

LESSON 9

THE ILLUSTRATION OF THE SERMON

The illustration is a literary device used to make a concept clear or impressive by giving an example or an instance. The illustration is not an end in itself, but rather is used as an aid in sermon explanation, argument, and application. It therefore serves an important function in preaching. Jesus used illustrations extensively in His preaching and teaching with great effectiveness.

The Purposes of the Illustration

The purposes of the illustration in preaching are many and varied. (1) The illustration is used first of all and primarily to clarify truth, that is, to make the message of the sermon clear to the hearers. Illustrations are used to enlighten a message by providing intellectual knowledge, throwing light or adding light to a Scriptural passage, a statement of truth or a new idea. (2) Furthermore, the illustration serves to gain and hold the attention of the audience. This is accomplished by enlivening the message or by making the sermon interesting. (3) In addition, the illustration often provides opportunities to rest the minds of the listeners in lengthy interpretations and explanations during the sermon. Or, it may provide for a change of pace in the delivery of the sermon or a means of transition to a new thought.

(4) The illustration is also used to persuade the audience in the explanation, argument, and application of the sermon. Illustrations help to make the truth impressive and convincing; they provide strength and force to argument; and they serve to apply the message in an appealing manner. (5) Moreover, the illustration is a means of providing repetition without appearing repetitious. Truth must often be repeated to be understood and accepted, and the use of illustrations provides the preacher with the opportunity to say the same thing in a different way. (6) The illustration also helps the hearers to remember the message. Often a person will recall an apt illustration in the days and months to follow, helping him to remember the truth and to apply it to his life.

A literary device used to make a concept clear or impressive by giving an example or an instance is called an _____.

(illustration)

LIST THE KEY WORD IN EACH OF THE SIX PURPOSES OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

- 1. c _____
- 2. a _____
- 3. r _____
- 4. p _____
- 5. r _____
- 6. r _____

(clarify, attention, rest, persuade, repetition, remember)

The Types of Illustrations

The sermon illustration varies from a brief expression to the lengthy story. First of all, the illustration might be a word or phrase if it serves as an example or calls clear attention to some concept. For instance, when Paul closed his address to the Jews in Jerusalem in defense of his actions, he told how the Lord sent him to the "Gentiles". That last word almost stirred the Jews to riot since it called attention to their hatred and animosity (Acts 22:21-23). Adjectives also serve as illustrations as the word "bloody" in such phrases as "bloody war" or "bloody crimes" (Ezek. 7:23). A figure of speech, especially the simile or metaphor, also serves as an illustration. In the prophecy of Malachi, two similes, identified by the use of "like" in the comparisons, are utilized to express judgement in Christ's coming to earth as follows: "for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap" (Mal. 3:2). Jesus frequently used the metaphor, which is a comparison without the use of "like" or "as", as in these expressions: "I am the bread of life" (John 6:48), and "I am the door" (John 10:9). The allegory, which is actually a metaphor, is used frequently as an illustration in which a series of characteristics or actions are compared with other characteristics or actions. Jesus used the allegory of the vine to describe the fruitful Christian life in union with Him (John 15:1-8). John Bunyan's whole book Pilgrim's Progress is an allegory of the Christian life. In it he also personified vices and virtues in such expressions as Mr. Worldly Wise, Giant Despair, Faithful, and Mr. Greatheart. The analogy is used also as an illustration in which a relation of likeness or resemblance in functions, attributes, or effects between two things is used to clarify and to illustrate, especially in argument. Jesus used a comparison such as this to illustrate God's providential care to men in the analogy of his care of the birds of the air and the lilies of the field (Matt. 6:25-30). The parable is a comparison in which a brief narrative is used to express a moral or spiritual truth. A very common and familiar human experience, usually fictitious but often true, is told with an application to the needs of the hearers. The prophets used them as the prophet Nathan's use of the parable of the poor man's lamb which he told to King David to convict him of sin (2 Sam. 12:1-7). Jesus used them frequently and effectively in His ministry. The Gospels are filled with His parables such as the parables of the Lost Sheep (Matt. 18:12-13), the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32), and the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:10-14).

The illustration might also be a Biblical event in which some passage of Scripture is used to clarify a statement or exemplify a truth. This could be a

IS THIS STATEMENT TRUE OR FALSE?

A word or phrase can be an illustration.

(true)

Which figures of speech serve especially well as illustrations? _____ and _____

(simile, metaphor)

In comparing one series of characteristics or actions with other characteristics or actions, a figure of speech which is used frequently as an illustration is the _____.

(allegory)

An analogy is used also to illustrate resemblance in functions, attributes or effects between two things, especially in _____.

(argument)

A comparison in which a brief narrative is used to express a moral or spiritual truth is a _____.

