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The Essential Element in Good Preaching.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED AT THE ORDINATION

OF

JULIUS H. SEELYE,

IN THE

FIRST REFORMED DUTCH CHURCH OF SCHENECTADY,
AUGUST 10, 1853.

BY LAURENS P. HICKOK, D. D.,
OF UNION COLLEGE.

[Published by request of the Consistory of the Church.]

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S E R M O N.

YE ARE THE SALT OF THE EARTH; BUT IF THE SALT HAVE LOST HIS SAVOR, WHEREWITH SHALL IT BE SALTED? IT IS THENCEFORTH GOOD FOR NOTHING BUT TO BE CAST OUT, AND TO BE TRODDEN UNDER FOOT OF MEN.—Matt. v. 13.

THAT which is good has some essential element in which its goodness consists, and when this element is taken away its goodness is gone. Thus salt is good, but if its essential savor is lost, nothing can compensate for it: henceforth it is worthless and men cast it away.

This was spoken by Christ *to* his Disciples, and *of* his Disciples; and this not solely as Christians, but more especially as Christian Ministers. The figure was designed to convey this truth—that the Gospel Ministry is good, but that its goodness consists in an essential element which may be lost, and that when this is wanting, the savor of the Ministry is gone, and it can not then be made good for anything. Its savor is lost, and nothing can season it. Like all other things worthless, it should be cast out.

Now, other qualities are incidental to salt beside its saltness. There is color, weight, and the form given to it in the law of its crystalization; and that which abounds in Judea, and to which the Savior

here referred, lies stratified in the earth, and upon exposure to the atmosphere, soon loses its saltiness, though still retaining its ordinary appearance. But a chemical analysis will readily detect that specific ingredient which is the efficient in arresting the process of putrefaction, and for the sake of this alone is the mass of any value; all else being fit only to be trodden under foot. Thus, the Savior designed to assist our estimate of the Christian Ministry, and in order thereto he would have us analyze all that the great commission contains, and all that belongs inherently and incidentally to the entire functions of the office, and learn to value it only as it possesses that specific element which constitutes all its goodness. Where this is, the Ministry is good; and where this is not, it is good for nothing. No matter what else may be retained, it has lost its savor and nothing can season it.

And here, (as appropriate to this occasion,) I propose to find and hold out prominently to view, that in which the essential excellency of the Christian Ministry consists, and in the absence of which no man's ministry can be good, or worthy of reception by either the church or the world.

IN WHAT IS THE ESSENTIAL GOODNESS OF THE GOSPEL MINISTRY? Having found this, we will then make a practical application:

Let it here be noted, that the grand employment of the Christian Ministry is the preaching of the Gospel. Baptism, Church organization and Gospel

discipline, with the whole routine of pastoral labors, follow as the result of successful preaching. This is the chief business, and its ground of reliance for success. The Jewish priest offered sacrifices, and filled his office in compliance with a rigid ritual. The Roman priest relies upon imposing ceremonies, the unbloody sacrifice of the mass, and hence the pulpit is put one side, and an altar assumes its place and that of the Lord's table. Idolatry, too, holds its sway over all ranks of its votaries, by the force of its terrible superstitions and bloody ritual exactions: and Mohammedanism adds the use of the sword to its ceremonies, and thus spreads and seeks to keep its conquests. No false religion puts its confidence in the preacher, and sends him forth with the simple principles of her creed and the sole protection of her God. It is the peculiarity of primitive and protestant Christianity, in simple faith and prayer, to execute the Apostolic commission, "Go ye into all the world and *preach* the Gospel to every creature." This is made conditional for all success among the ruined children of the fall, for "how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a *preacher*?" And so discriminating is this ordinance of preaching, that it separates the chosen of God and settles the issues of the last judgment: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved, and he that believeth not shall be damned." As, thus, the great work of the Christian Ministry is to preach, so that peculiarity which

gives to the ministry its goodness is to be sought in its preaching. Our enquiry, therefore, is, What constitutes good preaching, and thereby makes a good minister?

