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PSYCHOLOGY AND PREACHING.

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Whatever one may think the soul to be and however earnestly one may believe that it is the preacher's sole duty to deal with the souls of men we will all agree that the only way to reach the soul is through the mind. How can the preacher as he stands in the pulpit reach the souls of all those people whose faces look up earnestly into his? He has only one means, and that is, ideas. Through action, through voice, through words, in some way, he must suggest to them some thought, some truth. Now let me remind you that there is nothing accidental, nothing haphazard, in the way ideas are conveyed. The mind operates by law as certainly as anything in the physical world. We may accidentally or instinctively hit on those laws or we may miss them. But when it is possible for us to know them why rely on instinct or a haphazard hit or miss method? It isn't of course any more necessary to know the formal science of Psychology than it is to know the science of Physiology. We may get along in either sphere with our instincts to guide us or with a haphazard sort of knowledge. But surely we can do better with a more accurate knowledge.

There are three topics that it is important for the preacher to understand. *How we learn, the laws of attention and interest and the motives to action.* These matters I wish to discuss in order as pointedly and practically as possible.

Apperception. Since the days of Herbart a good deal has been made of the law of apperception in pedagogical psychology. Apperception means simply that in every act of perception the mind itself contributes much from past experiences. Every new experience is interpreted in the light of past experiences. Any simple act of recognition is just that; the present sensation or experience

is identified with certain past experiences. To know, to understand, is to bring the new within the circle of the old. There is no such thing as understanding a fact that is absolutely new. The mind is a living organism and grows from within as it assimilates to itself new impressions and experiences. The approach of the learner to anything new presented is always from what is already in the mind. One morning as I went from my home to the College I saw a child playing on the sidewalk. I knew all the children and was accustomed to speak to them as I passed. On seeing this unknown child I was conscious of the question in my mind as to whose child it was. The next morning on finding the same child at the same place my curiosity became somewhat stronger. The child was evidently also curious as to who I was. On the third morning the child could no longer restrain his curiosity for after I had passed him a few steps he called out after me, "Say, mister, whose daddy are you?" A rather unusual way to be addressed: and yet it was exactly the question the child should have been expected to ask. Had I expressed the question in my mind I would have said, "Boy, whose son are you?" Why so? Because I knew the parents, the men and women, of the neighborhood, and would have felt that I knew who the boy was could I have connected him with one of them. On the other hand the child knew the children and felt that he knew who some grown up was when he was able to connect him with some child of his acquaintance. Evidently in trying to place me he was running over in his mind the children of his acquaintance and trying to connect me with one of them. His mind and mine were going through identically the same process. We were both trying to relate the new fact to the old. This is the primary law of learning. To understand it is the first essential of teaching. For teaching is just this: the helping the mind of the learner to make this connection. The first duty of the teacher is to know the content of the mind of

the pupil. For lack of this knowledge I am persuaded that not less than 50 per cent. of the energy expended in teaching is lost. Recently a little girl of six came to me for assistance in memorizing some lines given her by the leader of the Sunbeam Band. It was evidently the intention of the leader to impress a lesson of Missions. To the mind of the adult the lines were simple enough. But to the child of six there was not an intelligible idea in the eight lines and where the child's mind was struggling toward an idea the result was quite fantastic or false. One line, for instance, was, "The ocean white caps softly tossed." What sort of image do you suppose that simple line would call up in a small child's mind to whom the only kind of caps ever seen or heard of were the kind boys wear on their heads and sometimes toss in the air? The only thing it could possibly mean would be a scene where boys all wearing caps were somewhat more gently than usual tossing them in the air; all connected vaguely with an unknown thing called "ocean." The average teacher would often be very much surprised and shocked if she could know just what idea she has left in the child's mind.

This is just as important a truth for the preacher. This is the reason why much preaching is ineffective. The preacher must know the mind of his congregation. It is his business to *impart* ideas not simply to *proclaim* them. He must find a peg in the mind of his hearer on which his ideas will hang. The preacher to be effective must approach his subject not from his theological, or ministerial, or individual, standpoint but from the standpoint of those whom he instructs. That is his task; to find the mind, the content of mind, the attitude of mind, the interests, of his congregation and from that point to lead them on to understand his mind and grasp his thought. That is his skill; to bridge the chasm between the mind of his congregation and his own mind; and he must always build from the other side back to himself. That is no

easy task. It is difficult for us all to put ourselves in the place of another and view the world out of his eyes, yet it is absolutely necessary for teacher and preacher.

