

Amos 8. 10

Take heed how ye hear.

A S E R M O N

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"Take heed therefore how ye hear."—LUKE VIII, 18.

The sceptic Bolingbroke—who had no great respect for the clergy of his day—remarked, that to his mind the strongest proof of the truth of the Christian religion was, that in spite of such preaching as was ordinarily heard from its ministers it still survived. This remark, intended as mere sarcasm, has in it far more of truth than was apprehended by the witty statesman who uttered it. The treasure of the Gospel has indeed been put, as the Apostle expresses it, "in earthen vessels, that the excellency of the power"—that strange power which even its enemies are constrained to acknowledge it possesses—"may be of God and not of us." "By the foolishness of preaching," even in the sense of poor preaching, it often "pleases God to save them that believe." Whilst, however, God may and often does bless to the salvation of souls the feeblest efforts of the feeblest of His servants, it is doubtless true that the comparatively limited success of the

Christian religion, now after eighteen hundred years of Gospel preaching, is, humanly speaking, largely due to the lack of ability and lack of fidelity of the heralds of salvation. At the same time, whilst it is undeniable that poor preaching is an evil far too common, there is another kindred evil no less common, to which the tardy progress of Christ's kingdom is in larger measure due—I mean, *poor hearing*.

It is to this evil that with marked significance our attention is directed by the exhortation, or rather the solemn warning, with which the Saviour closes his interpretation of the parable of the sower, “*take heed therefore how ye hear.*” He seems to have anticipated the reception which is ordinarily given to the Gospel message.

There are many who appear in the house of God, sabbath after sabbath, who act as if they thought that their whole duty with respect to this ordinance was fulfilled by the mere fact of their presence, or at least by respectful decorum during the exercises of worship; who treat the services of the sanctuary as if they were nothing more than a mere ceremony to be decently performed, a ritual service to be gravely gone through with; who seem

to regard Divine truth as something which it may be their duty to hear but in respect to which, when heard, all duty ceases.

Of these hearers but not heeders of the Gospel there are two classes that deserve special mention—they who sit within the sound of the preacher's voice and yet may be said not to hear at all, and they who hear indeed but hear amiss.

The former class are the *listless hearers*—if hearers they may by courtesy be called. Brought to the house of God by constraint, or custom, or to gratify pious friends, or to see and be seen, or possibly from some vague sense of duty, yet when here they sit with listless unconcern whilst “the glorious Gospel of the blessed God” is proclaimed in their hearing. Their attention is fixed on anything rather than the truths proclaimed from the pulpit. Bodily present in the sanctuary, they are virtually absent—their minds wandering like “the fool's eyes” of the proverb “to the ends of the earth”—their imagination roving over their secular pursuits, their pleasures, it may be their very sins. So far as they are concerned the preacher might as well be speaking in an unknown tongue. As his eye falls on one and another of these listless hearers, he feels not

unfrequently as the prophet must have felt in the valley of vision, when the word of the Lord came unto him saying, "Prophesy to the dry bones." The attempt to make on them any impression is as if one should attempt to write upon glass. These are the "wayside" hearers of the parable. The seeds of truth, so far as they reach their minds at all, lie for a little time on the hard, dry, barren surface, and the devil snatches them away. They go from the sanctuary without profit—would that I could say, without sin—they leave at the Church door all that they have heard, and ere an hour has passed every impression of the service has faded from their memory and become to them like the visions of a forgotten dream.

The other, and in such a community as this by far the larger class of those who hear but heed not, are they who listen indeed—it may be with close attention and even interest—and yet apparently without any appreciation of the fact that the truth proclaimed is practical, and is addressed to themselves personally, that it concerns their most precious interests, and will be profitable only so far as they "receive it with faith and love, laying it up in their hearts and practicing it in their lives." Their

interest is mainly if not wholly intellectual. They listen to a sermon with the same kind of interest as that with which they would listen to a platform lecture or a literary oration. They go to the sanctuary not to be spiritually edified but to be entertained—hungering and thirsting it may be, but not for the bread of life and the water of life. Like the Athenians of Paul's day, they are desirous to "hear some new thing," or at least old things presented in some new way. And hence it is that so many Gospel hearers at the present day have what the Apostle calls "itching ears," that are not satisfied with preaching that does not abound with sensational anecdote, and flowers of rhetoric, and flights of the imagination, and flashes of wit, and bursts of eloquence. Epicures in their religious tastes, they have no relish for spiritual food that is not highly spiced, and that too with the very thing which the Apostle of set purpose refrained from using, "the enticing words of man's wisdom."