I would here remark, that when, among other good qualities, we shall have found this *essential* element of good preaching, it will be seen to be as simple as that which gives to salt its savor and its value; but, that we may attain it the more surely, and ultimately apprehend it the more distinctly, it may be expedient to make our approach to it through several successive steps of an analysis.

1. *Good preaching must strike directly and surely at the heart.*

The heart is the spring of all moral action, the source of all personal responsibility, and thus the very fountain of moral character. "As a man thinketh in his *heart*, so is he." The audible declaration and the outward action of two persons may be the same, and yet their hearts exactly contradict each other. It cannot, therefore, subserve at all the great end of preaching the Gospel, to so constrain the outward speech and actions of men that they shall conform to some self-righteous ritual, while their hearts have been left untouched in their depravity and hostility.

It may be admitted that the preacher has gained much for the interests of this world, when he has induced the unchanged heart to disguise itself under a fair exterior, and from considerations of social cha-

racter, domestic happiness, or a refined taste, to so control rising appetite and suppress raging passion, as to shut out those gross sins which blast and wither all that is lovely. A minister may aim at this, and accomplish this, and then set down contented with this; but this is not that which constitutes him “a *good* minister of the Lord Jesus Christ.” His commission contemplates interests infinitely above those of this life. If these could be secured as readily and as extensively without, as by the thorough purification of the heart, still the grand ends of the Christian Ministry could not in this way be reached. His mission is with man’s immortality, and applies to the eternity of his action and influence and welfare, as now standing and evermore to stand under the moral government of Jehovah. If his preaching has not aimed to secure the full tide of the heart’s loyalty to God, and this to flow on forever in its glad freedom —

“ While life, and thought, and being last,
Or immortality endures,” —

then has it not at all sought its great end, and to all the purposes of his high commission his whole preaching has been good for nothing. No matter how many interests he has promoted and services rendered to human society, his commission as a Gospel minister did not contemplate these. Let moralists, and legislators, and philosophers, and political economists, work with these transitory aims; but his great business is nothing less than to make the heart take

on an entire transformation, and choose truth and love God, and thereby become fit forever for his presence and his service.

Marvel not, then, that the Gospel Ministry so often reiterates the great injunction—"Ye must be born again;" nor, that where the evidence of this great change appears, it still urges on the work of sanctification by the constant cry—"Be ye holy"—"without holiness no man shall see the Lord." This is the grand burden of his whole commission, and the ambassador can only in this way fulfil his obligation, or reach the object for which his Master sent him. Let his preaching take any lower aim, or he be content to have accomplished any inferior end, and his preaching has lost its savor so that nothing can season it. Like the refuse mass of lime and chalk from whence all saltness has evaporated, nothing can season it; and no matter what else may be in it, as Gospel preaching it should everywhere be rejected by saint and sinner.

We take a principal still farther back, when we affirm,

2dly. *That preaching to the heart involves the preaching of "Jesus Christ and him crucified."*

The preacher may instruct, enlighten and convince the intellect by other themes and in various methods. He may awaken the imagination, and please the taste, and kindle emotion, by presenting many topics which have no connection with the Cross of Christ. He may even use the authority of

God's law, and apply its awful threatenings, and thus induce the most pungent convictions of guilt and pangs of remorse, and arouse the most fearful apprehensions, and thus very properly and very faithfully preach to the conscience; but if his preaching stop short at this, he will not find the way to the heart, and bring it subdued, broken and penitent to God. To effect this, he must apply those truths which respect the tender mercy and melting compassion of a crucified Savior. The terror of the law's condemnation will steel the heart in greater stubbornness, separate from the forgiving love and grace of Calvary.

There is that in convicted and guilty human nature, which demands just such an influence as the Cross of Christ to bring it subdued and penitent to the acknowledgment of its guilt and a willing return to obedience. This may be very fully illustrated in the case of a convicted criminal against civil law.