I will make three suggestions that will be, I hope, practical and helpful. 1. *Do not allow yourself to get very far away from the great commonplaces of experience.* The universal experiences furnish the common ground on which all stand. Let the preacher keep in mind always the plain, common, human heart, with its every day experiences, its every day needs, its perpetual struggles, temptations, defeats and victories. This is one of the advantages of good expository preaching, because one of the characteristics of the Bible is this that it deals largely in these universal human experiences. The preacher that can really get into the spirit and take the point of view of the scripture passage taken for exposition will not lack for interested and profited hearers. 2. *Do not fail to keep in touch with current thought, current theology, current philosophy, current scientific thought, and even current common place newspaper gossip.* For by this will you know what the people are thinking and talking about. The content of the papers yesterday will be the content of the minds of the people to whom you speak today. 3. *Maintain a close and vital intimacy with the people of the church and congregation.* It is not necessary for the pastor to be a gadabout, a loafer or a gossip, but it is necessary for him to know not only people in general but more especially these particular people to whom he ministers. The work of pastor and the work of preaching go together. Then when the preacher understands that it is his business on Sunday not to deliver a sermon for the admiration of folks who can appreciate a good performance, but to help the people solve *their* problems, to throw some light on the dark places in *their* way, to bring to *them* some comfort and strength, some consolation and good cheer, to help *them* get a better, higher, more helpful conception of truth, to find *their* consciences

and quicken them, in short, to minister to all their needs, he will have solved the first problem of successful preaching.

Psychology's first lesson, then, to the preacher is this, become completely absorbed in the life of those to whom you would minister. Put yourself in their place and then find for yourself and for them the helpful word.

The Laws of Interest and Attention. I wish next to discuss *interest* and *attention*. One of the principal problems of the preacher is how to get and hold the attention of his congregation. Now it is certain that if he gets their attention and arouses their interest he will do so, whether he is conscious of it or not, by conforming to the laws of attention. If the people go to sleep the preacher is to blame because he doesn't know how to make them attend. Attention is not a haphazard thing. It is by definite laws.

There are about two primary laws of attention with a number of corollaries, but I shall here for practical purposes relate them in a co-ordinate series. 1. *Interest accompanies all instinctive movements.* This interest may be carried over to anything else associated strongly with these instincts or common experiences. For example any boy is interested in action because of his instinct in this direction and it is comparatively easy to interest him in any subject that can be taught through action. In the grown boy or girl the social and sex instinct becomes very strong. They are intensely interested in any social function that brings the sexes together. At this age it is easy to interest them in anything that can be associated with social relations, and at a certain age this is almost the only means of gaining the interest of youth and should be the principal medium of instruction. The wise preacher and church that desires to get a place of power in the lives of young people will not neglect it. There are also the larger social instincts, the family instincts, the selfish instincts even. All may be used to transfuse an interest

into the tasks that are to be done and the lessons to be learned. This is the most universal appeal.

When a boy I early acquired the habit of reading. I read everything that I could get my hands on. One day I tried to read "Paradise Lost." Of course I failed. The appeal of "Paradise Lost" is artificial; its appeal is to a cultured and an acquired taste. One must first be familiar with the classics of literature before he can make headway in it. Over against Paradise Lost put the Iliad or Odyssey. Any boy, anybody, would find these books interesting, absorbing in interest, all the way through because they appeal all the time to the common universal human instincts of action, of adventure, of admiration for the man that can do things.

Of preachers Spurgeon knew best the heart of the common people. Phillips Brooks also powerfully stirs the heart but he is also intellectual. His appeal is therefore not quite so wide as Spurgeon's.

To interest the people then, it is necessary for the preacher first of all to appeal to, or associate what he has to say with, the elemental instincts or common experiences of man. This is especially important in dealing with children and young people and the uneducated. It is not unimportant even for the most highly cultured intellectual class, for none of us ever entirely get away or should get away from these elementary instincts. 2. *Interest attaches to that that can be valued by experience.* In other words the law of apperception is as applicable to attention and interest as it is to learning. The mind is incapable of attending to anything that is entirely foreign to it. Just here is where many preachers fail; they are dealing with things interesting and meaningful enough to them but completely foreign to the minds of their hearers. I do not mean to say that the preacher should leave the gospel and deal in all sorts of modern ideas solely to interest the crowd. I do mean to say that it is impossible to interest anybody in the gospel without showing how

the gospel has application to the things that people today are thinking and doing. The gospel must be associated with today's thought and activities and approached in the modern man's way of thinking and largely in the forms of modern thought. My quarrel with the preacher is that he too frequently is a man of the middle ages dealing in middle age forms of thought. He must be a man of the age in which he lives and of the people to whom he speaks if his words meet with any response of attention.

For my part, I believe that modern thought and activity gives a nearer and better approach to Christian conceptions than middle age forms of thought. For middle age philosophy and theology were largely a reflection of Plato or Aristotle. Modern science and philosophy have more truly felt the leavening effect of the teaching of Jesus.