With this mis-appreciation of the great end for which preaching was instituted, and estimating it by this false standard, it is not strange that their interest in it either terminates with the service, or expends itself in subsequent criticism of the sermon, com-

mending what they esteem its merits, condemning what they deem its defects, discussing its logic, and its rhetoric, and the manner of its delivery, and comparing other preachers with him who afforded them their last religious entertainment. Many habitually do this, and only this, without a thought of giving heed to the truths proclaimed; and do this, not only without self-reproach but rather with complacency that they are taking an interest in religious things, and that in respect to preaching they are "doing God service," and all the service that is therein required.

And is this all our duty in regard to God's appointed means for our salvation—to imitate the folly of a patient, diseased nigh unto death, who when the physician announces to him the only remedy for his case, either refuses to hear, or hears only to criticize the manner of the announcement? Is this all our duty, to imitate the folly of prisoners under grievous bondage, to whom a messenger of authority comes and opening their prison doors proclaims to them a pardon, and they begin to talk to one another about the herald's voice, and style, and emphasis, and gestures, and perhaps find fault that he read to them their pardon when he might have

committed it to memory and recited it, or peradventure complain that some other messenger had not been sent whose manner would have been more interesting and impressive, who would have entertained them with a more thrilling description of their wretchedness, or would have depicted more vividly the blessedness of that freedom to which they were invited—and then turn themselves over in their chains and give no further heed to the message of pardon?

The Gospel of salvation deserves other treatment at our hands than this. We come to the house of God to take part in no mere outward form and empty ceremony. The service we here engage in—if it be not wholly meaningless—is one of the most precious privileges and solemn duties of our earthly existence, and involves in it the gravest responsibility. We can not with impunity, slight the summons of the context, “If any man have ears to hear let him hear;” nor can we without sin despise the Saviour’s admonition, “*Take heed how ye hear.*”

Let us consider briefly some of the reasons why we should give heed—in the language of the Apostle to the Hebrews, should “*give the more earnest heed*”—to the Gospel message.

We should do so, in the first place, *because of its Author*. It is a message from God—a communication from heaven to men—not indeed so immediate, but as direct as when at Sinai the assembled host heard Jehovah's voice proclaiming, "Thou shalt have no other Gods before me." If preaching were but the expression of the thoughts and feelings of the occupant of the pulpit, neglect and criticism might be excused—yea, the doors of the sanctuary might well be closed. But such is not the preacher's office. He comes to men on no private errand, or to gain any merely personal ends. His warrant is the voice of God proclaiming, "I have set thee a watchman unto the house of Israel, therefore thou shall hear the word at my mouth and warn men from me." His authority is the Lord's command "Go, preach my Gospel." His commission is sealed with the seal of heaven's court, and bears this endorsement by the Saviour of the world, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that rejecteth you rejecteth me." He comes to men as "the ambassador of Christ"—yea, "as though God did beseech you by us we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God." When Gospel truth is preached it is God that speaks—man is but the instrument.

Nor should we fail in this connection to observe the special sense in which the truth we preach bears the stamp of divinity upon it. "At sundry times and in divers manners God spake in times past unto the fathers by the prophets." He "hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son." The law was given by Moses; the gracious truth we preach came by Jesus Christ. "Therefore," argues an inspired Apostle, "we should give the more earnest heed" to the gospel message. "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great salvation, which began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard Him?"

But further, we should "take heed how we hear" the Gospel, not only because it is a message *from* God as its Author, but *because it is a revelation of God as its subject.*

What higher theme can occupy the mind of man or angel than Jehovah's adorable character and attributes and works. "This is eternal life"—the very life of an immortal spirit—"to know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou hast sent."

And what revelation has Jehovah ever made of himself comparable to that which is made in the Gospel of His Son. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament sheweth forth His handiwork." "The invisible things of God are clearly seen in the things which He has made, even His eternal power and Godhead." Wherever we turn our eyes, on field or flood, rock, hill or dale, tree, plant or flower, the heavens, the earth, ourselves,—without, within, above, beneath, around—in atom or in world, in insect or archangel—we behold a manifestation of God's power and wisdom. And yet, before "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God as it shines in the face of Jesus Christ" all other revelations that He has made of Himself to men, pale as the light of a taper pales when the sun rises in its strength. Here we behold a display of Divine *power*, greater than that manifested when out of nothing the universe was spoken into being. Here we behold a display of Divine *wisdom*, not only surpassing all other revelations ever made to us, but the crowning act of a grand scheme devised by the All-wise and executed by the Almighty "to the intent," as declared by the Spirit of inspiration, "that unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places

