

Dr. David A. deSilva, Hebrews, Session 13, The Sermon “to the Hebrews” and the Art of Preaching

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In this and the following presentation, we will focus on preaching through Hebrews at two levels. First, the homiletical strategies are modeled by this author. And second, the core message of Hebrews, the proclamation of which remains perennially essential to nurturing faithful response.

The first focus is because the author of Hebrews was a master preacher, and we are accustomed to looking at the sermons of master preachers in an effort to discern their strategies and perhaps think about imitating those strategies when appropriate in an effort to improve our own preaching. The second focus is because the word proclaimed by Hebrews merits being proclaimed more often and more broadly to congregations in our age. So first, we focus on learning from the preacher's example.

The first thing he teaches us in the opening two chapters of his sermon is to always give them Jesus. The goal of all rhetoric, including sermon rhetoric or homiletics, is to move an audience from where they are to where the speaker wants them. That distance might not be very far.

In fact, the speaker may simply want to confirm that the audience is staying where they are. But rhetoric is always concerned about that distance and bringing the audience along to that end point. The art of rhetoric lies in the how.

How do we move an audience from being preoccupied with what concerns them to being preoccupied with what we think ought to concern them? How do we move an audience from doing what they might otherwise think to be in their best interest to doing what we believe, on the basis of scripture, will be in their best interest? As we seek to bridge this distance through speech, where we start can be vitally important. Given the situation of the audience of the preacher of Hebrews, I am amazed at how many places this preacher might have started his sermon but did not. He could have started with the addressee's past and current experiences.

I know a lot of you have suffered a great deal and given up a lot over the past few years. He could have started by upbraiding the congregation for the problems that have developed. I've heard some of you people have stopped coming to church, and the rest of you aren't doing a thing about it.

He could have started with a biblical story, like that of the wilderness generation. Now, to appreciate this story, we need to understand a few things about the Hebrews' history. But he didn't start in any of those places.

Instead, he starts with a forceful declaration about how God has spoken in a son, that this declaration was unlike the partial and piecemeal words God used to speak through the prophets, and that this speaker was unlike those faithful, but by comparison quite ordinary, servants of God. What's really important in recent history here, folks? It's not that you're having a tough time because your neighbors are unhappy with you and putting pressure on you. It's that God, the almighty ruler of the cosmos, has spoken a definitive word about deliverance through God's son, God's partner in creation, God's agent in sustaining the cosmic order, a being who bears the very imprint and image of God, who took on flesh for a brief span in order to accomplish something vitally important at great personal cost and then returned to the divine realm to take his seat at the right hand of the majesty in heaven.

Now, that's an incredible event in recent history worthy of our full attention. And our author doesn't stop there. He spends a full 10 verses getting the hearers to imagine the greatness of the Christ that they follow once again.

Pulling together scriptures that help them visualize Christ's place in God's realm, help them see the angels worshipping around him, and help them grasp the unchangeable firmness and reliability of the son to whom they have committed themselves. And then, after suggesting that they better give this son and his message their complete and undivided attention and investment in response, he goes on yet more to talk about what this son has done for them, what he is standing ready at hand to offer them now, and where he is taking them through all this. And with that, this preacher has accomplished some very important things rhetorically.

Even in the midst of their challenges and the things going wrong in their situation, he has directed their attention back to Jesus, to God's activity and mission in the world, speaking in this son. He has offered them a choice at the moment without having to talk about the options. Keep focusing on the problems and perhaps find a compromise solution that will blunt your witness, stall your discipleship, hobble your walk, or focus on what God is about in your congregation's story in the midst of the human story.

Give this your full attention. Give it its due weight as you think about what to do next. And find your situation transformed by the opportunities you have to respond to God and advance God's purposes in yourself, your congregation, and your witness.

And, of course, the preacher has done more besides. The congregation's situation impresses the experience of loss, anxiety, and insecurity upon the believers' minds, and it naturally predisposes them to strategize toward alleviating those problems.

