

6: POSTURE, ACTION, GESTURE, ETC.

The subjects of this lecture are to be *Posture, Gesture, and Action in the Delivery of a Sermon*. I shall not attempt to draw any hard and fast line of division between the one and the other; for it would need a very highly discriminating mind to keep them separate; indeed, it could not be done at all, for they naturally merge into each other. As I have, after a fair trial, found it impossible to keep even 'posture' and 'gesture' in an absolutely unmingled state in my own mind, I have allowed them to run together; but I hope that no confusion will appear in the result.

The sermon itself is the main thing: its matter, its aim, and the spirit in which it is brought before the people, the sacred anointing upon the preacher, and the divine power applying the truth to the hearer: these are infinitely more important than any details of manner. Posture and action are comparatively small and inconsiderable matters; but still even the sandal in the statue of Minerva should be correctly carved, and in the service of God even the smallest things should be regarded with holy care. Life is made up of little incidents, and success in it often depends upon attention to minor details. Small flies make the apothecary's ointment to stink, and little foxes spoil the vines, and therefore small flies and little foxes should be kept out of our ministry. Doubtless, faults in even so secondary a matter as posture have prejudiced men's minds, and so injured the success of what would otherwise have been most acceptable ministries. A man of more than average abilities may, by ridiculous action, be thrown into the rear rank and kept there. This is a great pity, even if there were only one such case, but it is to be feared that many are injured by the same cause. Little oddities and absurdities of mode and gesture which wise men would endeavour not to notice are not overlooked by the general public; in fact, the majority of hear-

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ers fix their eyes mainly upon those very things, while those who come to scoff observe nothing else. Persons are either disgusted or diverted by the oddities of certain preachers, or else they want an excuse for inattention, and jump at this convenient one. There can be no reason why we should help men to resist our own endeavours for their good. No minister would willingly cultivate a habit which would blunt his arrows, or drift them aside from the mark; and, therefore, since these minor matters of movement, posture, and gesture may have that effect, you will give them your immediate attention.

We very readily admit that action in preaching is an affair of minor consequence; for some who have succeeded in the highest sense have been exceedingly faulty from the rhetorician's point of view. At the present moment there is in Boston, U.S.A., a preacher of the very highest order of power, of whom a friendly critic writes: 'In the opening sentences one or the other of his arms shakes at his side in a helpless fashion, as if it were made of caudal vertebrae loosely jointed. He soon exhibits a most engaging awkwardness, waddling about in a way to suggest that each leg is shorter than the other, and shaking his head and shoulders in ungainly emphasis. He raises one eyebrow in a quite impossible fashion. No one else can squint so.' This is an instance of mind overcoming matter, and the excellence of the teaching condoning defects in utterance; but it would be better if no such drawbacks existed. Are not apples of gold all the more attractive for being placed in baskets of silver? Why should powerful teaching be associated with waddling and squinting? Still it is evident that proper action is, to say the least, not essential to success. Homer would appear to have considered the entire absence of gesture to be no detriment to eminent power in speech, for he pictures one of his greatest heroes as entirely abjuring it, though not without some sense of censure from his audience.

But when Ulysses rose, in thought profound,
His modest eyes he fixed upon the ground;
As one unskilled or dumb, he seemed to stand,
Nor rais'd his head, nor stretched his sceptred hand.
But when he speaks, what elocution flows!
Soft as the fleeces of descending snows,