all languages. Culture indicates itself through regard to these fundamentals, which the science of rhetoric has discovered and correlated.

Jesus is not to be classed with those rhetoricians who have cared more for the forms than for the materials of thought. The normal mental life of the Son of man followed the processes of expression that *obtain* (have to do, belong) with an educated mind of any race and time. His preaching will continue to appeal to all classes of men not only for the value of its religious message but also for the incomparable dignity and beauty of its forms. His homiletics would gain him an abiding audience and interest; his ministry and Saviorhood made him eternally peerless.

#### I. Illustrative Homiletics

1. Method.—Jesus was an illustrator of truth. He did not use pen or brush, but his words have left fadeless pictures that charm and stir the heart. He was not an author, but his words have given inspiration to numberless books to explain and enforce his message during the Christian centuries. He presented his thought through many illustrations of various forms. The parables because of their length, importance, and uniqueness will require separate treatment, though they are to be classed as illustrations.

Even a casual reading of the Gospels will show how largely Jesus used the ordinary rhetorical forms. His pictures are found on almost each page of the records. It would be impracticable to give a complete list of the illustrative figures of Jesus, while something of his custom may be grasped by one example. In the Sermon on the Mount, as given by Matthew, we have counted 62 figures of speech. A detailed examination of his words will confirm this example of his illustrative gift.

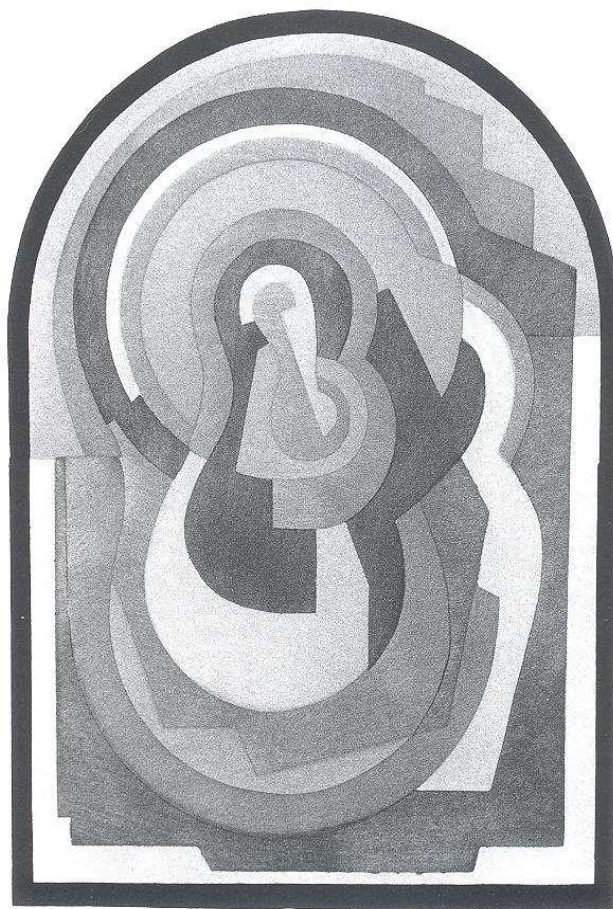
From the very large list of his word-pictures a few familiar ones may be cited: salt, light, bread, water, treasure, mote and beam, dogs, swine, two gates and two ways, trees and their fruits, physician and patients, harvest and laborers, serpent and doves, bad leaven, church rock, keys, eye of needle, gnat and camel, whitewashed tombs, hen and chickens, lightning, vultures, house servants, Temple, breeze, day and night, door and shepherd, the Good Shepherd, grain of

wheat, vine, travail, well, sheep and goats. These similes and metaphors might be almost indefinitely cited, for Jesus had complete mastery over the art of illustration.

2. Characteristics.—A wide range of life was covered by Jesus' illustrative homiletics. He entered into the full life and interests of people. Inspired by his plan of redemption for sinners, enthusiastic in his efforts to reach with his remedy the cases of physical, mental, and spiritual need, and wonderfully tender and versatile in his response to the misery caused by sin, Jesus adapted himself to the current modes of thought and living of those to be benefitted. He did not approve in theory or practice of the life of the hermit. The Logia of Jesus, discovered in Egypt in 1897, contained this saying as from Jesus: "Raise the stone and thou shalt find me, cleave the wood and there am I."

Upon this word Henry van Dyke's beautiful poem, *The Tiling of Felix*, is based. Young Felix goes out in search of the holy life, hoping to end his task in a hermit's retreat away from men and social duties. "One by one he dropped the duties of the common life of care, broke the human ties that bound him, laid his spirit waste and bare." Through many failures he found his way finally to an old hermit, who gave him a papyrus leaf with the above inscription. Young Felix realized that his plans had been wrong and returned to help in the common tasks of men, finding here the presence and blessing of his Master. "This is the gospel of Labor—ring it, ye bells of the kirk; The Lord of love came down from above to live with the men who work."