(parable)

Can a Biblical event serve as an illustration? _____

(yes)

historical event as the building of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1-9), a biographical incident as Abraham's offering of his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1-19), a proverb (Proverbs 15:1), a poem (Psalm 150), a teaching such as the Beatitudes (Matt. 5:3-12), or a prophecy as from the Book of Revelation (Rev. 20:11-15). The illustration could be a personal experience. The preacher's personal testimony of his salvation experience or his call to preach could be used effectively. The Book of Acts records two incidents in which the Apostle Paul gave his testimony regarding his conversion and call to preach (Acts 22:1-21; 26:1-23). Other personal experiences of the preacher and of people that he knows or that he has heard about might also be used to illustrate. Historical facts other than Biblical events and personal experiences might also serve effectively as illustrations. This might include events from history, especially church history, such as from the Reformation, the Great Awakening in America, or the Wesleyan Revival in England. Biographical information of outstanding men and women, especially noted Christians, serve well as illustrative material, including such people as Martin Luther, Isaac Newton, John Bunyan, John Wesley, Abraham Lincoln, C. H. Spurgeon, Jonathan Edwards, Florence Nightingale, Helen Keller, and Billy Graham. The illustration might also be a story, which is narrative of an incident or event. The story may be true or imaginary. This includes the anecdote, which is a brief narrative that is often amusing or humorous. The story is told to clarify or exemplify some truth.

The Sources of Illustrations

Many sources for sermon illustrations are readily available to the preacher. They either supply the illustration itself or the materials with which he can create his own illustrations. The Bible is a primary resource for sermon illustrations. It provides ample and fitting similes, metaphors, allegories, analogies, parables, historical events, and biographical incidents that can be utilized by the preacher to illustrate his sermons. In addition, Biblical illustrations help people to become more knowledgeable of the Bible. The Old Testament is filled with the experiences of men that can be used to illustrate New Testament passages. For instance, the Apostle Paul used the sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, as an allegory of the two covenants of law and grace (Gal. 4:19-31). Personal experiences of the preacher provide ample sermon illustrations, but should be used wisely and discreetly. Peter vindicated his ministry to the Gentiles by citing his vision of the great sheet with all types of animals and his experience with Cornelius (Acts 11:4-18). Paul referred to his salvation experience in his

Give an example of a personal experience which could be used as an illustration.

(the preacher's testimony of his salvation experience)

Events from history and biographical information known as _____ serve effectively as illustrations.

(historical facts)

The story used as an illustration may be _____ or _____.

(true, imaginary)

A primary resource for sermon illustrations is the _____.

(Bible)

The preacher should use his personal experiences _____ and _____.

(wisely, discreetly)

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defense of the Gospel (Acts 22:1-21; 26:1-23). The preacher's observations in daily life provide valuable resources for illustrations. This includes his personal observations of people, events, and nature, and the information he receives through radio and television. These experiences can provide comparisons for analogies, allegories, and parables or provide instances or narratives for other types of illustrations. Paul used the altar to the unknown God on Mars Hill as an introduction to his message to the men of Athens (Acts 17:22-31). Periodicals such as newspapers, popular magazines, religious periodicals, and scholarly journals contain numerous articles that can be utilized in providing examples and in creating illustrations. These are usually current and often more interesting and effective than other printed materials. However, books also contain an abundance of materials that can be used to illustrate sermons. This includes history, biography, travel, classic literature, fiction, science, and especially religious books, such as commentaries, theological treatises, devotional books, biographies of noted Christians, church histories, and inspirational books. Volumes containing collections of sermons and sermon illustrations are valuable resources, but care should be taken in their use. The preacher may be tempted to preach other men's sermons or to depend too much on other men's materials rather than creating his own.

The Use of the Illustration

The preacher should know how to use illustrations appropriately in the sermon. He should first decide how many illustrations he needs for the sermon. Generally, one good illustration each for the sermon introduction and conclusion is adequate and one appropriate illustration for each minor point of the sermon, using a variety of types. From two to four brief illustrations, such as similes, metaphors, or analogies, may serve in place of one long illustration if repetition is needed at some point. The preacher should choose the illustration carefully, making certain that it really illustrates the Scripture passage or idea that needs to be clarified or emphasized. He should be certain that he has illustrated the point adequately, but on the other hand, he should not over illustrate. He should think through carefully all the details of the illustration, either writing it out or going over the arrangement in his mind. He should be accurate in relating facts and avoid over elaboration which might call attention to the illustration rather than the point to be illustrated.

Valuable resources for illustrations are provided by the preacher's _____ in daily life.

(observations)

Illustrations can be found or created by reading current _____.

(periodicals)

An abundance of materials for sermon illustrations can be found in _____.

(books)

Some of the types of books which contain valuable materials for illustrations are:

(Compare your answers with the text.)