The situation of God's announcement of deliverance through the son, however, impresses upon their minds the higher priority of holding fast to that lifeline.

The congregation's situation makes them feel powerless and despised, provoking questions about the wisdom of the path they have chosen when they begin to follow Christ. The situation of Jesus' death on their behalf and ascension to God's right hand to secure God's favor for them in time of need reminds them of the freedom Christ has given them, the destiny of honor that awaits them, the availability of help now in the midst of their temporary distresses. By showing them Jesus, the preacher has shown them that the end of their story will be honor and glory as they keep following the Lord who first walked through the distresses they now suffer before entering himself into honor forever.

In so doing, the preacher has taken their eyes off their own situation just long enough to give them the perspective they would need to return to it and persevere through it. For this author, the song, Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus, would not signal a sentimental escapist strategy. As they see Jesus in these opening chapters of Hebrews, they see the exalted Lord whose honor they will share and whose aid they will enjoy all along the way, a potent remedy for the feelings of shame and powerlessness their neighbors seek to impose upon them, and by means of which they hope to undermine the believers' commitment to this way of life and this gospel that holds up their own way of life to critical scrutiny.

Seeing Jesus more fully and one's pressing circumstances a bit more dimly for a while empowers a return to those circumstances committed to overcoming rather than being overcome. And so, the first homiletical strategy that this preacher might bequeath to us would be to call us to reflect on the question, what do our congregations need to see of the Lord whom we serve in order to get perspective on their current challenges, to respond to the opportunities and problems of their situation with faithfulness, and perhaps even with transformative power and investment? The second lesson that this preacher would give us is to shape the moment with Scripture. This takes us into his third and fourth chapters in his reflection on the story of the wilderness generation in Exodus through Numbers.

The way we frame the moment in which the congregation finds itself and the way we define its challenges and opportunities exercises significant pressure on how they will see their own condition and situation in that moment. In this second major block of Hebrews, the preacher looks to a carefully selected scriptural precedent as a resource for this task of overlaying the mundane concerns that dissipate the congregation's energies and drives toward faithful discipleship with a frame that instead refocuses and gather those energies and drives back toward wholehearted investment in the Christian journey. The way he approaches it is really clever.

The underlying story that provides this canvas that he will stretch out as the backdrop for his own congregation's situation comes from Numbers chapter 14. The author of Psalm 95, however, had already made a homiletical application of that story, and it is this application that our preacher chooses as his point of entry. Today, if you hear God's voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.

By using that familiar warning in Psalm 95 and by using Numbers 14 as an interpretative overlay for the congregation's situation, the preacher again raises the question for the hearers and helps guide them to a strategic answer. What is the real threat to us in this moment? The threat is not that things will never get better for us as long as we keep being seen hanging out with other Christians or as long as we don't engage in those practices that everyone else does to get ahead. The real threat is that our hearts will become hardened to the voice of God calling us forward.

We will no longer believe his promises and his goodwill and ability to bring us into the experience of those promises. We will find ourselves stricken with spiritual sclerosis, with wicked hearts of distrust that turn away from the living God, as the preacher puts it. We have reviewed this story in the course of our exposition of Hebrews.

The ancient Hebrews had been rescued from slavery in Egypt, delivered miraculously at the Red Sea, provided with food and water during their journey through the desert, and now stood on the threshold of entering the promised land. The command from God was to move forward and take the land. The Hebrews sent 12 spies into Canaan to reconnoiter.

Ten reported that the inhabitants were too strong and their cities too well fortified. Joshua and Caleb spoke of the goodness of the land and urged their peers to move forward in confident trust. The Hebrews believed the majority report, blaming God for bringing them out of Egypt to die in the desert.

Rather than move forward, they planned to elect a new leader who would take them back to Egypt. In response to their rebellion, God promises that they will all indeed die in the desert but that Joshua and Caleb will lead their children into the promised land. The wilderness generation had serious heart problems.