The words of Jesus abound with references to agricultural life. The farmer may be thrilled with joy as he listens to Jesus. He sees the grain of wheat fall into the ground to die and to live again in the larger harvest, which process Jesus made a symbol of the eternal life; he watches the waving harvest-field, ripened for the sickle, and learns of that more precious world-field of souls. The home-life presents a favorite source of figures; one may watch the preparation of the daily meal, and learn from the silent leaven the force that shall gradually enlarge and empower the spiritual kingdom of God; one may hear the growl of the dogs beneath the table and remember the woman whose humility



would accept even the crumbs intended for the dogs; the merry laugh of the children at play mingles with the wailing of the hired mourners, and one may know how intimate was Jesus' fellowship with social conditions in the home-life of his times. The merchant of today may be more closely linked to his faraway predecessors, who heard the commercial world illustrated and translated by terms of spiritual values, as Jesus spoke of the moth-covered treasures and the barter that would suggest the soul and the world in exchange. The civic duties, with the taxes and the kings; and the social life, with the weddings and funerals, seem almost a part of our own experience, so vividly did Jesus picture them.

The pictorial homiletics reveal the open-eyed illustrator. Jesus did not close his eyes to the pulsating life around him. He himself suggested that one should keep true to the functions of the members, for some people have eyes and see not. One may scan the flowers with unseeing eyes and may lose their mission of beauty through form and color.

*"A primrose by the river's brim a yellow primrose was to him,  
and it was nothing more."*—William Wordsworth, *Peter Bell*

But to Jesus the myriad voices came from the physical world with their suggestions of analogues for the spiritual realities. His illustrations were often suggested by the flitting occasion, and thus preserve naturalness and a vitality that invite admiration but discourage imitation.

Simplicity and brevity mark these word-pictures. Jesus' longest illustration was the parable of the Sower with the explanation, and yet a few minutes would suffice for its recital. This trait is in sharp and singular contrast to the involved and lengthy style of many speakers and preachers. If brevity be the soul of wit, simplicity should be the body of an illustration. Jesus never wearied his audience with attenuated verbosity. His clear, sparkling, and fresh imagery invites the vision into the limpid depths of his thought. He did not tell all the story; he left something to the imagination. The master artist may use but few strokes.

The illustrations of Jesus have a continuous and a universal touch upon the heart. This is true both of his short and long imagery, words, phrases, and parables. The parable of the Lost Son, the poor unfortunate prodigal, might well be called the parable of the Bereaved Father. It is unequalled in literature for its tenderness, grace, and pathos. Jesus touched the soul's harp-strings to call forth the bitter threnody of tears, the victorious pæan of faith, the hymn of adoration, the dirge of the lost, but the unbroken harmony of his own sympathy always accompanied the strains to give them setting and value. He was gentle and loving, but he did not hesitate to paint pictures that would rebuke the unrepentant heart. He easily entered the hearts of the audiences that crowded around him, and his reported words still charm a larger audience.

Jesus preferred the concrete word rather than the abstract. The individual definite picture was desirable. He used words with local color, form, and beauty, realizing that the eyes of the mind are similar to the physical in the vividness of perception of the concrete object. Modern educational science has sought to emphasize this

method, translating the analogues of matter and spirit. Jesus did not unduly exalt the physical objects, for these should only be aids to the spiritual understanding. Men could not escape the charm, directness, and vividness of this pictorial method, which did not distract attention from his meaning, but carried the picture only so far that it made the truth impressive.

## II. Formal Rhetorical Homiletics

1. Interrogation.—Jesus employed the interrogatory with great skill and effect. This method has been named the Socratic Method, but Jesus was a greater master of it than Socrates. By it the sage of Athens was limited to the innate and experiential truths of his students' minds, while Jesus could add to this the divine revelation. The records of his words give us two hundred and thirty-seven distinct questions that Jesus asked. Forty-seven discourses contain one hundred and sixty-eight, and the others are found in the fragmentary sayings. The Sermon on the Mount has twenty-three interrogations. Eighty-six are found in his recorded words for the last six months of his ministry, fifty-eight of these being uttered during the Last Week. Twelve miracles and twenty parables connect with this form of address. The tabulation of these facts furnishes the basis for the scientific observation of his method. Guesses will not take the place of facts.