Go to the gloomy cell of a doomed malefactor. He murdered his fellow in cold blood, aggravating the deed by many horrid atrocities. There he sits moody and sullen, and his countenance grows more dark and harsh as you approach him. You talk to him of the crime he has committed, and bring anew before him the dreadful circumstances, until you see the anguish of a guilty conscience writhing in every muscle. You go on, and say, the law that condemns you is just; the execution is fixed, sure, and near; the world approves the sentence, and feels that you richly merit your terrible doom, and will say, amen,

when the law is vindicated. He may be agitated by this; turn pale, swoon away in terror, or summon up all his stubborn hardness to meet the worst that is coming upon him; but he is not repenting and confessing.

You then entirely change the tone and language of your address, and say: but guilty as you are, you are a human being; you have all the sympathies and sensibilities within you that belong to my nature. I feel for you; I pity you; I will do all that righteousness will let me, to relieve and comfort you. And while you thus make him feel your kindness, amid all his blameworthiness, look into that hard, guilty face again. The frown of defiance is gone, the muscles relax, the lips quiver, the eye melts, the stammering tongue is already beginning its confession and penitent supplication. If anything you can do may reach the heart, and bring the relentings of guilt subdued, it will come through a benevolence that is kind while it is righteous.

And even so to the sinner condemned by the law of God. You may press the rectitude and the rigor of that law for conviction—there is, what is often called, “a law work” to be done; but when you have made the load of guilt to hang as an insupportable burden upon the conscience, you must tell of Jesus’ dying love and grace, and bring that burdened soul to look from the foot of the cross on Him who was pierced for his sin, before you need expect the tears of penitence, or the consolations from the hope

of sins forgiven. Your preaching will prove “a savor of death unto death,” until you can reach the heart by Jesus’ love, and make his blood “a savor of life.”

But we carry the analysis still farther, when we say,

3dly. That the doctrine of the cross is made effectual upon the heart *only in dependence upon the work of the Holy Spirit.*

If anything could avail to reach and soften and subdue the heart of the sinner, doubtless it would be found in the preaching of the dying love of Jesus. But in counteraction of all the melting motives from Calvary, we find the depraved heart still hard and unyielding. Of all sinners, now as formerly, even when Christ is preached, or when Christ himself is the preacher, we may say, “ye will not come unto Him that ye may have life.” The ardent and sanguine preacher soon finds that something more is needed, than even the faithful and direct application of the mercy of God in Christ Jesus to the heart. That heart does not bow in submission, penitence and new obedience, except under the special working of the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.

It is very true, that all the words of Christ in the Gospel “are spirit and life.” They exert a most astonishing living power and energy upon the minds of men, for even his enemies must say, “Never man spake like this man.” They would make alive in Christ Jesus, if not perverted and resisted. But in every case, where these words are spoken, and their

truth only is applied by the preacher, this influence is perverted and resisted, and the obstinacy of the sinner makes the entire provisions of the cross of none effect. "Paul may plant and Apollos may water," but the increase is wholly from another quarter. Here must come in the agency of the Spirit of God, or all the good seed is made, through some perversion, to be utterly unproductive.

This agency of the Holy Spirit upon the mind of a sinner, though analogous to the action of truth, in that it is a moral power, precisely adapted to secure the intended result in regeneration in full accordance with human freedom and perpetual responsibility, is yet another agency than truth; a work superinduced upon the heart beyond all that truth effects; and reaching to every faculty of intellect, emotion, and volition, in its own separate identity of working, as immediately and directly as the truth itself does. The heart comes under the concurring agency of both influences, and attains to eternal life "through sanctification of *the Spirit* and belief of *the truth*." All preaching of even the doctrine of Christ crucified, without the special work of the Holy Ghost, will be profitless and worthless. No matter how much the preacher may aim Christ's words to the heart; they will not change and sanctify it, without the special agency of the Spirit.