might be known the manifold wisdom of God." Here we behold the *justice* of God inflexible, and His *truth* immutable, though tested by the strength of the infinite affection of God the Father for God the Son. Here we behold the elsewhere unseen attribute of *mercy*—the mercy of God for the ungodly; yea, more than mercy—*grace*, "riches of *grace* unsearchable;" yea, more than grace—the *love* of God for sinners—*redeeming love*, a precious mystery which we cannot comprehend, we can only believe, rejoice in and adore. The angels, who excel in knowledge as they "excel in strength," who behold with unveiled vision the light to mortals inaccessible, turn from all that is revealed of God in heaven, to gaze with admiring wonder and a new delight on the manifestation of the Divine attributes here displayed, wherein they are permitted to behold the development and anticipate the consummation of one, and probably one of the most glorious, of the eternal purposes of Him who is "infinite in counsel and almighty in working." In the Gospel is presented to us that which is adequate to minister in overflowing measure to the gratification of the highest faculties of our spiritual nature—those of knowledge, of love, and of holiness—faculties, in the

right exercise of which, we may share the delights of angels,—yea, may in our measure have an experience of that joy in which Jehovah himself rejoices. And shall we be engrossed with the beggarly things of this world, and be uninterested in things heavenly and divine? Shall we be ever feeding on the husks of this world's wisdom when God is showering around us heavenly manna, and inviting us to partake to the full of angel's food? Or does it not become us to give "earnest heed" to these precious and ennobling truths, "lest at any time we should let them slip?"

But again,—not only should we give heed to the Gospel message because it is *from* God as its Author, and a revelation *of* God as its subject—it has an additional and peculiarly binding claim on our regard, *because of the great end* for which this message has been sent, this revelation made, to men. The truth we preach is "the wisdom of God and the power of God" unto *salvation*—our personal salvation from eternal death.

Upon whatever theme God might see fit to address the children of men the message would deserve and should receive our devout and heedful regard. Were He to unlock the secret chambers of His prov-

idence and disclose to us "the hidings of His power," were He to reveal to us the mysteries of nature—the laws and operations of those physical forces that in ceaseless activity according to His will work out the phenomena of the material world—were He to speak to us of the stars or of the angels or make known to us unknown truth in regard to any of the wondrous works of His creation, should we not listen with absorbed attention and unwearied interest? And shall we sit with listless ears, or hear with heedlessness, when Jehovah speaks to tell us of *ourselves*—of our spiritual relations and our eternal interests; when God himself, in the person of his Son, comes to us bringing *our* "life and immortality to light"—teaching us what we are, and why we are, and the destiny that awaits us? Shall we refuse to look, or look with stolid unconcern, when God lifts the veil behind which lies the life beyond the grave, and discloses to our view, on the one hand the burning pit, and on the other "the far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory?" Shall we be as deaf men and as blind men amid such sights and sounds of warning and of mercy?

Especially, shall we be heedless when Jehovah speaks to tell us not only of our danger but of our

remedy—not only of our peril but how we may escape it; when He forewarns us of the coming storm of wrath and fiery indignation, and then points us to Him who is “an hiding place from the wind, a covert from the tempest, a shadow from the heat, when the blast of the terrible ones”—the unrestrained malignity of Satan, permitted in just judgment—“is as a storm against the wall?” Fellow-sinners, will ye not give heed to the Gospel message—gladdest tidings, to them that hearken, ever heard by human ears? Ye, upon whom the burden of unpardoned sin is resting, “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world.” Ye, who have destroyed yourselves, behold Him who is “the resurrection and the life.” Rebels, listen to the proclamation of your pardon. Bondmen of Satan, accept the glorious liberty of the sons of God. Prodigals, there are blessed mansions prepared for you in your father’s house—parental affection is waiting with outstretched arms to embrace you as a son that was dead and is alive again, as a child that was lost and is found. Can men refuse to hear this gracious message, or hear it without heeding? Can they not only despise God’s threatenings but slight His love and trifle with their own eternal welfare?

Yes, men can and do—alas, how many do it—alas, how often. And in view of this, does the Apostle unreasonably ask, *How shall they escape who neglect so great salvation*—a salvation that has claims upon their regard commensurate with the preciousness of the soul, and the duration of eternity, and the desirableness of heavenly joys, and the dreadfulness of hell's torments—commensurate with the very infinitude of the love of Christ, the length, the breadth, the depth, the height of which, “passeth knowledge?”

And further—as you value your soul's salvation, “take heed how ye hear” the Gospel, not only because it is *from* God as its author, and is *of* God as its subject, and has *our salvation* for its object,—it behooves us to give heed, *because the salvation here revealed*—the only salvation “under heaven among men, whereby we must be saved,” if saved at all—*is a salvation that can be attained in no other way than by giving earnest, diligent, lifelong heed thereto.* According to the Gospel method of salvation the appointed means of grace are not like a fetish or a charm. They do not act upon the soul diseased like medicine on the body, by an efficacy in themselves and independent of our will and consciousness. Sal-

vation is not to be attained by sprinkling or immersion, or by having our absolution pronounced by a regularly ordained priest, or by having a successor of the Apostles lay his consecrated hands upon our head. Were the Romish dogma of transubstantiation true, eating and drinking the very body and blood of Christ could not save the soul. All such methods of salvation belong to heathenism and the semi-heathenish perversion of the truth as it is in Jesus.