The interrogatory address was a permanent feature of Jesus' homiletics. The records show his use of this form in all periods of his ministry, the large number during the Last Week being partly explained by the relative fullness of the discourse material for this time. This form was used in the Sermon on the Mount, delivered near the first of his ministry, and this fact shows that Jesus did not learn this method through contact with his audiences and especially his foes. He knew how to give the religious value to the interrogatory.

All forms of his address contained this trait. The brief and incidental fragmentary sayings, the conversations with individuals, and the formal discourses before groups and multitudes were made effective by his incisive, provocative questions. Parables and illustrations were thus introduced and recited; miracles were accompanied by questions to secure opinions as to the propriety of the deed or to express censure for lack of faith. Only a great orator could risk his reputation and success by such a large use of this difficult form of address, for it invited responses from the audience, and such a privilege might well unbalance the course of the speaker's thought. Jesus could deflect a *captious* (attempted fault-finding) question to his own purpose and success. The audience never slipped from his control by a difficult, embarrassing, and unexpected question.

Jesus personalized his message through his interrogations. A direct appeal by a question will often awaken the indifferent hearer to the personal bearing of the message. This psychological principle lay beneath Jesus' method. Modern pedagogy gives proper recognition to its worth. Jesus brought in this way his message so close to his audience as to arouse anger and cause confusion among his critics, while he drew nearer to himself the humble seeker for eternal life. Dr. John A. Broadus would sometimes prepare a written list of questions for classroom work, and his pupils testify to his ability to carry the class over interruptions to his intended instruction and personal applications. (Because of Albert Bond's

reference to Rev. Broadus, this editor is herein attaching remarks made in an account of the popular Baptist preacher appearing in [www.graceonlinelibrary.org](http://www.graceonlinelibrary.org), author unknown, which relate to his manner of the sermon preparation and its presentation:)

In 1870 he published *A Treatise on the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, a book which was to become and remain a classic in its field. A factor which contributed to his being a successful preacher was his simplicity in preaching. What he had to say was transparently clear. This does not mean that his sermons lacked worth-while thought. He gave to his preaching his best intellectual effort, but he invariably concealed the processes and brought to his congregations the results of his investigations in language which they could understand. One Sunday morning he preached on the "Practical Aspects of the Trinity", and a ten-year-old boy came forward after the service to thank him for the helpful message. His method of preparation has often been criticized, the critics feeling that the sermons should have been fully written. However, Dr. Broadus wanted the freedom of choosing exact words in the act of delivery as the occasion and nature of the subject dictated. Thus he was left free for many striking asides and helpful thoughts which came to him as he spoke. This method proved quite advantageous to Dr. Broadus after he became a seminary professor. Before re-preaching a sermon, he would spend at least two hours trying to adapt it to the new situation and in seeking to make the sermon real to him again. Thus he recreated his sermons and gave them a freshness and vitality which they might not otherwise have had. Here is one direct appeal he in a sermon made:

"My friends, let us make it a practical lesson for us all. Christian people, begin to pray more. Fathers of families, if you have neglected to pray with your families, begin now at once. If you have been negligent in public or private prayer, renew your petitions with earnestness. O, troubled one, shrinking away from the Savior, remember that he said, 'Ask and it shall be given you.' And, if there is somebody here this evening that has not prayed for months, that has not prayed for years; if there is some man that has not prayed since the time long ago when he prayed by his mother's knee, and who all these years has been slighting God's word and rejecting God's invitation; O soul, O fellow-sinner, will you not tonight take Jesus' word home to your heart, and begin to find in your experience what some like you have found, that you have but to ask and it shall be given."

The interrogations of Jesus, though dependent largely upon the occasion, did not show haste in origin or application. They were always appropriate and timely. His intimate and intuitive knowledge of men gave him absolute assurance that his method would accomplish its desired results, reaching even to the mental attitude of his hearers. "Jesus answered and said," even when no word had been uttered by his audience.

The Synoptics contain a few double questions, in which one writer will put the matter in the form of the interrogatory and another in the direct statement, or one writer will omit part of the record. The Gospel of John does not give any question given by the Synoptics either in the single or double form.

2. Denunciation.—Wickedness received the severe denunciation of Jesus. There was no respect of the person of the transgressor. Jesus uttered his woes against the Pharisees, who violated the laws of simplicity in worship and who regarded themselves as too holy for the touch of common people; the white sepulcher was a fit emblem for such hypocrisy. Those who reared class distinctions and oppressed the poor received his woes and censure. Passport to his favor was not secured because of name or position in society, for he touched with justice the shams and deceits of his day and admitted to his friendship men whose sole recommendation lay in their unworthiness and faith in himself. Claimants for popularity because of external piety felt his keen invective, cutting and stinging like a whip of cords.