A general suggestion as to the number of illustrations used in a sermon is as follows:

_____ illustration in the introduction,

_____ illustration in the conclusion,

_____ illustration in each minor point,

using a variety of types.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The illustration other than the figure of speech is composed of four parts: the introduction, the body, the conclusion, and the application. The introduction is usually composed of one sentence or even of several transitional words, such as these: "Remember what happened to Lot's wife"; "The story I heard..."; "You may recall the newspaper report last year"; "For example...". The preacher should use variety in his introduction and avoid being apologetic for illustrating. He should refrain from talking about illustrating, but rather should proceed to illustrate. The main body of the illustration then follows and should include only the essential facts and without unnecessary details and sidelights which take away from the purpose of the illustration. The conclusion of the illustration is the climax of the story, the primary thought which illustrates the passage or idea to be clarified or exemplified. The application relates the story to the point that the preacher intends to get across to the listeners. Generally, a phrase or a brief sentence or two is sufficient, such as, "What will you do?"; "Do you understand your privilege and responsibility?"; "Take this to heart."; "Oh, that we had such faith!"; "Therefore..."; "That is the reason...". However, if the illustration is brief and very pointed, the application may not be stated at all.

The following illustration is an example of the way to construct and use a biblical incident as an analogy to illustrate a Scripture passage:

God proved that He loves us. Paul wrote, "God commendeth his love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). What does he mean by the statement, "Christ died for us"?

Consider this analogy. You may recall during the week of the Crucifixion that Pilate sought a way to release Jesus whom he knew was innocent of the charges against Him. A custom of the Roman governor during the Passover was to release a prisoner; therefore, he set before the people the innocent man, Jesus, and a guilty man, Barabbas, who was a thief and murderer, thinking they would surely choose the innocent. But the religious authorities mingled among the mob gathered at Jerusalem and influenced them to demand Barabbas. When Pilate asked them whom he should release, they cried "Barabbas!" When he asked what he should do with Jesus, they cried out to his amazement, "Crucify him! Crucify him!" And so reluctantly, he released Barabbas and crucified Jesus. Thus the innocent One, Jesus, died instead of the guilty one, Barabbas, who was set free.

An illustration contains _____ parts, which are: _____ no.

(four, introduction, body, conclusion, application)

The conclusion is the _____, the primary _____ which illustrates the passage or idea to be clarified.

(climax, thought)

Even so, Jesus, the innocent One, died in our place, the guilty ones, and we who deserve death because of sin go free if we accept God's provision of deliverance. This is how we know He loves us.

The first sentence of the second paragraph serves as the introduction to the illustration. The body of the illustration follows. The conclusion is reached as a climax in the last sentence of the second paragraph. The application of the illustration is made in the third paragraph.

The preacher may also use a brief illustration to clarify or exemplify a statement such as this personal experience used as a parable:

At the second coming of Christ to earth there will be a great "gathering together unto Him" (2 Thess. 2:1). This gathering together is like those family gatherings that many people have. I can remember years ago the family reunions we used to have. On a designated Sunday afternoon each year, all our relatives from around the countryside and from distant places would gather together for a dinner on the grounds of a park and for renewal of fellowship. What fun it was. When the Lord returns, all of us who are Christians and the many who have died in Christ will be gathered together unto Him for that last great and glorious family reunion.

The introduction to the parable is made by the word "like" and the body of the illustration follows. The conclusion is reached in the expression "would gather together for a dinner on the grounds of a park." The application is made in the last sentence in that Christians are "gathered together unto Him."

In his message, the preacher should deliver the illustration in keeping with the original experience, usually in a conversational tone of voice with some note of drama or suspense as the experience dictates. He should avoid "preaching" the illustration, that is, speaking in a loud voice with striking gestures, but rather should tell the story as it happened as much as possible.

<p><i>What should the preacher avoid especially in telling the illustration? " _____ "</i></p> <p><i>(preaching)</i></p>

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3):

1. What is an illustration? _____

2. What are six purposes of illustrations?

3. Name nine types of illustrations. _____

4. Read the Scripture reference for the nine types of illustrations given in the Study Guide. Then find another Scripture reference for each of the nine types. _____

5. What are the five sources of illustrations given in the Study Guide? _____

6. Name at least ten types of books where illustrations can be found. _____

7. How many illustrations are suggested for sermons according to the Study Guide?

8. Name the parts of an illustration. _____

9. What is the purpose of the conclusion of the illustration? _____

10. How should the preacher deliver the illustration? _____

11. Find or create an illustration to explain some Scripture passage. _____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3):

Read pages 68-79 of the textbook.

1. Give the needs for the use of illustration according to the textbook.
2. What are the types of illustrations mentioned in the textbook?
3. What are the advantages and disadvantages of personal illustrations?
4. What are the qualities of good illustrations?
5. What suggestions does the textbook give for the use of illustrations?

Advanced activity (Level 3):

1. Explain what you feel Bishop Boaz meant by his three-point theory of effective preaching? (Page 78 of the textbook.)
2. Choose one of the parables of Jesus and analyze it. Identify the four parts of the illustration if possible.
3. Explain why Jesus was so effective in his use of illustrations. Give several examples of his use of different types of illustrations.

Seminar Discussion

1. Discuss the purposes of the illustrations.
2. Discuss the effectiveness of various types of illustrations.
3. Let each student present a sermon illustration to the group.