They showed the sickness of their hearts by distrusting the goodness and power of God, accusing God of working insidiously to bring them harm rather than the great blessings God had promised. They had been beguiled by the power of sin. Fearing human opposition kept them from moving forward.

And the desire for tangible comforts, like the boiled meats of Egypt, even if the cost was slavery, made them long to go back. Their distrust alienated them from God as their hearts turned away from God and the promised goal and back toward lesser

goods offered by a life of slavery. In chapter 4, verses 1 to 13, and again in chapter 10, verses 19 to 25, the preacher will make this example strike home for the original hearers.

Like the wilderness generation, they, too, have enjoyed God's presence and provision in abundance as they wandered away from the comfort and embrace of the life they knew toward their divinely appointed destiny. They, too, stood at a threshold. They had received the promise of entry into a homeland.

This time, however, the promise of entry into the eternal realm, following Jesus as their forerunner who offered his life in a perfect act of obedience to fit them to cross this threshold. As they moved across that threshold, they would encounter their neighbor's continued hostility. But they would also have the continued help of God to persevere.

Would sin beguile them into thinking that what they had lost was too great a price to keep paying for God's promises, if these promises would ever materialize at all? Would their hearts stray from treasuring their relationship with God and the help of Jesus, turning to long for the acceptance of their neighbors and the enjoyment of this world's goods and pleasures, being hardened by a lack of trust and a desire for short-term compensation? Some hearts have been hardened, regarding more the opinion and hostility of society than of the God who promised them an unshakable kingdom, wavering in their commitment at the very time when they were closer than ever to attaining what had been promised them. Some of their company have already begun the journey back toward Egypt. These people have ceased to meet with their fellow Christians, shrinking back from those places and those associations that their unbelieving neighbors deemed unacceptable.

The preacher has exercised the utmost care in his selection of which scriptural episode to hold up as analogous to the situation in which his congregation finds themselves. A poor choice here would have undermined his sermon entirely. What would have been the effect, for example, of depicting the hearers not at a threshold but at a starting gate? The mental frame of the threshold underscores the starkness of the choices.

Choose what God promises and move forward, willing to pay the cost, or stop short, turn around, and return to the life from which God was calling you, to the bosom of those whose perspective had never been quickened by faith in the first place. The mental frame reinforces the issue that the preacher wants the congregation to see as the principal issue for them to address. Will they shrink back or exhibit trust in God? And it does so in such a way as makes perseverance not only feasible but, in fact, the only sensible choice.

The difficult part of the journey is behind them, and they stand on the edge of their promised homeland. They've already invested so much to get to this point. Surely, it makes sense to invest just a little more and thus arrive at the promised reward.

The preacher makes that explicit in chapter 10, verse 35. It might be argued that the preacher engaged in a bit of manipulation here since it is not at all clear in what sense the congregation was truly at such a threshold. Christ did not return within the year to usher them into the heavenly holy of holies.

They did not, in all probability, fall victim to a persecution that ferried them across that threshold in an untimely way. They had to persevere for years. Even decades more, without seeing the heavenly homeland, the land of promise.

I believe, however, that the preacher applied this story and this mental frame of standing at a threshold in good faith. That he perceived them to be standing, indeed, at a threshold in their own commitment to God and to one another. Indeed, each day, in the midst of temptations and pressures to give up, presented them with a new threshold decision.

Will we keep crossing over into God's future in faith? Or will we look back longingly to the life and company we have left behind? Again, the mental frame of the threshold and the obvious choices that present themselves at a threshold reframe a congregation's view of their situation and force the question upon them. What do you really stand for? What are you really about? Are you for God and God's promises? Or are you for the comforts, security, and affirmation that come from the world and its promises? As soon as a person answers that question and takes a step in either direction, he or she has surely crossed a threshold in his or her spiritual walk. And so the second strategy that this preacher would offer to us would be to look long and hard at where our congregation finds itself, trying to discern the view from heaven on this question, and then to use stories and images from the sacred tradition of Scripture strategically to illumine the real challenge in the moment in terms of the mission of God in this world and in the midst of the congregation, to lead the congregation to see the response that manifests trust in God's word and faithfulness toward God as the most reasonable, advantageous path to pursue.