Thus much has now been attained, that the Gospel Minister must aim at the heart the truths of Christ crucified, and in full reliance upon the Divine Spirit.

We need to carry the analysis one step farther back, and we shall there find the peculiar element which sends its savor through all this preaching, and without which all other ministerial qualifications, and all other good things of the preacher, will have nothing to season them. And this is,

4thly. *Supreme devotion to the honor of God.*

Other things are determined as what the minister must *do*; here we determine what the preacher must *be*. The whole energy of his preaching must find its source in what he himself is before God. If his heart has not bowed in full submission to his Savior, and from the depth of his own conviction and distress for sin he has not given away his whole being to Christ, and now determines to know nothing else than that which may glorify his Lord and Master, he will not so preach Christ as to reach the hearts of others, nor so rely upon Divine power as to attain the blessing of the Holy Ghost upon his ministry. No other qualifications can suffice without this deep and abiding principle of all goodness,—*the honor of the Lord Jesus Christ before and above all other considerations*. No other spring will be controlling enough, no other motive sufficiently comprehensive to govern and sustain in all the trials and toils of the sacred office. “The love of Christ must constrain him to live, not unto himself, but unto Him who died for him and rose again,” or no matter what his resolutions, his knowledge of Divine truth, or speculative faith in the special working of the Holy Spirit; the

purifying and sweetening savor which gives to preaching all its goodness will not be in it.

A man may preach very earnestly from strong sectarian partialities; he may be very active in quest of reputation, applause, and popular influence; or he may be very soundly and stiffly orthodox, and manifest great ardor in doctrinal discussion and theological controversy; yea, a preacher may be very zealous in earnest entreaties and loud warnings to unconverted men, because his constitutional sympathies are painfully excited in view of their danger from the wrath to come; and such motives may prompt to sacrifices and labors which often attain the approbation and commendation of the community. But if only such motives operate upon the preacher, how many points of stern duty and rigid self-denial will he be obliged to meet, where he will either wholly neglect his duty, or do it in a very different manner and spirit, than when prompted by the love and honor of God! Nothing but an absorbing devotion to the glory of God will prompt to perseverance in the right preaching of the Gospel, or diffuse through all this preaching the unction of a right spirit. But when the minister's regard to Christ is above all other interests, he can then *do* anything and *endure* anything that duty demands, and all he does will be in the best manner. The essential piety in the heart will work itself out, and diffuse itself through all his ministry. His heart's desire and prayer to God for perishing men is that

they may be saved; and he will be "ready to be bound not only, but to die for the name of the Lord Jesus."

We here find the essence of all goodness, in all the other good things which the preacher may possess, and what is the necessary condition without which nothing can make any man's preaching to be good. If this does not season the ministry, well may it be asked, "Wherewith shall it be salted?" Where this is, it will compel respect for its worth, and secure an honorable appreciation of its dignity; but without this, no learning, nor titles, nor vestments, nor assumed transmitted prerogatives, can make it fit for anything than to be cast out and trodden under foot.

II. WE WILL GIVE A PRACTICAL APPLICATION TO THE TRUTH NOW ATTAINED.

1. *It determines in what light we are to view the ceremony of Ordination to the Gospel Ministry.*

Most denominations of Christians recognize the importance of a regularly ordained Christian Ministry, but there obtains quite a wide difference of opinion relatively to what is implied in the ceremony of ordination. With some, the ordination itself, canonically administered, gives the essential element of all that is valid in the Gospel Ministry. The goodness is not in the *man*, but in the *office*. The savor goes with the official investiture, and is transmitted from generation to generation through the hands of the persons ordaining; and thus the authorized ceremony works its own transformations; the

saltness is given according as the official investiture is regularly made ; or it becomes a mere secular appointment, with no Apostolic savor, where the prescribed formulæ have not been exactly observed.