There are three characteristics of this age that the preacher must take account of and through which largely he must get the attention at least of the cultivated part of his audience. 1. The scientific spirit that is concerned not with abstract or theoretical statements but with the carefully worked out results of experience. 2. The practical spirit that is concerned with conduct more than with creed, and 3. The social spirit that is concerned with Christianizing the social order as well as with the conversion of individuals.

I do not say that the preacher must listen to every wind of doctrine that blows across the country. I do say that to get the attention he must deal in a vital way with what is in the minds of the people, by contradiction, by correction, by enlargement, as a means of bringing them to the truth as it is in Christ Jesus. I do not mean to say that the preacher is to teach from the pulpit science and sociology or anything of that sort. I do not know anyone that can make a nicer mess of a thing than the preacher who undertakes to pronounce authoritatively on all the questions of the day. I do mean to say that these

things furnish the preacher by his way of approach, his source book of illustration, his means of getting attention to his gospel message, his field for the practical application of the gospel.

It is useful to know something of general tendencies of thought but as a matter of fact the preacher has to deal with individual minds. The preacher must study the characteristics which are frequently of more importance for getting attention than the knowledge of general tendencies. To do this effectively the preacher must be a man of wide sympathies, of very broad and general culture and information. Above all men the preacher must keep out of the ruts and narrow grooves of thought.

3. Things are interesting in proportion as they are felt to be vitally important. This is true because of the importance of the vital instincts. It is important that the preacher himself should feel the vital importance of what he is saying. His earnestness and forcefulness of manner will impart itself to others. Vitality may be imparted to the message by the manner of the speaker, his voice, by the expression of his face, by the simple directness of his words, by being concrete. Few can follow a long course of abstract thinking. Attention will fail unless concrete illustrations are freely employed.

The meaning of the message for life must be made clear. The gospel is a vital message. It is expressed in terms of life and should be interpreted in terms of life; and if this is done in a vital way men will listen to it. Make the church the liveliest thing in town and your problem will be to find room for the people. And be assured that if your pews are empty you haven't solved the problem of vitally relating your church service to the needs of the community. Do not understand me to say that popularity is the sole test of successful preaching. Sometimes the very best preaching is to a few or even to one; but it is vitally related to the needs of these few. My contention at this point is only this: if the gospel is to get

the wider hearing it will do so because it is vitally related to the needs of the many. 4. Change is necessary to interest. Consciousness is a stream. The mind is a sort of moving picture show. Nothing remains in consciousness long. For this reason it is impossible to hold the attention long or steadily on one object. Attention can be brought back by jerks but that soon exhausts itself. Monotony or sameness is the death enemy of attention. We are all familiar with many instances of how we become unconscious of that which is monotonously repeated; as the ticking of the clock, but aroused to consciousness of its presence by its stopping. So it is that the familiar loses its interest for us. A preacher must avoid monotony as the plague. A monotonous, droning, voice is the latest scientific method of inducing sleep. On the other hand the voice has great suggestive power. A word spoken with expression goes farther and straighter, a good voice well trained, is half the battle with the speaker. Leave off the tricks of elocution but learn how to speak. But it is more in the matter than in the manner of the discourse that we are interested just now.

Two points I would emphasize: 1. The theme must bring out the new from the old. The old and familiar loses all interest for us, the totally new is meaningless to us; it is the new in the old that interests. There is nothing as interesting as a new light on an old theme or as a new application of an old truth. It is psychologically true that nothing is more interesting than the old gospel if treated in a fresh way. Show the application of the gospel to modern conditions in a clear cut way and there will be no lack of interest. But do not comfort yourself by saying that you are preaching the old gospel when you are only repeating the old phrases, the old formulas or crying out the old shibboleths. 2. There must be movement in the thought without too long delay at one place. This is the second element of interest in the Homeric poems. There is a constant forward movement. Inter-

est doesn't have time to drag. That is a characteristic of all literature and holds the attention and keeps an unflaging interest. Either the scene must change rapidly or the thought be continually unfolding and varying. That may be done either by the logical unfolding of the thought or by turning its varied sides to view with apt illustration. Such is the richness of the gospel in meaning and possibility of application that this ought not to be a very difficult task.

Will and Action. I have tried thus to express as briefly and pointedly as possible the laws of attention. I shall now call your attention to the motives for action.