The third strategy that the author presents to us is to hold our congregation accountable. We encounter this especially in Hebrews chapter 5, verse 11, through chapter 6:20. This is often called a digression in his argument, but it's really sort of a wake-up call in the middle of his sermon.

In this third segment, this third move, the preacher takes a break from the forward movement of his sermon to call his congregation to account, to greater attentiveness, and to greater investment of themselves. He lets them know quite

boldly that he expects great things of them, born of spiritual maturity. He also reminds them of their accountability to God for God's gifts.

In chapter 5, verses 11 to 14, we hear a preacher who was not reticent to challenge his congregation to live up to that measure of Christian instruction that they had received. In the preacher's estimation, many more of them ought to have been actively engaged in Christian leadership within the congregation, shoring up the faith and the hope of the less mature and the wavering, going after the double-minded, like shepherds looking for the sheep that is edging away from the flock, rather than minding their own business-like dumb sheep themselves. The Apostle Paul likewise challenged his readers in Philippi.

Even if we are not complete or mature, let us at least fall in line with what we have attained. Many believers could profit from being pressed on this point. Do they live by what they confess with their lips or know in their heads to be the truth of our existence in this temporary world? Do they live up to the vows they made at their baptism or confirmation? Do we live up to the promises we make at the baptism of others or reception of others into our congregation, namely to nurture and encourage them in the faith that they have embraced or will be moved to embrace if they are baptized as infants and raised in a truly supportive and nurturing congregation? What would happen to the spiritual climate in our churches if our congregations lived out these vows? If we held out the consistent expectation that these vows would be lived out, that we really expected our people to mean them and to find their self-respect in the congregation insofar as they invest themselves in being true to these vows? Do we continue to urge our congregations on to maturity and discipleship, to be born along to perfection or to maturity as the preacher of Hebrews does? Do we help them remain ever aware that baptism, conversion, confirmation, or joining a church is but the larval stage of a great ongoing process of metamorphosis, impelling them forward more and more toward Christlikeness and calling them to take greater responsibility to assist one another on that journey? Arguably, we only really know that which we are willing to live out, and we only truly confess something to be true when we take measures to act and chart our course by that truth.

Hebrews 5:11 to 14 may challenge us precisely on this point, motivating those of us who have spent years or even decades in the faith to accept our status and responsibility as teachers, that is, as those who take an active role in modeling the Christian way of life, living up to what we know, and in encouraging, exhorting, challenging others to pursue that road more intently and wholeheartedly. The preacher expects great things from his congregation, born of spiritual maturity. He also holds them accountable for the grace they have received from God.

We have already explored this topic at length in an earlier session. So here, suffice it to say that the preacher also models the expectation of costly gratitude for the costly

grace we have been given. In so doing, he increases his hearers' awareness of and appreciation for the gifts they have received and the privileges and favors they currently enjoy.

Their experience of God's grace becomes proportionately more real in their own experience and in their own consciousness as their investment in making and maintaining a grateful response increases. Awareness of these gifts and privileges becomes a well of gratitude, springing up into renewing rivers of witness, Christian commitment, and acts of service and outreach. So the third homiletical strategy that our preacher commends to us is this.

Let the congregation know that you expect great things of them, born of spiritual maturity. Hold them accountable to God for the grace that they have received from God. The fourth homiletical strategy that this preacher models is simple.

Make it meaty. This preacher is no slouch. He devotes four full chapters to sharing his answer to a difficult theological question.