But the view we have here gained establishes a very different meaning to an ordination service. The essential element of goodness must first be found in the *man*, and not merely in the *office* ; and this official investiture is not to be given, except as the man is already found to be fit for it. The office can not have any preserving qualities, unless the salt be already in the man who is to assume it. No possible form of ordination can give this, and all possible forms of ordination are utterly worthless without this. Peter or Paul might impose hands, but could give “no part nor lot in this matter ;” yea, even Christ himself might commission, and yet he would say of such, as of Judas, “he hath a devil.” The true view of an ordination is, not that it *makes* or *gives* qualifications, but is merely the public pledge or symbol that the proper judges have found the qualifications already in possession. God, by *his grace* has renewed the man’s heart, and by his *providence* has strengthened and enlightened his intellect, and he is thus found to be called of God to take part in the holy ministry ; and then the act of ordaining is the public recognition and open testimony to this divine call, which God and not man has made.

As in the civil magistracy, the popular election designates and makes the man the magistrate, while

the oath administered and the ceremony of inauguration gives simply the public recognition of what has already been done; or, as in the selection of the ambassador by the sovereign, the foreign minister is already made, and the putting of the commission into his hands, is only openly manifesting the trust already committed; so the converting and providential qualifying and internal prompting a man to the ministry is God's call, and God's making the man to be a minister, and the ordination is only the open sanction and testimony by the proper persons, that they have found, and hereby testify to the already God-given qualifications for an office that no man can make.

The importance of an ordination service is thus manifest. Not to give nor make anything which God has not already given and made; but to hold out a consecrated sign and solemn testimony that God has already qualified the candidate for the holy work; that the salt is already there, and that God and not man sends him to the people to diffuse its savor among them. In this way all confusion in the great work of pastoral supervision and religious instruction is precluded, and general confidence in ministerial qualifications and fidelity is established. So God promises a ministry to the Church, and that he will be "with them alway, to the end of the world." Where this essential goodness is not already given, all ceremonies of ordination are preposterous. No possible forms can communicate the heavenly savor.

2. *We recognize the right estimate to be made of mental talents and attainments.*

Just preceding the text, Jesus had said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," "the meek," "the merciful," "the pure in heart," etc., by which he taught his superior approbation of moral qualities, even such as are humble and unobtrusive, over the most splendid talents and the ripest scholarship. He meant to teach the great truth, that in the holy ministry goodness is more than greatness.

The view which we have been taking of the essential excellency of the ministry is precisely in the same direction, and leads to the same conclusion. The savor of the gospel ministry can not lie in its great learning, its profound speculations, its deep philosophy, its logic, its imagination, or its eloquence; though all these may have their great value; but its salt is in its piety. All other powers are weakness, if the heart of the minister does not put his Savior's glory above all else, and stand strong in love, and faith, and zeal, and firm purpose in the work of God. Those mental endowments and acquired qualifications are good, when they come in as subservient to the essential goodness of a heart supremely devoted to God's glory; but are really good for nothing in a ministry destitute of this holy devotion. This is their place; from hence are they to find their right estimate; as auxiliaries to a minister's piety in fulfilling his great work, not at all as in any degree substitutes for his piety. Piety, though sincere and

simple-hearted, may be so deficient in intellectual light and strength as to be utterly unfit for the ministry, but this will not warrant the putting of the intellectual qualities in the first place, nor of estimating the ministry by them. Holiness is its essential savor; talent and learning are good, only that this may be diffused.

3. There is great *responsibility in the estimate we make of the Gospel Ministry.*

The ministry is one of the most sacred and important institutions of the Gospel system. It was when Christ “ascended up on high,” triumphant from his humiliation, and “led captivity captive,” that he “gave gifts unto man; some Apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some pastors and teachers; for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.” “He that despiseth you, despiseth me; and he that despiseth me, despiseth Him that sent me.” While Christ thus identifies the manner of the reception of his ministers, with his own and his Father’s reception among men, yet can there be but one proper standard of estimate—that essential goodness in above all things glorifying God. As we are bound to honor the minister for the Master’s sake, so are we bound to make this the measure of our estimate, in graduating the essential goodness of the ministry.

