

ELEMENTARY HOMILETICS

OR

RULES AND PRINCIPLES

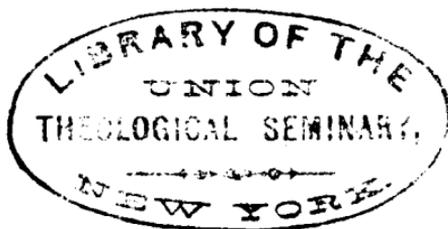
IN THE

Preparation and Preaching of Sermons

BY

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PREFACE.

FOUR years ago I had printed in pamphlet form some rules and notes in my department of Homiletics, for the use of students in the Lutheran Theological Seminary at Mount Airy, Philadelphia. To these notes others were added from time to time, which, with the examples given under the various rules, became sufficiently copious to appear now in book form.

The book does not claim nor pretend to be a treatise on Homiletics, nor a set of lectures on the subject in full form. That field is abundantly covered; but there seemed to be a need of a text-book giving only rules and explanatory notes, which would form the basis of free lectures, which are always preferable in the department of Practical Theology, and give the instructor every opportunity to make his own additions, comments, and illustrations.

It may also be of helpful service to young ministers, whether they have studied larger works on the subject or not, in presenting in succinct form those elements and first principles and rules in the preparation of sermons

which should ever be kept in view, but are too often overlooked or forgotten. The examples given under many of the rules will aid in understanding their force and meaning.

Consisting, therefore, chiefly of first elements and rules, and intended for those beginning the great work of preaching, I have called this book ELEMENTARY HOMILETICS, and as such send it forth to find and fill its place.

JACOB FRY.

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HOMILETICS.

CHAPTER 1.

DEFINITION AND IMPORTANCE OF HOMILETICS. CHOICE OF SUBJECTS AND TEXTS.

Homiletics is that branch of theology which teaches the principles and rules according to which sermons are prepared and delivered. It covers the whole subject, science, and art of preaching or public address before the congregation. Homiletics is therefore the chief aim and end of all theological study; the completion and crown of the whole course.

Preaching is the chief business of the Christian ministry, and the most frequent form of public speech. More sermons are delivered in any year than all other public addresses combined. In this fact there is an element of strength and of weakness; of strength, because of the frequent opportunity to influence public thought and action; of weakness, because this frequency brings the temptation to become careless in preparation.

There is a wide difference between a sermon scantily prepared and a sermon erroneously constructed. The latter may be found in sermons of elaborate preparation, and is a fault chargeable not to lack of time, but lack of observance of the principles and rules of true homiletics.

The objection that preaching is too sacred to be made a matter of art, and too varied in its topics and ends to be governed by rules and forms, is of no more weight than when applied to any other business or duty. Every sermon has two elements, divine and human. It is divine in its substance, which is the truth as revealed in God's Word-but it is human in so far as it is the product of human learning and skill in its preparation and delivery. As a human product every sermon is a matter of art, and as such demands the highest skill and best method of which the preacher is capable. In both elements it will show the marks of its maker.

Rules in homiletics are meant to aid and not to hinder the best and most effective kind of preaching. "What is worth doing at all is worth doing well," and the greater and grander the work the more important is it to observe this rule. Truth may be presented in such overwrought or stiffened form as to lose its force and end, but true homiletics will put the preacher on his guard against this as well as other faults by which sermons are spoiled. Every preacher will have some method or rule in his preparation and preaching. The question is-which is the best method and rule? To aid students in finding this out and becoming familiar with it, is the important purpose of this branch of study.

The term Homiletics is derived from the Greek *ὁμιλέω*, signifying both to assemble and to converse together, and is repeatedly used in the New Testament. [*See Luke* xxiv: 14, 15. *Acts* xx: 11, and xxiv: 26. *1. Cor.* xv: 33.]

From this is derived the word Homily which was the earliest form of public discourse in Christian congregations, and from this in turn comes the term Homiletics. The word Sermon, from the Latin *sermo*, has the same signification as Homily, but generally expresses a more elaborate and finished discourse. The term Postils is derived from the first words in the sentence "*Post ilia verba textus*," with which many homilies in the middle ages began.