How can we have assurance that Jesus' death really brought about a change in our relationship to God, particularly when the sacred scriptures say nothing about a human sacrifice being acceptable to God? Or what makes a cross outside the camp a more fitting altar for a better day of atonement than the altar in Jerusalem? This preacher doesn't just ask tough questions and then hem and haw around them. He has taken the time to really dig into and understand the sacred texts and the ancient rituals, to recognize and deal with the difficulties, and to formulate an answer that provides the foundation for reasonable assurance about the issue and, therefore, the foundation for continued investment in the way of life built up around this theology of Jesus. The preacher who created *Hebrews* challenges other pastors to invest time and energy in the ministry of the Word into their work as the primary theologians, ethicists, and biblical interpreters in the Church, the spokespersons for the sacred tradition.

There are 100 expectations on pastors every week. There are 100 excuses for not putting more time into reading, reflection, and thinking theologically about the difficult questions facing people in your particular setting or across our shared settings. There's probably not a lot of affirmation coming from staff parish relations committees or from the readers of annual reports if some of the administrative business slides because you're taking the ministry of the Word too seriously and trying to help the parishioners put together the pieces of the sacred tradition with the pieces of their fragmented lives in this world in a truly coherent, responsible, even profound way.

And yet, this master preacher challenges us that this is, in fact, our job as preachers, an indispensable part of our job, an aspect of our charge to be safeguarded at all

costs from the onslaught of the busy pastor syndrome. His fourth piece of counsel for homiletical excellence would be this. Don't let yourselves off the hook for digging into the difficult and challenging questions, questions having to do with the coherence and the viability of the faith that we proclaim, as well as questions having to do with living out a life and discerning responses that are consonant with that faith.

Don't shy away from the rigorous work of mining scripture and the heritage of the Christian Church for the answers that provide the assurance that our hope is real. Don't shy away from the rigorous work that leads to the assurance that God is and does, as our faith proclaims God to be and to do, and that the responses we are urging are indeed the responses God is seeking. This preacher understood better than most staff parish relations committee members that a depth of theological understanding as the foundation for radical, persistent discernment in discipleship and mission is absolutely essential.

But the more we attend to this foundation in our own churches, and the more those committee members see its fruits in the lives of the Church members and in their own lives, the more, perhaps, we will win them over. And the final lesson that this preacher would bestow on us who preach is to release the congregation's passion for excellence. This comes out mostly in chapters 11, 12, and 13 of his sermon.

This preacher encourages excellence. He knows that people have a passion for excellence or at least can be moved to such a passion. He resonates with those who want to attain honor and self-respect and who want to achieve great things in their lives.

He releases the congregation's passion for excellence rather than trying to shut it down because, in some cases, that passion might be misdirected towards success according to the models held up within the non-Christian society. Instead, this preacher encourages the discouraged and the disgraced to awaken even more fully to their ambitions but to do so in a Godward direction and with a view to the applause of heaven. Several decades ago, there was a popular show called *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*.

My own grandparents watched it faithfully, and I would often watch it with them. We would tour palatial mansions, peer into the private lives of celebrated people, and hear about what the narrator praised as the good life. Such people really seemed to have made something of their lives.

I grew up admiring them and wanted to emulate them and enjoy the same success. But the crucified Savior, into whose likeness Christians should hope to grow, would never have been featured on that primetime show. To be great in the kingdom of

God and to be free to serve God, one must relinquish the values represented on such a show.

And as we've seen, the preacher tackles that problem head-on throughout the sermon, which we call the letter to the Hebrews. At the same time, the preacher invites his congregation to tune into another show, the Lifestyles of the Rich Toward God. Hebrews 11, with its parade of high achievers throughout sacred history, preceded by the example of the congregation itself in their former passion and perfected in chapter 12 by the example of Jesus, which provides a kind of hope and a kind of season finale for such a show.

These people made a name for themselves not by achieving visible success or amassing fortunes, or climbing ladders of worldly power but by following wherever God led, fearlessly pursuing the greater vision that God implanted in their souls, even if this meant relinquishing all claims to status and place in this world. The choices made by such people, Abraham, Moses, the martyrs and the marginalized, and Jesus himself, teach us that even the disgrace that comes upon us as we follow Jesus is of greater worth than honor from those who are alienated from God. There is no room for a prosperity gospel in this preacher's theology, for prosperity comes too often from accommodation to the ethics and the values of this world, nor is there glorification of suffering for its own sake.