But, is it not manifest that our churches are making quite a different standard of judging what good

preaching is? How much of the salt itself, with all its precious savor in it is rejected! and how much that has no saltiness in it, and which never was nor can be seasoned, is taken in and used in its place! What crude, frothy, empty declamation is sometimes heard from the pulpit, and *called* preaching; yea, sometimes *good* preaching! As if that which had no saltiness in it was about to preserve the Churches and congregations in moral sweetness and purity. Brethren: I have no belief that Jesus approbates this estimate, so different from his own rule and his own example. There is not such a superabundance of the precious salt in the ministry that we can afford that it should be thus cast out; nor can other things so compensate for its absence, that we can afford to take that preaching into our pulpits which has no savor of God's glory about it. If we tread the pure salt under foot, and make a vain reliance upon what, with all its assumption, was after all never seasoned, we may be sure that the Head of the Church will hold us accountable for it.

4thly. *Every people needs the establishment of such a ministry in the midst of them,*

No people can preserve themselves from moral putrefaction without the Christian religion. This is as necessary to moral preservation as salt is to the preservation of animal flesh when the life is gone from it. No nation, no neighborhood, no family, no person, can discard the Christian religion and reject its duties, and be safe in purity and virtue. Yea,

the discarding of these principles, and expelling them from the heart, is itself already rottenness and corruption.

And now, it may emphatically be affirmed, that the savor of Gospel piety never has been diffused and never will be among men, except in connection with the action and influence of the Christian Ministry. Let any community come under the influence of a good and faithful ministry, in its instructions, counsels, example and prayer, for ten successive years, and all of moral worth and social virtue will have been raised thereby, and all the influences which bless man and make society happy will have come in along with it. And, on the other hand, let any community want this preserving savor for ten successive years, and it will invariably be found that the public morals have deteriorated, and the peace and purity of society been injured. No people can themselves afford to be without the stated ordinance of a preached Gospel. The fathers and the children will together become corrupt, and public morals degenerate, and men live and die without hope and without God, if the voice of the good preacher be not heard from Sabbath to Sabbath.

And, now, Brethren of this Church, we are about to re-establish the Gospel Ministry over you in the Lord. We are now to ordain this young Brother to the great work of preaching Jesus Christ, and it is because we think we have found the right qualifications already imparted to him by God, that we apply

this ceremony as a regular ordinance for the Church's confidence in him and recognition of him as a Minister, and not at all because we suppose the imposition of our hands will impart anything to him, or fill up anything that is wanting in him; or that any ordination ceremony can season him with that only savor which can make a good minister,—a soul entirely consecrated to Jesus' honor.

Suffer me to say, that I have watched over all his previous studies and preparatory steps to the assuming of the solemn responsibilities now to be imposed, with the deepest interest. I know that his eye has from the first been fixed upon this sacred calling, and that whatever privation, or toil, or foreign travel, or study, it may have cost, all has been pursued with reference to his entering the holy ministry the better prepared to serve God in it, and the people to whom God should send him. An unseen hand shaped events to bring him to your acquaintance, and to such as have watched the intimations of the Divine will in the providences, the course of duty has not been darkly traced or difficult to determine. The full conviction has been induced, that here the Head of the Church would have him begin the work of beseeching sinners to be reconciled unto God.

I trust you have already learned to value him for his work's sake; and that you will prize any talents he may exhibit, and any labors he may put forth, only as they help to diffuse among you the savor of godliness, and bear upon the glory of God in your

and your children's salvation. Make your great end, by the ministry, the same as that which the Minister must himself always propose—the glory of God in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Embrace the truth—receive the Gospel—profess the true religion—live in obedience to God's commandments, and a few short years at the most will bring minister and people together at the bar of God, and the righteous to an eternal welcome into his kingdom.

AMEN.