Homiletics is usually divided into four parts:

1. Invention, or the selection of texts or topics and the gathering of material.
2. Disposition, or the division and arrangement of the subject and matter of the sermon.
3. Composition, or the development, elaboration, and style of the discourse.
4. Declamation, or its public delivery.

INVENTION.

The term Invention is derived from the Latin *Invenio*, signifying to find, to discover, to contrive, to procure; and expresses the act of the mind in searching out a text or theme, and finding out what to say and how to say it. It may be in its beginning an act of the imagination, as the artist sees in his own mind the image before he touches the marble or canvas—or it may be a discovery, the result of diligent study of the Scriptures, or revealed to us in our own experience and observations of life.

This inventive faculty or gift should be cultivated and developed by every preacher. It

will liken him to a man ..that is an householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." It will keep his mind and heart awake and active, give freshness and interest as well as material aid to his sermons, and furnish a constant source of pleasure and delight in his studies and preparations for the pulpit.

We divide Invention into four parts: the choice of subjects, the selection of texts, the determination of the theme, and the gathering of material.

THE CHOICE OF SUBJECTS.

The observance of the Church Year with its various seasons and appropriate lessons from the Gospels and Epistles, ordinarily determines the subject of the sermon at the chief service on the Lord's day.

Luther, in revising and reforming the Order of worship and public service, retained the observance of the Church Year as it had come down from the early ages of the Christian Church; and while he abolished many superfluous festivals, held fast to the chief festivals and seasons, and their appropriate lessons for each Sunday and festival of the year, selected from the Gospels and Epistles of the New Testament.

Occasions, however, will arise and circumstances demand that other subjects be preached on besides those contained in the pericopes. This will generally be the case when there is a second or evening service, and quite frequently also at the first or morning service.

It is important, therefore, to have some rules and suggestions for guidance in the choice of subjects.

SUBJECTS TO BE AVOIDED.

1. Those irrelevant to the purpose of preaching. Such as sermons on abstract metaphysics; on natural philosophy and science; the mechanical arts or agriculture; mere social or sanitary questions; partisan politics, etc.

Sometimes there may be need of and propriety in a brief allusion to such topics, but they should never supplant the gospel by being made the subject of an entire discourse.

2. Certain great subjects, belief in which should be taken for granted, and which could not be covered in an ordinary sermon. Such as the existence of God; the immortality of the soul; the general evidences of Christianity, etc. Attempts to prove or explain great truths like these often raise doubts rather than confirm faith, and at best produce but little benefit. It is unwise to disturb good foundations.

3. Nor should subjects of great terror and awe be made the topics of entire sermons. We are to declare the whole counsel of God and not keep back any of His warnings, - but terrible things should not be discussed too familiarly, but presented as motives in the application of sermons rather than made the chief topic.

4. Controversial sermons should be avoided except the occasion be imperative. The pulpit is not the place for the criticism and

condemnation of brethren who differ from us, unless the difference amounts to fundamental heresy. Nor is it the place for any personal controversy or grievance a minister may have with members of his congregation.

5. All sensational topics, including whatever is merely odd and curious, are to be religiously excluded. The temptation to select and announce such topics to attract a crowd is very great, but it is a confession of pitiable weakness to be compelled to resort to them, and a perversion of God's gospel and grace to employ them.

SUBJECTS TO BE CHOSEN.

The whole range of Christian doctrines and duties, together with subjects pertaining to church life and personal experience, will furnish a great variety of topics which are always proper and profitable.

In selecting your subject out of this variety several considerations should guide you.

1. Take the subject which lies most upon your heart, and to which you seem to be most drawn. Subjects of doctrine, duty, or experience will often suggest themselves, and ask and urge a hearing. These may be the promptings of the Holy Spirit who guides us into all truth.

2. Consider the state and needs of the congregation and what will be most profitable for them at the time. Not always what you feel like choosing, but what they need should often decide your choice.