Greatness comes solely from remaining loyal to God and following the path that maintains that relationship, whether it's to be to victory and remarkable achievements, which even the unbeliever cannot help but praise, or to a life far from the limelight of society, even to deprivation, contempt, and ridicule. Examples of people who have lived by faith, who have turned aside from the trivial pursuits of temporary prizes to the pursuit of the peaceful fruit of righteousness, could be multiplied endlessly and should be multiplied. If the author of Hebrews found it helpful to surround his congregation with this crowd of spectators, we too could benefit from surrounding ourselves and our fellow believers with an ever-burgeoning cloud of those whose faith testifies to the reality of our shared goal and whose life choices can rouse our ambition in holy directions.

Such an endeavor is all the more necessary because those other voices around us, be they the voices of the media or of easily impressed acquaintances, seek to flood the stands around us with examples of another sort, namely those who are success stories as our society evaluates success. The author of Hebrews reveals how important it is to form a godly image of heroism. For those whom we admire or even envy, we desire to emulate.

We cannot help but feel some tug to internalize the values and the ambitions that brought success and glory to the hero. So choosing those heroes well is crucial to running the right race. Do we admire those who make \$20 million for a single film?

Or do we admire those who minister in virtual anonymity, mending lives or mentoring children in the inner cities? Are we impressed by the titans of Silicon Valley? Or are we impressed by entrepreneurs who serve the poor, the sick, and the unbeautiful? Do we follow with interest, even obsession, the careers of professional athletes or the pacings of those who are imprisoned because they have testified to faith in Jesus Christ? It would, therefore, be useful for us to surround ourselves with examples of faith rather than examples of self-made people, to turn away from the lifestyles of the rich and famous and look rather to the lifestyles of the rich toward God.

The history of the Christian Church is full of stunning examples of faith. But we don't even need to reach beyond our present generation to discover those whose fight for the faith should rekindle our own passion for God. A great cloud of witnesses is to be found in the survivors and the martyrs from behind the Iron Curtain, or in Southeast Asia, or in northern India.

The preacher might urge us, by his own example, to tell their stories, to keep before the eyes of our congregation visions of greatness in the eyes of God so that the Holy Spirit can stir up holy ambitions. The preacher goes on in his sermon to use several images for life and its challenges that orient the hearers toward those challenges in a way that promotes wholehearted and diligent engagement, and thereby promotes victory over those challenges. Life, for example, is a great contest in which we are called to compete and win.

It is a contest that many have run successfully before, and they now watch our own race or our own wrestling match from the heavenly stands into which they have passed after their own victory. Life is a contest that offers eternal prizes for those who persevere to the end, who invest themselves fully in discipleship, witness, and service, and who run well. Life is also a formative experience in which God shapes our character and nurtures particular virtues, exercising our commitment to God and refining our ambitions so that our hearts are set fully on God and God's promises, all with a view to equipping us with nobility and fitting us for a glorious destiny.

In using this example of training, the author of Hebrews turns society's very attempts to shame the congregation into God's attempts to shape them, with the result that the believers' ambitions can be set on enduring, engaging, and persevering through their neighbors' attempts to dissuade them from discipleship, turning society's goals for those attempts on their heads. The Christian life is an exciting ride. It is like being on the field in a climactic game before a cheering crowd.

It is like a training exercise for the business of eternity. It is a path to greater and more lasting fame and success than anything we could have been excited about in our secular preparation and career. The preacher of Hebrews challenges us in our own preaching to convey something of this excitement, to whip up our

congregation's ambitions and thirst for greatness, to send them out, flooding back into their lives to compete in the noble contest for holiness, seeking the victor's crown from the hands of God himself.