The salvation of the Gospel is indeed supernatural, and yet in an important sense—*the* sense in which especially our responsibility and duty is involved—it is at the same time *natural*, that is, is in entire accordance with our intellectual and moral nature. We are regenerated and sanctified by the blessed Spirit of God—but the Spirit operates upon men *through the truth*—truth distinctly apprehended and diligently heeded. We are saved by *grace*, but it is through faith, and faith implies knowledge, and to attain that “knowledge that maketh wise unto salvation” we must “attend thereto with diligence, preparation and prayer.” It is only by earnest striving that we can enter the strait gate, and having entered, it is only by continued effort that we can make progress in the narrow way. We must “give all dili-

gence " if we would " make our calling and election sure." The work demands the ceaseless vigilance of warfare, the vigorous exertion of one who is wrestling for the mastery, the perseverance of one who is running for a prize. No attainments that we ever make in piety can release us from the necessity for continued watchfulness and exertion. That model child of God, who was able to say, " for me to live is Christ," declares in the same Epistle, " I count not myself to have apprehended"—that is, I do not allow myself to act as if success were already attained—" but this one thing I do"—as if all the energies of his mighty soul were concentrated in the effort—" forgetting those things which are behind," the vision on the way to Damascus, the stoning at Lystra, the stripes and imprisonment at Phillipi, yea, all that he had hitherto done or suffered for Christ's sake"—and reaching forth to those things which are before I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus." And, brethren, if such an one as Paul the aged, covered with the scars of a life-long conflict and bearing about in his body the very dying of the Lord Jesus—if such an one dare not lay aside his armor until he had got the crown—shall we sleep

at our posts and yet hope to share with him the victory?

Shall we be carried to the skies,
On flowery beds of ease,
Whilst others fought to win the prize,
And sailed through bloody seas?

If "the righteous" — such righteous as the martyred Apostles — shall "scarcely be saved," where shall such laggards in the race, such cowards in the fight, as we, appear?

I will add but one other reason why we should "take heed how we hear" the Gospel—if we heed it not, *it will but aggravate our condemnation that we ever heard it at all.* He that knoweth not his lord's will and doeth it not "shall be beaten with few stripes," but he that knoweth and doeth not "shall be beaten with many stripes." There are degrees of torment in hell, even as there are degrees of glory in the heavenly state. Some of the redeemed shall hereafter shine as the sun, others as the moon, and others as the stars. Even so, rest assured, one fallen star differeth from another in magnitude. If this be so, surely, if there be one abyss in the lake of fire that burns with a fiercer flame than another, it will

be that in which those wretches are confined, who from the midst of Gospel light and Gospel privileges neglected and unheeded, descend with guilt unpalliated to their place of torment. And if this be so, whose burden of woe hereafter shall be heavier than that which you and I must bear if we despise the Gospel? We sometimes pity the poor heathen, who having never heard of Christ and the way of eternal life, go down to the death of those who know not God. Peradventure, at the judgment day, the poor heathen may pity some of us. We read with awe of the wrath of God poured out in a storm of fire upon guilty Sodom and Gomorrah. Peradventure it may be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for us.

There is no greater mistake than that which many make, that the Gospel is often preached without effect. The blow that does not break, hardens. The Gospel is never preached without effect—if not an effect unto salvation, an effect unto destruction. It is ever “a sweet savour of Christ both in them that are saved and in them that perish—to the one a savour of life unto life, to the other a savour of death unto death.” Its effect for weal or woe on every one who hears it is inevitable. And there are few

upon whom its effect is so momentous as upon those who hear it and imagine that it has produced no effect upon them at all.

I beseech you therefore, "take heed how ye hear" the Gospel. Hear it with that reverence with which we should listen to the voice of God speaking by His ambassador. Hear it with the devout emotion we should feel, in beholding the most glorious manifestation of God, ever made to the intelligent creation. Hear it with the deep interest of personal concern therein—even as a dying man would listen to one announcing to him a way—the only way by which he may be saved. Hear it with the docility of one who feels that the life of his soul depends upon his intelligent and sincere obedience. Hear it with fear and trembling lest at the last your mouth shall be filled with bitterness and cursing, that you ever heard the Gospel.

And may God, by his Spirit, prevent his message to you this day, being made the occasion of the very sin, against which the message is a warning.