3. Consider what will be suitable and ap-

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propriate to the occasion; to the day or season of the year, etc., which would add interest and give special point to the sermon. Such would be times of special incidents, calamity or concern, etc.

Also days set apart for Thanksgiving or for Fasting, appointed by the civil authorities—and also the Sundays nearest the Fourth of July, Washington's birthday, and other national holidays, will give opportunity for sermons of a national character, which may be useful and should sometimes be preached. They should never be of a partisan character, discuss purely political questions, nor criticise the rulers of the land. These occasions should be used to remind the people that our government was founded by Christian men on religious principles—that our national prosperity depends on the continued favor of God—and that our laws should ever be in accordance with the teachings of His Word.

4. Consider what has been neglected. Keep a record or list of subjects as you preach on them, and an occasional examination of this will reveal what important subjects have been unintentionally omitted, which should be presented.

THE SELECTION OF TEXTS.

1. Every sermon should be founded on a text, *i.e.*, on some passage of Scripture. Only in extraordinary circumstances, as in delivering a discourse on some special occasion or some topic outside the usual range of sermons. should this rule be dispensed with—as

it is better to take no text than to put into one what was never intended.

2. The advantages and benefits of having a text are:

(a.) It keeps us to the true idea of preaching, viz., to explain and enforce the Word of God. A sermon is not a mere religious address or exhortation. It proceeds from the Word of God, leads into that Word, continues with that Word, and attains its highest purpose and end in making clear and plain the meaning of that Word.

(b.) The text gives strength and authority to the discourse. The power of the pulpit consists in the fact its occupants can say "Thus saith the Lord." Without this foundation the sermon loses its claim that men should hear, believe, and obey it. The text therefore is the ground and pillar of the sermon.

(c.) It is a great aid to the preacher in preparing his sermons, and to the hearers in remembering it, as it fixes the mind on something definite.

(d.) While preventing the preacher from wandering away into unprofitable topics, texts of scripture also furnish the richest variety of thoughts, arguments, and illustrations the mind or heart can desire.

3. The sermon must be really based upon the text, the thought of which should run through the entire discourse. It is a misuse of God's Word to take a passage from it as the text of the sermon, and then make no further use of it or allusion to it. This is making it a pretext instead of a text. On that portion taken as the text, the sermon is constructed and

developed. The text is therefore not merely the beginning of the sermon, but that on which it rests for its assertions, authority, and power; and the meaning, spirit, and life of which must pulsate through it from beginning to end.

4. Texts should neither be too long nor absurdly short. If a very extended passage is selected (except for Expository preaching), the mind is confused by the variety of subjects included, and the text is not easily remembered. Texts may be very short if they cover the entire theme of the sermon, and give the sense of the passage, *e.g.*, "God is love," "Jesus wept," "Maran-atha," "And he said, Come," etc. But usually to select but one or two unimportant words, as has sometimes been done, seems like trifling with the Word of God and the great business of preaching. A sermon on the New Testament fulfilling the Old was based on the words "This was that;" and another on Excuses had for its text the single word "But:" Such trifling cannot be too severely condemned.

5. Passages should not be chosen for texts simply because they are unusual and striking, if they do not teach what the sermon is meant to set forth. A sermon by a popular preacher, on the value of public meetings in which Christians relate their religious experience and give personal testimony, was based on Ps. cvii :2. "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so:" Any intelligent hearer who knew the connection and meaning of this passage might be amused, but neither convinced nor edified by the sermon.i

So too, mere incidental sayings or statements in Scripture, which contain no doctrine or important fact upon which to base an edifying sermon should not be chosen for texts. Some little incidental statements may be and are rich in instruction and suggestion, and have been used to great advantage, but ordinarily it is better and safer to select passages in which truth is more fully and directly taught.

6. It is a mistake to give preference to Old Testament texts, rather than those taken from the New. There is a temptation to do this from the fact that Old Testament texts are less familiar, or are generally connected with an attractive story.

But while the entire Bible is our storehouse or armory from which our supplies are drawn, we must not forget we are ministers of the New Testament rather than of the Old.