Sharp discriminative irony and sarcasm served him for ready and effective weapons. The hypocrites could not fail to perceive his application of the pictures of the blind leading the blind, of the careful cleansing of the outside of the cup, and of the father giving the stone or the scorpion to the hungry son. With a bravery that knew but overcame the dangers Jesus gave his message, making enemies who would plan his sufferings and death, and reproaching the sinner of every social rank. His denunciations were always based upon the depravity of the ones condemned, and were entirely free from personal venom and hatred.

3. Persuasion.—Formal oratorical persuasion was not largely used by Jesus. His style consisted more in the appeal through personality and the inherent worthiness of his words. He did not resort to the arts of his contemporaries in order to secure a following. His life and mission were the real and sufficient grounds for persuasion. One might justly consider his attractiveness of personality and preaching as a form of persuasion.

4. Apostrophe.—Literature does not present a finer example of apostrophe than Jesus' lament over Jerusalem. The city of the prophets, favored by tokens of Jehovah's presence and help, the center of national history and hopes, scene of the incomparable revelation from God, brought to this Preacher the echoes of historic voices and filled him, as he stood on the hill overlooking its sacred walls, with a prescience of coming gloom and distress for the city which symbolized that New Jerusalem whose glory should be in its purity and happiness. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, that kills the prophets, and stones them that are sent unto her! how often would I have gathered your children together, even as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings, and you would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate." Comment would not enrich the pathos and beauty of this outburst of the heart of the Preacher.

5. Condensation.—The words of Jesus had the vitality of the living grain. His thoughts harvested more than a hundredfold. His wisdom was so great that scholar and ignorant man have found an unlimited task of interpretation, each in his own way and ability seeking the message from a common Lord. Jesus packed

into short proverbs the materials for an age-long study for men, while his discourses give the student constant surprises because of their vision of the needs of the human heart and the way to satisfy such needs. Jesus did not exhaust his resources, his audiences feeling the force of his infinite reserve power. His spoken word was but the ray of sunshine; he himself was the sun.

The history of the pulpit, which has produced such a rich accumulation of sermonic material that professes to interpret and enforce the revelation through Jesus and his apostles, attests the wonder of condensation of Jesus' words. Jesus and his preaching furnish the dynamic for Christian preaching. Research into his words but illuminates their glory.

In a Dresden art gallery may be found a silver-shelled egg. The silver is of the finest and is burnished and decorated; the touch of a secret spring bursts the shell to disclose a golden chicken; another secret touch, and the chicken opens its breast to exhibit a crown of gems; yet again the touch will open the crown, and there nestling in sparkling glory is seen a diamond ring which outranks all its coverings in beauty and value. So opens the word of Jesus to the reverent student.

6. Repetition.—The Gospels assign certain sayings of Jesus to more than one historical occasion. The list of such examples would vary from short, partial similarities to real repetitions. This custom does not lessen the value of his homiletics. It would be entirely natural for Jesus in his itineraries to repeat a former truth in whole or in part and in the same language. His purpose was not to give each audience a new truth. The Athenian disposition for the newer things did not rule his method; he rather adopted the prophetic method of "precept upon precept." The Preacher was more concerned about men than about a reputation for saying new things. He was aiming directly for souls.

Attention has been called to the simile and the metaphor. Other rhetorical figures occur in Jesus' preaching, but these may not here have a large discussion. Almost all rhetorical forms were used by him. Simple citation of examples will suffice for the hyperbole, the climax, and the paradox.

### III. A View of Jesus in Rhetorical Homiletics

1. His poetic nature.—Jesus was a true poet. He did not speak or write in verse, but he had the real poetic nature. The poet is the seer of the unseen, the lover of the true and beautiful, the soul sensitized to receive the finer impressions of truth.

2. His outlook upon nature.—Jesus was more than a scientist. He did not formulate laws for the physical universe, but he translated these laws into terms of the spiritual experience. To him nature was not a divinity, whose will was supreme and unalterable, but God's method of sustenance for the physical forces, which might be displaced in their uniformity in behalf of the higher providential order for men. Miracles and grace are herein provided.

3. His outlook upon man.—The depravity of men did not escape the notice of Jesus, nor did he seek to minimize its evil results and calamities to men. In this fact lay the need and justification for his ministry of word, deed and sacrifice.

Because men had lost the uplift of God's conscious presence Jesus came to give them restored favor with God. He believed that men could be redeemed to a life of personal integrity and a future happiness. But the sole condition of such redemption lay in himself. He would make the sacrifice that would entitle every soul, regardless how far astray in personal depravity he may have gone, to be saved. Contact and fellowship with himself should be the method. The life of men was worth the sacrifice.

( End of Chapter Six – The Rhetorical Form of His Preaching )