Instruction and interested attention are not the ends of preaching, they are themselves the means to the farther end of conduct. Jesus closes the "Sermon on the Mount" with a motive for action. "He that *doeth* these sayings of mine, I will liken him to a wise man that built his house on the rock." The true preacher like the Master is not content with words only, ideas must become deeds, thought be transmuted into conduct; otherwise words and ideas are vain and useless things and preaching an empty performance. Thought and feeling must complete themselves in action. Now, of course, the only way the preacher has of making people do what he wants them to do is through the power of suggestion. I shall make here a series of suggestions that are especially applicable to preaching. 1. All ideas tend to action and will result in the appropriate act unless inhibited from doing so. So that the problem is largely to prevent or avoid inhibition. 2. This impulse to action is, in general, in the strength of its impression on the mind. This strength of impression depends much upon the evident strength of impression the idea has made in the first place on the mind of the speaker, and the forcefulness of its expression. The personality of the preacher, the strength of his convictions, the forcefulness of his manner of expressing himself, are very potent in giving strength to an idea and go far toward insuring its resulting deed.

Ideas also have a strength of their own. Some ideas are by their nature more intense than others. It is impossible of course for the preacher to deal in these larger ideas all the time but it is possible usually to associate the smaller, less significant ideas with great ideas. In Paul's letters are many examples of such forceful association of common place duties with the strongest motives. In the first nine verses of the sixth chapter of Ephesians the every day duties of children to parents, of parents to children, of servants to masters and of masters to servants, are all enforced by bringing them into the light of their relationship to the Lord. So everywhere Christianity glorifies the commonplace. For this reason it is possible for the preacher to deal with commonplace ideas in a large and inspiring way.

3. Ideas impel to action in proportion to their singleness or simplicity or lack of complexity. The active impulse of an idea is inhibited only by another idea. All ideas would result in action if some other idea did not interpose. Naturally then a plurality, or complexity, of ideas tend to mutual inhibition. The man of intense conviction and impulsive action is generally a man with one idea. It is true psychologically that narrow-mindedness and ignorance tends to produce strong convictions and actions while broad knowledge and culture tend to weaken conviction and dissipate energy. Just here lies one of the really serious problems of Christian culture. It is not my task just here, however, to solve the problem. From another standpoint we have seen that it is necessary for the preacher to be a man of broad culture; from this present standpoint we see that it is necessary for him to be a man of strong convictions. From the point of view of effectiveness the sermon must be characterized by a single, clear-cut idea enforced though it may be by other ideas. In other words the effective sermon requires very clear thinking and concise expression.

The more axiomatic or self-evident a truth the more forceful it is. Doubt may attach to a process of reasoning but not to what we seem to know intuitively. A study of the teaching of Jesus will show his marvelous power of expressing profound spiritual truths or very broad generalizations in clear axiomatic form. This is but another way of saying that perfect clearness of expression carries with it immediate conviction of truth.

4. Repetition of a statement increases its suggestive power. Every one has had some experience of the truth of this statement. A college student told me only recently the following incident: Four or five fellows conspired to torment another fellow that had become a sort of pest. Seeing him pass down the street they arranged to meet him one at a time about every hundred yards or so and comment on how ill he looked and commiserate with him. By the time he reached the last man he was actually sick and almost past going. All teachers find it necessary to repeat a good deal. Jesus repeated himself over and over again. The preacher ought to come over the same theme many times but be careful to avoid becoming monotonous and tiresome. View the same thought from different standpoints, bring it out in new lights, unfold its implications. Jesus frequently compared truth spoken to seed sown. Nothing is more effective than for a truth to lodge in the mind and unfold itself; a living truth, growing and developing to fruitage. This is one of the most striking characteristics of the teaching of Jesus. His words do, indeed, like seed, germinate and grow in the minds into which they fall.

5. An emotional atmosphere adds to the impulsive nature of ideas. The function of emotion for life is a theme of great importance for preachers. Here I wish only to call attention to feeling or emotion as a motive to action. Feeling is the expression of the instinctive valuation of an experience. For this reason feeling is an immense force in life. Modern psychology has come to emphasize

feeling, especially the instinctive feelings, as of greater importance in life than intellect. Certainly feeling is the more potent force moving to action. To work up emotion artificially is contemptible; to stir the emotions for their own sake and allow them to dissipate without resulting action is criminal, but wholesome feeling is the necessary accompanying of vital ideas. Ideas with meaning for life will of necessity be attended by proportionate feeling. From this standpoint good preaching must have at least two qualifications: 1. Earnestness, and earnestness is but the feeling valuation of the importance of the theme, and 2. Attractiveness, and attractiveness is that that appeals to the feelings and affections. For it is this about the gospel, its high meaning for life, by which men are won and the world saved.

It is a great thing to preach: the work is great, the qualifications required are proportionately great. For no other work is required so fine a culture, such broad knowledge of life, such sincerity and earnestness of spirit.