Old Testament texts may be admirably employed to illustrate the New, but texts which teach positive truths and doctrines are far stronger than those which simply illustrate by comparison or figure. Christian doctrine, duty, and life do not rest on the Old Testament but on the New, and the latter should therefore be our chief text-book.

7. This brings up the question whether it is proper to use texts by way of accommodation, *i.e.*, selecting a text for the purpose of illustrating some truth to which the text has no reference or connection. *E.g.* Dr. Ruperti's sermon on "God's love to rebellious man," his text being I. Sam. xiv: 33, "The king kissed Absalom"; Dr. Seiss' sermon on

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"People who start for heaven but never get there" - his text being Gen. xi :32, "Terah died in Haran" ; or Dean Stanley's sermon on "The discouragement of God's servants"-based on the remark of Elijah's servant, "There is nothing" (I. Kings xviii: 43) ; and many other examples which might be given, for the custom of treating texts by way of accommodation is very common.

The chief objection urged against it is that it is an unauthorized use of the sacred narrative, and puts a meaning into it which was never intended. But this can be urged against the spiritualizing of the miracles and other acts of our Lord, which has always been regarded as proper when kept within bounds; as the cure of Bartimeus is an illustration of the cure of those spiritually blind, etc.

Where texts are chosen by way of accommodation and used cautiously and wisely, there is force in the argument in its favor that it opens up the historical parts of the Bible as a rich field for suggestive texts. And it really does no violence to God's Word, provided the truths presented and illustrated thereby are really taught in other parts of the Bible. It is employing the art and power of illustration drawn from the Word of God itself, and attracts attention from the start through the story or narrative on which the sermon is based.

Furthermore there is Divine warrant for such use of texts in the fact that many things in the Old Testament history were types of the Gospel and are so explained by Christ and the Apostles.; as in John vi : 31-35, in which

Jesus applies the story of the Manna to **Himself**; or I. Cor. x: 4, where Paul says the rock smitten by Moses "was Christ"; or Gal. iv: 19, "Which things (Sarah and Hagar) are an allegory"; or Heb. ix: 19, where it is said Abraham received Isaac "in a figure" ; and in vs. 26, Moses is said to have "esteemed the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt," etc.

Under proper limitations, which the conscientious preacher will always observe, the use of texts by way of accommodation, not for teaching but illustrating truth, is justifiable and sometimes of special value.

8. Another general rule in selecting free texts is to give preference to such as are really **God's words**. Many sayings in the Bible were uttered by heathen or wicked people, those who were God's enemies, and even by Satan himself. Sermons are not unusual on Job i :9, "Doth Job fear God for nought?" the purpose being to teach no man serves God without being rewarded. This is true, but surely Satan ought not to be the person to teach it. Unless the preacher is careful to state whose words they are and why he chooses them, such texts may be mischievous to those familiar with their origin. It would seem strange to take that text when the words of our Lord in Matt. xix: 29, would be more suitable and forcible.

9. Texts **should not be taken from the Apocryphal books**. While they are printed in some editions of the Bible and have a certain value, they are not the inspired Word of God, and should not be used as texts. For

the same reason several passages in the canonical books, like John v : 4, and I. John v: 1, which are now regarded by the best authorities as interpolations, should not be taken.

10. Ordinarily the text of the sermon for the chief service of the day should be taken from the Gospel or Epistle for that day, either whole or in part.

The advantages of preaching on these *pericopes* may be briefly stated:

(a.) It makes Christ the centre and theme of our sermons and presents the chief facts of His life and doctrines He taught, in regular order once every year. It is therefore eminently Christian.

(b.) It accords with and preserves the *cuttus* and spirit of our church, which bases her order of worship and instruction upon the church year. It is therefore eminently churchly.

(c.) It maintains the communion of saints in furnishing the same topic and thought for all congregations assembled on any particular day.

(d.) It preserves the congregation from being subject to the special whims, likes or dislikes of the preacher in his choice of texts and topics.

(e.) It saves the preacher the perplexity and loss of time incident to selecting texts at random.

11. Other texts, not in the pericopes, but appropriate to or suggested by the particular thought of the day or season of the church year, may be used to great advantage. Many such texts can be found both in the Old and New Testaments which will bring out such particular thought equally well, and sometimes

in more striking form than the pericopes themselves. While maintaining the church-year idea, they give variety and interest to our sermons beyond what is possible when the texts are always chosen from the Gospel or Epistle for the day.

As a rule it is not wise to choose the same texts which have been repeatedly preached on before. The wise householder brings out of the storehouse things new and old. Claus Harms's reply to a question about repeating old sermons, was "O sing unto the Lord a new song." His objections to being altogether confined to the Gospels for the day, in the matter of texts, are interesting and forcible. While the extended passages which form these pericopes give great variety of topics of discourse, and therefore are not open to the objection to the repeated use of the same short texts, it is wise often to take other texts appropriate to the particular Gospel, day, or season of the church-year, rather than always to use the words of that particular Gospel.

It is hard to make a new sermon on a text frequently used before, and the Bible is very full of new ones which the diligent student is not long in discovering. Luther made a great discovery in the library of Erfurt when he found there was a great deal in the Bible which was not in the pericopes. To choose a text only because it is unfamiliar is a mistake, but the mistake is not much less to take familiar and oft-used texts when new ones, equally important, appropriate, and instructive can be had for the searching.

For reasons given in paragraph 9, the Gos-

pel for the day should generally furnish the text for that day,-but even during the principal seasons of the church-year other texts of great force and propriety will suggest themselves, and sometimes ought to be used. *E.g.*, on the 1st Sunday in **Advent**, texts containing prophecies, types, and promises concerning Christ, and such passages as Ps. cxxx: 6; Sol. Song v : 2; Acts iii : 24; Heb. i : 1-2, and ii : 13; 1. Pet. i : 10-11, and II. Pet. i : 19-21, will be appropriate.

On the ad Sunday, the many texts concerning Christ's second coming will be in place, as well as texts like Luke xviii: 8, or xix: 13, etc.

On the 3d and 4th Sundays, texts relating to the character, mission, and work of John the Baptist, such as Acts xiii : 25; John i : 7, or v : 35, etc., will give rich variety to Advent sermons.

In a more subjective sense, texts on the preparation of the heart to receive Christ may be used with good effect during this season.

The **Epiphany** season brings before the congregation not only the manifestation of Christ to the Gentiles, but His entire public life, ministry, and teaching. Texts referring to Christ as our teacher, example, etc., belong here,-such as Acts x : 38, and xxvi: 26; Luke ix : 56; Matt. vii : 28-29, and viii: 20; II. Cor. viii: 9, etc. Missionary sermons also are very appropriate to this season, and will suggest numerous texts.

The season of **Lent** is especially rich in appropriate texts, many of which, as in Advent, will be found in the types, sacrifices, and proph-

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ecies of the Old Testament. On the first Sunday, which brings before us Christ tempted of the devil, suitable texts will be Ps. xvii: 4 ; II. Cor. ii: II; I John iii:8, etc. Texts for sermons on the sufferings of Christ, will be found in Isa. liii, and throughout the Epistle to the Hebrews, *e.g.*, ii: 10, 14, 17, 18; iv: 15 ; V:8-9 ; vii : 25-26; xii: 2-3. Lent is also the season for sermons on penitence and humiliation, and on the trials and sorrows of life, texts for which abound in every part of the Bible.

The **Easter** season, extending to Ascension day, will be found short enough for sermons based on or suggested by our Lord's resurrection. The different appearances of the risen Lord will furnish topics and texts of wonderful interest, as will other passages like Isa. lxiii: I; Matt. xxi: 42; II. Tim. i : 10; Heb, xiii: 20-21; I. Pet. i :3; Rev. i: 18, and v: 5-6.

These are but few out of many which might be mentioned to show how other texts besides those in the pericopes can be used, whilst the church-year thought is carefully observed.

12. A convenient blank-book in which to note texts as they occur to your mind in your studies or pastoral work, is a help in choosing texts. The particular thought, purpose, application, or arrangement which strikes the mind at the time, should also be noted.